

UNIVERSIDADE FEDERAL DE VIÇOSA

The land is no mother: an ecofeminist reading of the dystopian novel *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins

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Magister Scientiae

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Dissertation submitted to the Letters (Languages) Graduate Program of the Universidade Federal de Viçosa in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of *Magister Scientiae*.

Adviser: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira

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*This is the grass your feet are planted on.
You paint it orange or you sing it green,
But you have never found
A way to make the grass mean what you mean.*

*A cloud can be whatever you intend:
Ostrich or leaning tower or staring eye.
But you have never found
A cloud sufficient to express the sky.*

*Get out there with your splendid expertise;
Raymond who cuts the meadow does not less.
Inhuman nature says:
Inhuman patience is the true success.*

*Human impatience trips you as you run;
Stand still and you must lie.
It is the grass that cuts the mower down;
It is the cloud that swallows up the sky.*

Rural Reflections — Adrienne Rich

ABSTRACT

LOPES, Kelma Aparecida Saraiva, M.Sc., Universidade Federal de Viçosa, February, 2026. **The land is no mother: an ecofeminist reading of the dystopian novel *Gold Fame Citrus* by Claire Vaye Watkins**. Adviser: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira.

Contemporary dystopian literature written by women often criticizes broad social, political and environmental concerns while also focusing attention on gender issues. In the dystopian novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), American award-winning author Claire Vaye Watkins provokes reflections about women's place in the Anthropocene, narrating the trajectory of a protagonist amidst the environmentally devastated state of California in the United States. My research investigates how the protagonist Luz Dunn from *Gold Fame Citrus* constitutes her subjectivity in the climate crisis. For our theoretical and methodological approach, we draw on concepts especially from ecofeminism, but also from dystopian studies, gender studies, feminist literary criticism and ecocriticism. Firstly, I argue that the association between woman and nature plays an active role in the protagonist's constitution of subjectivity. In addition, I demonstrate that this connection is underlined by the androcentric logic, which endorses the domination and exploitation of both women and nature. However, I discuss how Watkins' writing challenges the traditional representations of the landscape, such as pastoral, wilderness and desert, and helps destabilize dualized and gendered conceptions of nature. Moreover, I explore how motherhood, both as an experience and institution, help shape the protagonist's subjectivity and show the importance of care in a decaying world. Finally, I interpret Luz Dunn's open-ended destiny as an ambiguous confrontation to the androcentric front, as she oscillates between alienation and resistance. Thus, Watkins' dystopia can be seen as a warning against the implications of the ideologies that reinforce the oppression of women, nature and others, calling attention to the need of rethinking not only our human relationships, but also the relationships between humans and non-humans.

Keywords: contemporary literatures in English; dystopias; ecocriticism; ecofeminism; women's writing

RESUMO

LOPES, Kelma Aparecida Saraiva, M.Sc., Universidade Federal de Viçosa, fevereiro de 2026. **A natureza não é uma mãe: uma leitura ecofeminista do romance distópico *Gold Fame Citrus* de Claire Vaye Watkins**. Orientadora: Natalia Fontes de Oliveira.

A literatura distópica contemporânea escrita por mulheres frequentemente critica amplas questões sociais, políticas e ambientais, ao mesmo tempo que concentra a atenção em questões de gênero. No romance distópico *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), a premiada autora americana Claire Vaye Watkins provoca reflexões sobre o lugar da mulher no Antropoceno, narrando a trajetória de uma protagonista em meio ao ambientalmente devastado estado da Califórnia, nos Estados Unidos. Minha pesquisa investiga como a protagonista Luz Dunn, de *Gold Fame Citrus*, constitui sua subjetividade na crise climática. Para nossa abordagem teórica e metodológica, recorremos a conceitos principalmente do ecofeminismo, mas também dos estudos distópicos, estudos de gênero, crítica literária feminista e ecocrítica. Em primeiro lugar, argumento que a associação entre mulher e natureza desempenha um papel ativo na constituição da subjetividade da protagonista. Além disso, demonstro que essa conexão é reforçada pela lógica androcêntrica, que endossa a dominação e a exploração tanto das mulheres quanto da natureza. Contudo, discuto como a escrita de Watkins desafia as representações tradicionais da paisagem, como o pastoral, a natureza selvagem e o deserto, bem como ajuda a desestabilizar concepções dualistas e generificadas da natureza. Além disso, exploro como a maternidade, tanto como experiência quanto como instituição, ajuda a moldar a subjetividade da protagonista e demonstra a importância do cuidado em um mundo em decadência. Por fim, interpreto o destino aberto de Luz Dunn como um confronto ambíguo contra a frente androcêntrica, à medida que ela oscila entre alienação e resistência. Assim, a distopia de Watkins pode ser vista como um alerta contra as implicações das ideologias que reforçam a opressão das mulheres, da natureza e de outros grupos, chamando a atenção para a necessidade de repensar não apenas nossas relações humanas, mas também as relações entre humanos e não humanos.

Palavras-chave: distopias; ecocrítica; ecofeminismo; escrita de autora feminina; literaturas contemporâneas em língua inglesa

SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION.....	8
CHAPTER 1: WOMEN AS CLOSE TO NATURE IN <i>GOLD FAME CITRUS</i>	20
1.1. Of Mice and Women: Her Yearning for Nature	23
1.2. Man of War: The Androcentric Point-of-view	28
1.3. Drought and Dream: Female Subjectivity in the Climate Crisis	35
CHAPTER 2: THE LAND AS WOMAN IN <i>GOLD FAME CITRUS</i>	42
2.1. The One who Refuses: American Pastoral, The Failed Experiment.....	46
2.2. The One who Receives: Wilderness as a Place of Refuge?	51
2.3. The One who Reacts: Nature versus Man Interlude	58
CHAPTER 3: MOTHERHOOD MYTHS IN <i>GOLD FAME CITRUS</i>	62
3.1. Baby Done: Mothering as a Source of Empowerment	66
3.2. Madonna or Medea: Stereotypical Images of Motherhood	70
3.3. Our Lady of the Dune Sea: Womanhood as Performance	74
CONCLUSION	87
REFERENCES	90

INTRODUCTION

Opposition, hierarchizing exchange, the struggle for mastery which can end only in at least one death [...]. (Cixous, 1976, p. 893)

Contemporary dystopian literature written by women often criticizes broad social, political and environmental concerns while also focusing attention on gender issues. In her dystopian novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), American award-winning author Claire Vaye Watkins provokes reflections about women's place in the Anthropocene¹, narrating the trajectory of a protagonist amidst the environmentally devastated state of California in the United States. My work investigates how the protagonist Luz Dunn from *Gold Fame Citrus* constitutes her subjectivity in the climate crisis. The novel is analyzed through the lenses of ecofeminism. Watkins' dystopia can be seen as a warning against the implications of androcentrism, which associates women and nature in an inferiorizing way, thus endorsing their domination and exploitation. I argue that the relationship between woman and nature plays an active role in the protagonist's constitution of subjectivity. Underlined by the androcentric logic, this connection often leads Luz Dunn into a place of submission. Then, a tension between the protagonist's autonomous and subordinated selves runs throughout the narrative. Despite her efforts of resistance, she is oftentimes brought back into alienation and vulnerability by her male partners.

In her writing career, Claire Vaye Watkins has explored themes such as motherhood, sexuality, loss and belonging – primarily having the American Southwest with its desert landscapes as the backdrop. Prior to the publication of her debut novel *Gold Fame Citrus* (2015), the author had already been established as a prominent writer of the American West through her collection of short stories *Battleborn* (2012). Watkins became known for being listed as “5 Under 30” by the National Book Foundation and for having received several awards, such as The Story Prize and The Dylan Thomas Prize. The vast desert landscape of the American

¹ As accounted by Déborah Danowski and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro in *The Ends of the World* (2017), the Anthropocene is a “the designator proposed by Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer for what they see as the new geological epoch that came after the Holocene, which would have started with the Industrial Revolution and become intensified after World War II” (2017, p. 4). It is an epoch marked by intense human interference on the Earth's systems, which has provoked negative impacts on the environment such as altered landscapes, biodiversity loss, and climate change.

Southwest is also present in her most recent publication, *I Love You But I've Chosen Darkness* (2021), an autobiographical novel that follows the story of a woman trying to come to terms with motherhood and marriage, while also revisiting family loss and trauma.

The setting of *Gold Fame Citrus* is near-future California. Jennifer K. Ladino comments that “California is a novelist’s utopia, an optimal site for staging complex subjects like environmental activism, techno-optimistic solutions to ecological problems, apocalyptic natural disasters, and class, race, and border conflicts” (2021, p. 199). Watkins’ dystopia addresses the implications of the drought in the Southwest when all technological efforts have failed to provide water for the region, as well as explores the impacts of the climate crisis on the local community. This once seen as a land of promises and dreams, is in the novel turned into a completely inhospitable and hostile place, as a growing dune sea named Amargosa threatens to cover the whole region. Despite all the pessimist implications, individuals and communities, for various reasons, refuse to evacuate the region. Between them are outlaws who would be arrested if inspected in the state borders, hopeless believers who insist on feeding into each other’s myths, and some fragile ones who haven’t yet had the chance to leave. It is in this context of climate change and precarious social structures that we follow the trajectory of the protagonist Luz Dunn.

The scenario of this dystopian novel dialogues with the issues of drought and desertification of the American Southwest. Even though the American Southwest is naturally a region of mainly arid and semi-arid climate with long stretching deserts, recent studies show that increasing anthropogenic climate change has been affecting the weather of the region even more: recordings present tendencies to extreme temperatures, which are directly connected to water shortages, drought and precipitation patterns (Diffenbaugh; Swain; Touma, 2015), changes on ecosystems such as wetlands (Springer; Manker; Pigati, 2015), enhancement of wildfire risk (Williams *et al.*, 2019), endangerment of fauna and flora (Franklin; Macdonald, 2024) and more. Thus, Watkins demonstrates to be aware of the problems of climate change and its implications, such as changes in ecosystems and biomes, and impacts on the lives of local communities.

With its apocalyptic appeal, *Gold Fame Citrus* has the potential to draw attention to current ecological concerns, considering the possible implications of the climate crisis that we may experience in the future, but that also are already troubling people's lives in this present moment. In addition, the novel explores the outcomes of the long history of colonization of the United States and how it shaped peoples' views and relation to nature. In a recorded interview to the Chicago Humanities, Watkins talks about the dialogue that her futuristic novel establishes with the past of the American West. She says: "Try as I might, I could not make up anything weirder than what we've already done to the American West, in terms of water infrastructure, colonization and everything in between" (Chicago Humanities, 2017, 6 min 20 s). When asked about her writing process and the speculative and dystopian nature of *Gold Fame Citrus*, the author expresses her initial desire to originally write, in her own words, "high-sci-fi fantasy, exaggerated to satirical proportions, not realism" (Chicago Humanities, 2017, 8 min 5 s). But her what-ifs ended up being real, since much of what her imagination could conceive had already taken place in reality. Furthermore, the author's sensibilities towards the environment comes from her own lived experience. Being born and raised near the desert, Watkins mentions her personal proximity to the landscapes of Death Valley and Mojave Desert—she even calls these sites the closest thing she has to a church, thus showcasing the sacred relationship she has with nature. She also mentions her difficulty in comprehending the ideas of the desert as a "dead and empty" place due to her own experiences there, which proves it otherwise. The novel, then, reflects the author's own mourning for the endangerment of the landscape she calls home.

The novel is divided into three books: the first covers Luz and Ray's last moments in the city of Los Angeles, and their starting point towards the desert until their separation; the second focuses on Luz's solo journey and life as a mother among the colony in the sand dunes; and the third narrates Luz and Ray's reunion and outcomes. Each book explores a different relationship between the characters and the environment. The narrative, revolving around Luz's search for survival and purpose, is told by a third person omniscient narrator, occasionally interrupted by fragments of various sorts: politicians' discourses, newspaper clippings, extracts of direct dialogues analogous to a Greek chorus, and even an entire illustrated primer presenting the so-called "Neo-fauna of the Amargosa Dune Sea" written by the

character Levi Zabriskie. This hybrid form highlights the relevance of mediatic and pseudo-scientific discourses within the novel, especially because the media surrounds the protagonist's life since her birth. Similarly, the presence of theatrical elements recalls the performativity of Los Angeles and Hollywoodian culture.

Luz Dunn's characterization accompanies the evolution of the water crisis. Born on the same day as a ceremony to inaugurate a water reservoir that was advertised as the great salvation for curbing the water crisis, Luz was made into the campaign's "poster baby," becoming widely known in the media as Baby-Dunn. She was reportedly handed over to government authorities by her father while still in the maternity ward. As a teenager, Luz became a model, taking her mother's Mexican surname, Cortez, and was emancipated at the age of 14—which symbolizes the emotional abandonment of a father who once referred to her as "a cross to bear" (Watkins, 2016, p. 12). Never achieving real success with her modeling and acting career in that increasingly deserted land, Luz was only able to approach luxury when she invaded and lived in an abandoned mansion with her partner Ray in Los Angeles. Paradoxically, they lived surrounded by luxurious goods and Luz's long saved model money, but with a shortage of basic resources for survival. The end of her career corresponds to the moment when complete environmental and social collapse ensued in California.

Motherhood brings a new sense of purpose and meaning to Luz's life. By adopting (or perhaps kidnapping) a two-year-old girl—named Estrella after her mother but usually called Ig— she finds a motivation to look for a better place to live, and decides to go on a journey through the desert, in which she ends up being abandoned by Ray. Along with the child, in the middle of nowhere, Luz is found by Levi, the leader of a colony dangerously close to the dunes. There, he had established control and authority by convincing people that he was a dowser, a seer, capable of discovering water and other resources in that barren land. However, this initial savior, after making Luz his lover and dominating her, reveals his interest in making her into the star of a commercial to promote the supposed triumph of his surviving community—once again bringing her closer to that past of futile beauty and emptiness that she had been trying so hard to overcome. In this manner, this theme of objectification repeats all throughout her life.

Several feminist critics, such as Raffaella Baccolini, Ildney Cavalcanti and Natália Fontes de Oliveira have investigated contemporary dystopian fiction written by women. These researchers' works converge on the study of a subgenre of literary utopianism theorized by Cavalcanti as feminist critical dystopias. Cavalcanti's aim at grouping feminist texts is not due to any structural marks, as she states that feminist literary criticism "has evolved past the belief in an inherently feminist aesthetic" (2003, p. 47), but rather to gender-specific matters often addressed within this subgenre. The author also emphasizes the relevance of the term because of its impact on raising readers' awareness to gender concerns: "the feminist dystopias may have a crucial effect in the formation and/or consolidation of a critical-feminist public readership" (2003, p. 48). Feminist critical dystopias are powerful tools in the hands of writers who address the historical oppression of women under patriarchal society and its tendency to be aggravated when paired with matters such as totalitarianism, social inequality and environmental devastation. Yet, the expression "critical" within the term may seem redundant unless we explore the textual distinctions of utopian and dystopian literature.

Both utopias and dystopias are genres essentially capable of conveying profound socio-political criticism. The term "utopia", meaning "no place", was coined by Thomas More in 1516, with the publication of his satire, originally written in Latin, that discusses the social, political, and economic structures of the fictional island of Utopia—where equality, justice, harmony prevail. Dystopias emerge as utopias' opposites. They take a pessimistic turn, mostly as a response to the terrors of the twentieth century, with narratives that touch upon themes such as totalitarianism, systematic exploitation, repression, censorship, diseases, famine, genocide and ecocide. Among the classical dystopias are Yevgeny Zamyatin's *We* (1924), Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932), Katharine Burdekin's *Swastika Night* (1937), and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949). These and other dystopian novels became notable in their time and remain relevant to this day due to their depiction of consequences of extreme government control, social engineering, unethical uses of technology, suppression of individual freedom and other fundamental human rights.

Meaning in its etymology, "bad place", dystopia, however, has been constantly defined not as a *bad* but a *worse* place, stating that the world outside of fiction is constantly a point of comparison. Lyman Tower Sargent defines "dystopia" as "a

non-existent society described in considerable detail and normally located in time and space that the author intended a contemporaneous reader to view as considerably worse than the society in which that reader lived” (1994, p. 9). Thus, through terror, dystopias provoke a sense of urgency, drawing attention to imminent problems in society, so that readers feel the need to seek measures to prevent such a pessimistic future from becoming a reality. But besides their clear content distinctions, dystopias can also be discerned from utopias by their formal peculiarities. For instance, unlike utopias that are set in a seemingly ideal society and make the protagonist question his own society in a comparative way, dystopias generally begin in *media res*, portraying a terrible scenario in tones of normality—which provokes a cognitive estrangement²—and featuring a protagonist who will somehow develop a counter-narrative to the status quo, either because they have become alienated or because they have assumed a stance of resistance.

Besides the cautionary aspect of dystopias, Sargent states that dystopias cannot be limited to terrifying tales; they can also be works that convey a sense of positivity, since by exercising our free will, we may explore different possibilities to escape the foreseen bleakness. In the author’s words: “Some dystopias are deeply pessimistic and can be seen as a continuation of the idea of original sin. [...] But many dystopias are self consciously warnings. A warning implies that choice, and therefore hope, are still possible” (Sargent, 1994, p. 26). Accordingly, we infer that dystopias that contain a hint of utopia at their core tend to be more effective in calling out for action. In addition, for Anne Cranny-Francis, empathy with the main character and recognition of the contemporaneity of the social structure depicted in dystopian works are key realizations that are expected from the reader. When empathy is not accomplished, it can be said that the warning factor has failed. In the author’s own words: “If readers do not make this connection, they commonly turn back in relief to the relative ease of their own state, paradoxically the subject of the dystopia” (Cranny-Francis, 1990, p. 125). Therefore, it must be considered that the response of fear is not always action, but often denial.

² “Since the text opens *in media res* within the nightmarish society, cognitive estrangement is at first forestalled by the immediacy and normality of the location. No dream or trip is taken to get to this place of everyday life” (Baccolini; Moylan, 2003, p. 5).

In light of that, more recent dystopian novelists have been developing ways of maintaining hope within the lines of these bleak universes by incorporating other textual strategies. Critical dystopias are the response to that need, as Raffaella Baccolini and Tom Moylan theorize in their book *Dark Horizons* (2003). In their definition, critical dystopias are dystopian works that carry a utopian impulse at the level of the form, thanks to the protagonist's non-subjugation at the end of the novel or their escape from the traditional tragic outcome. In this way, through an open, ambiguous—or even precarious³—ending, critical dystopias manage to maintain a spirit of hope, allowing space to imagine alternative paths out of the foreseeable dark destiny. Moreover, Baccolini stresses the role of genre blurring as another important textual characteristic of critical dystopias: “By borrowing specific conventions from other genres, critical dystopias [...] expand its creative potential for critical expression” (2022, p. 1233).

In synthesis, summarizing the works of Baccolini, Moylan and Cavalcanti, feminist critical dystopias represent sites of women's resistance to patriarchal oppression and incorporate hope within their lines by two main textual strategies: by providing an open ending, and by blurring the lines of the literary genres. This way, critical dystopias offer space for female protagonists to obtain sovereignty over their destinies as well as gives creative freedom to the women writers adventuring into the traditionally male dominated field of science fiction.

Gold Fame Citrus, as a feminist critical dystopia, presents an ambiguous ending for the protagonist in a way that challenges androcentric perspectives. Furthermore, the novel combines elements of other genres. Firstly, to position nature as a central agent in the narrative, Watkins explores nature writing, which is “a form of creative fiction and nonfiction about the environment” (Fontes de Oliveira, 2021, p. 6). Secondly, satire, a genre that accompanies literary utopianism since its origins, is also outstandingly present in this dystopia. Northrop Frye defines satire as “the completion of the logical process known as the *reduction ad absurdum*, and that is not designed to hold one in perpetual captivity, but to bring one to a point at which one can escape from an incorrect procedure” (1944, p. 88). In *Gold Fame Citrus*,

³ “Conversely, the new critical dystopias allow readers and protagonists to hope by resisting closure: the ambiguous, open – and today I would add precarious – endings of these novels maintain the utopian impulse within the work” (Baccolini, 2022, p. 1230).

satirical elements are incorporated into the narrative alongside nature writing to critique anthropocentrism and androcentrism, ideologies which endorse violence towards the environment.

Thus, through a constant usage of irony and ambiguity, this dystopia enhances its critical potential and exposes ideologies that oppress both women and nature. Watkins' novel demonstrates how women's writing, coming from a place of marginalization, are indeed highly critical—as Hélène Cixous claims in “The Laugh of the Medusa”: “If she's a her-she, it's in order to smash everything, to shatter the framework of institutions, to blow up the law, to break up the ‘truth’ with laughter” (1976, p. 888). The subversive laughter described by Cixous is present in this dystopia, which resumes the very traits of masculine nature writing and gender stereotypes only to reveal their contradictions.

Moreover, this dystopia has also been classified under the umbrella term cli-fi, or climate fiction—an emerging sub-genre of science fiction. The term, which curiously has a non-scholar and rather unconventional origin, was coined in 2007 by the Taiwan-based North American activist and journalist Dan Bloom, and has since been incorporated into literary criticism. Goodbody and Johns-Putra define cli-fi as “a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change” (2019, p. 2). By placing the environment as an important subject in her novel, Watkins' critical dystopian universe paradoxically establishes nature as the main element of terror as well as of hope in the narrative.

Therefore, nature plays a major role in the narrative of *Gold Fame Citrus*, as the environment often dictates the actions of the characters as well as the descriptions of the setting create the apocalyptic mood. The constant interaction between the human and non-human in the novel justifies the ecocritical approach in this research. Cheryll Glotfelty briefly defines ecocriticism as “the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (1996, p. xviii). Greg Garrard claims that: “The challenge for ecocritics is to keep one eye on the ways in which ‘nature’ is always in some ways culturally constructed, and the other on the fact that nature really exists, both the object and, albeit distantly, the origin of our discourse” (2004, p. 10). In my analysis, I investigate specially the gendered representations of nature and how they intertwine with the protagonist's experience

and potentially mold her subjectivity. Women's historical association with nature has been extensively discussed by ecofeminism as well as has been increasingly analyzed by ecofeminist literary criticism.

Ecofeminism, as both theory and activist movement, is based on the justification that the various forms of oppression—such as race, class, gender and species—are sanctioned by the same ideologies (Gaard, 1993, p. 1): anthropocentrism, which is based on the conception that human beings are the central creatures of the universe; and androcentrism, which is characterized by the overvaluation of values considered masculine, such as strength, competitiveness and power over others. The term “ecofeminism” was coined by Françoise d'Eaubonne in her book *Le féminisme ou la mort* (1974). According to Luca Valera:

the tradition of thought inaugurated by d'Eaubonne deals with the patriarchal domination of Women and Nature by Men considered as a paradigm of any domination and exploitation (hierarchical, military, capitalist, industrial, etc.), and with the clear aim of redeeming these two fragile realities from any type of male subjection. (Valera, 2018, p. 11-12)

Thus, d'Eaubonne parallels women's struggles for equality with the strive for preservation of human life and the planet.

Ecofeminist Val Plumwood argues that at the root of the ideologies that inferiorize women and nature is the logic of dualism. In western thought, women and nature are conceptualized in binary opposition to men and culture, placing them as inferior:

To be defined as 'nature' in this context is to be defined as passive, as non-agent and non-subject, as the 'environment' or invisible background conditions against which the 'foreground' achievements of reason or culture (provided typically by the white, western, male expert or entrepreneur) take place. [...] It means being seen as part of a sharply separate, even alien lower realm, whose domination is simply 'natural', flowing from nature itself and the nature(s) of things. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 4)

By withholding women's subjectivity and agency, and limiting women's identity to their bodies and devaluing it, western rationality ensures male dominance in all fields. This dualistic approach even affects women's experience of motherhood, as their bodies become a target of control under patriarchy. Fontes de Oliveira problematizes the construction of motherhood as a biological imperative: “Under

patriarchy, women are often defined simply as mothers, and as such, they are not viewed as individuals. With the sole role of caring, mothers' experiences, personalities, and desires are often ignored" (2015, p. 68). Thus, motherhood, which is an experience that can confer subjectivity and power to women, is often institutionalized so that they can become malleable and controllable. Similarly, as Carolyn Merchant investigates in *Death of Nature* (1980), nature has historically been personified as a feminine and maternal entity, thus also becoming subject to exploitation and being valued only for its potential to nourish and provide goods to men.

Patrick D. Murphy asserts that ecofeminism enters the field of literary criticism as a continuation of an activist movement, recovering the works of women who demonstrate ecological sensibilities. Ecofeminist literary criticism is relevant since women writers, a group historically marginalized but nowadays much more influential, can help instigate new sensibilities towards nature writing and bring different perspectives on environmental issues. Fontes de Oliveira raises an important question concerning women and nature association in literature: "In canonical literature, nature writing has often reinforced such values parting from patriarchal paradigms that highlight women's and nature's pristine qualities. Are feminists' dystopias doomed to follow a similar path?" (2021, p. 2). Fontes de Oliveira's inquiry is one that continues to reverberate. Therefore, ecofeminist literary criticism is particularly interested in the ways women and nature associations in literature contribute to reinforce or deconstruct the androcentric logic.

In this research, I interpret Claire Vaye Watkins' dystopian novel *Gold Fame Citrus* through the lenses of ecofeminism, investigating how the protagonist Luz Dunn constitutes her subjectivity in the climate crisis. The term subjectivity in this work is based on its definition by Donald Hall's as "social and personal being that exists in negotiation with broad cultural definitions and our own ideals" (2004, p. 134). In this sense, it suggests self-awareness and construction of one's own identity as important steps to a person's self-development. Also, subjectivity implies a close connection with agency, since to determine oneself is to hold power to act in the world, rather than to passively be pushed by external forces. Affirming the relevance of the study of subjectivity in literature, Hatice Yurttaş states that: "The human subject has come to occupy a central role in recent literary criticism and this concern owes a

lot to feminism which has initiated the awareness that the subject is not a natural, biologically determined, apolitical, or neutral entity but it is a socially constructed political being” (2023, p. 1). Thus, the feminist view on subjectivity challenges western universal male model of subject which relies on dualistic oppositions of Subject/object and mind/body.

In order to fulfill my objectives, I divide this work in three chapters. Chapter 1, “Women as Close to Nature in *Gold Fame Citrus*”, investigates the protagonist Luz Dunn’s relationship with nature. I present an analysis of the protagonist’s metaphorical associations with nature, her longing for it, as well as her approximation with the animal. Furthermore, I highlight the androcentric traits that permeate the characterization of Luz’s important bonds, her father and her lover, given the influence that the male gaze provokes in her perception of self. Lastly, I argue that androcentrism is an ideology responsible for the perpetuation of precariousness in the dystopian context of the novel and ultimately an obstacle for dealing with the climate crisis.

Chapter 2, “The Land as Woman in *Gold Fame Citrus*”, analyzes the representations of nature in the novel. I identify the presence of the main tropes of nature writing: pastoral, wilderness and desert, and demonstrate how these tropes are subverted and reinvented in *Gold Fame Citrus* in order to represent the human complex experiences in relation to the environment. These divergent representations of nature mark dystopian and utopian impulses in this critical dystopia. The various shifts in human perspectives towards the natural world reveal the ways in which nature, similarly to culture, is constructed. Moreover, I show that instead of passive matter, nature is imbued with agency in Watkins’ novel, which helps destabilize dualized and gendered conceptions of nature, as well as question anthropocentric and androcentric claims of mankind’s hierarchical superiority and independence from nature.

And chapter 3, “Motherhood Myths in *Gold Fame Citrus*”, identifies and discusses the representations of motherhood and its stereotyped forms in the novel, aiming to understand their impact on the constitution of the subjectivity of the protagonist. In the novel, not only women but also nature is depicted as a maternal figure, which creates space to investigate the various conceptions of motherhood.

According to Adrienne Rich (1986), the constitution of motherhood can be both framed as an institution, which becomes an instrument to male control, or as an experience, becoming a place of female empowerment. This dual reality troubles the protagonist's relationship with her child and her own self, and opens space for our reflection upon the importance of care in a decaying world, contrary to the androcentric logic which denies dependency upon nature and others.

To conclude, I emphasize the role of androcentrism as a major obstacle to the protagonist's journey in the dystopian scenario of *Gold Fame Citrus*. I read Luz Dunn's open-ended destiny as an ambiguous confrontation to the androcentric front, as she oscillates between alienation and resistance. Overall, the protagonist's fate questions the limits of all humanity's control over both nature and women and highlights their capacity of having their own power and agency.

CHAPTER 1: WOMEN AS CLOSE TO NATURE IN *GOLD FAME CITRUS*

*With thee, in the Desert—
With thee in the thirst—
With thee in the Tamarind wood—
Leopard breathes—at last!*

(Emily Dickinson)⁴

Claire Vaye Watkins plays with the historical associations between women and nature, bridging new meanings to their relationship in *Gold Fame Citrus*. Exploring nature writing, Watkins appropriates traditional western representations of nature and subverts expectations by incorporating elements of satire. Classic pastoral depictions of nature as a nurturing, plentiful and motherly entity collide with references to a wilderness which is “*inhospitable, barren, bleak, and empty*” (Watkins, 2016, p. 122). Similarly, the author explores metaphorical images of women as close to nature in ways that are permeated with ambiguity and irony, thus criticizing and deconstructing those connections as well as unveiling underlying androcentric discourses.

The ancient women and nature associations—which permeates sciences, visual arts and literature to this day—has long been problematized by feminists as being a symptom of women’s seclusion from the male dominated culture. This discrepancy that has been fought over but still lingers. By positioning men as the model, masters of reason and culture through the logic of dualism, women are secluded to the realm of nature, which is cast as inferior. Stacy Alaimo, in *Undomesticated Ground: Recasting Nature as Feminist Space* (2000), emphasizes this differentiation as one that withholds women’s power: “Defining woman as that which is mired in nature thrusts woman outside the domain of human subjectivity, rationality, and agency” (Alaimo, 2000, p. 2). Thus, the overvaluation of men over women in patriarchal societies, and their association with the category of culture, has been used as a justification to claim control over women’s bodies as well as explore and destroy nature, both categorized as passive matter deprived of reason.

Ecofeminism has been consolidated as both a theoretical and political movement that integrates gender concerns with environmentalism, and it seeks to investigate the roots of the oppression of both women and nature. Greta Gaard

⁴ DICKINSON, Emily. With thee, in the Desert. *All Poetry*. Available at: <https://allpoetry.com/With-thee,-in-the-Desert>. Accessed on: 7 set. 2025.

asserts that the historical conceptualization of women and nature in western rationality “has resulted in devaluing whatever is associated with women, emotion, animals, nature, and the body, while simultaneously elevating in value those things associated with men, reason, humans, culture, and the mind” (1993, p. 5). The logic of dualisms, predominant in western philosophical tradition, alongside with the hierarchical order derived from it, is identified by ecofeminists as the main cause of many forms of unjust domination.

Val Plumwood in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (1993) scrutinizes the western “network of dualisms”. According to the author, the logic of dualisms is the result of a tradition founded by René Descartes, one of those responsible for the emergence of modern philosophy and science. Specifically, through the human/nature and mind/nature dualisms, Descartes claims human superiority over nature, idealizing rationality as a distinctive trait of the human being, which would justify human domination of nature—frequently characterized as a passive, inert, and inferior entity. In this vein, by associating men with the mind and women with nature, the same logic of power is applied to justify the domination of women:

As dualised nature, conceived as inert, passive, non-subjects, women have offered a fertile field for such control and manipulation by a rationality which structures women’s experience of reproduction in two Cartesian halves: the suffering body deprived of agency, and the mastering, external rational agent. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 38)

According to Plumwood, the issue with dualisms is not necessarily differentiation or dichotomous thinking itself, but rather the hierarchical relationship established between the binaries—where one side of the coin is deemed as superior and the other side inferior. In the author’s own words: “A dualism is an intense, established and developed cultural expression of such a hierarchical relationship, constructing central cultural concepts and identities so as to make equality and mutuality literally unthinkable” (Plumwood, 1993, p. 47). Then, by construing dichotomies in terms of radical exclusion, dualistic thinking “naturalizes” power over others, that is, conceptualizes domination and subjugation as inevitable.

To destabilize and deconstruct dualisms, such as men/women, culture/nature, mind/body, is one of ecofeminist’s main ways of resisting and fighting against oppression—a battle formerly established in the realm of language and discourse.

Therefore, the approximation of women and nature from an ecofeminist standpoint “is not an essentialist return to feminizations of nature or naturalizations of women” (Yang, 2018, p. 3), but rather an effort to resignify the relationship of all humanity with nature. In this manner, seeking to resignify notions related to women and nature in non-hierarchical terms is an important way of shifting to a mentality that prioritizes reciprocity and interdependence, instead of power over others.

The history of male dominance has culminated in androcentrism⁵, an ideological perspective that endorses control over others and denies dependency on women or nature. Ecofeminist Janis Birkeland refers to it as the “androcentric premise”, “an interpretation of human nature that assumes the universality of a masculine model of Man and its associated values” (1993, p. 24). Birkeland lists five aspects that compose the androcentric premise, which can be summarized as: “the *polarization* of masculine and feminine archetypes and the elevation of so-called masculine traits and values”; “*instrumentalism*, whereby things are valued only to the extent that they are useful to Man”; “the idea that Man is *autonomous* or independent from both nature and community”; “the *universalization* of male experience and values”; and lastly “the linkage between masculinity and *power over others*” (1993, p. 24-25). All these aspects of androcentrism are to some extent present among the lines of *Gold Fame Citrus*. Some of them are intimately bound to the personality of the main characters or help shape the relationship between the human and non-human in the narrative. In the context of the novel, androcentrism inevitably influences the protagonist’s sense of self.

The theoretical framework of ecofeminism contributes to our comprehension of power paradigms subjacent to the representations of women and nature in *Gold Fame Citrus*. In this chapter, I present an ecofeminist reading of the novel, exploring the protagonist Luz Dunn’s relationship with nature. I explore how her portrayal as close to nature and her personal yearning for the natural world influence her subjectivity. In addition, I analyze the underlying androcentric discourses in the novel, especially in regards to the construction of the protagonist and her partner, Ray, as polarized gender archetypes, and her father, who I deem responsible for her

⁵ The term androcentrism originated in the beginning of the 20th century and was popularized within feminist debate by American writer Charlotte Perkins Gilman in *The Man-Made World or, Our Androcentric Culture* (1911).

objectification since an early age. In this manner, I discuss how androcentrism contributes to the perpetuation of precariousness in the dystopian context of the climate crisis in the narrative.

1.1. Of Mice and Women: Her Yearning for Nature

An ambiguous yearning for nature distinguishes Luz Dunn's character since the beginning of *Gold Fame Citrus*. The well-crafted novel's opening introduces an element of peculiarity to an otherwise tedious domestic scene, as the couple inhabit the abandoned starlet mansion in Los Angeles. The protagonists' lives are disturbed by the appearance of a prairie dog, a small animal filled with significance: "Putting the prairie dog into the library was a mistake. Luz Dunn knew that now, but it had been a long time since she'd seen a little live thing, and the beast had startled her" (Watkins, 2016, p. 3). Her initial desire to welcome the rare animal soon turns into fright and she calls her partner, Ray, to get rid of it. The appearance of the prairie dog in the novel is proleptic in many ways. Their cultural significance traces to the Navajo's association of prairie dogs with rain,—as noted in Barre Toelkens's recording of Hugh Yellowman's performance of the trickster tale "Coyote, Skunk, and the Prairie Dogs"—and their burrowing activities help breath and moist the earth. According to the Indigenous beliefs in the Southwest of the United States, killing a prairie dog is a bad omen. The couple's reaction to the animal mirrors the anthropocentric treatment of nature and all other living beings, as they are valued as long as they please humans but are easily discarded. But the consequences of this episode will be felt and in a somewhat prophetic manner prairie dogs will continue to be referred to along the narrative as a symbol of the last day of normalcy in the protagonists' lives.

The promise of rain brought with the prairie dog represents just another vague image among other miscellaneous obsolete things around the house where the couple inhabited, such as the mink, an abandoned fur coat, the "sculpture of a failure" (Watkins, 2016, p. 4). Alone in a starlet's abandoned mansion, Luz Dunn and Ray are metaphorically a family of light, their names referring to one of the only things left in the absence of water: "Sun of suns. Drought of droughts. There were their days now, Luz and Ray and the merciless sun up in the canyon, a family of light in this mansion cantilevered into the hillside, a bridge for a driveway" (Watkins, 2016,

p. 4). Ironically, it is light, not darkness, which represents a dystopian element in *Gold Fame Citrus*—which emphasizes even more the failure of utopianism in California.

The irony persists as Luz dresses to impress in “a clinging cobalt mermaid gown dense with beads” (Watkins, 2016, p. 4) and “leaden galoshes”. She makes it her project to dress flamboyantly with the starlet’s deserted luxury items. Depicted as the siren of a waterless land, Luz is the evocation of the femme fatale archetype. Heather J. Hicks argues that Luz plays the role of the femme fatale in *Gold Fame Citrus* “embodying the misguided values and stunted imagination that Watkins suggests have devastated California socially and ecologically” (2018, p. 626), such as toxicity, materialism and proliferating destruction. I agree with Hicks’ argument that Watkins reclaims this archetype in order to subvert it, since this femme fatale soon unveils her fragility:

It was gorgeous and she was gorgeous in it, even with her filthy hair and bulgy eyes and bushy brows and teeth that jutted out from her mouth as if leading the way, the front two with a gummy gap between them that caused her to seal her thin top lip to her plump bottom lip, even when she was alone, even now as she twirled and the dangly beads went *click click click*, softly. She looked liquid and wanted to show Ray. (Watkins, 2016, p. 4-5)

The character’s physical dishevelment look reveals a sense of powerlessness. Although Luz still presents herself as an object for male admiration, her allure is less snake-like and more mouse-like. Situational irony comes from her failed attempt to embody the mermaid and femme fatale archetype while she is truly overpowered by the man around, thus becoming more of a prey than the man at her disposal. The differences between Luz and Ray are highlighted in the following passage:

She watched him work a while, leaning on the balcony rail as the starlet might have. It was impossible to be original and inspired living as she was, basically another woman’s ghost. Ray could dismantle the starlet, splinter her, hack her up and build with her bones, but Luz languished beneath her. They wore the same size everything. (Watkins, 2016, p. 6)

Ray is here invested with physical strength and capability for aggression, while Luz is frail and deprived of agency as she lived by imitation of another woman in a house that wasn’t her own. The performativity of Los Angeles and Hollywood industry shapes Luz’s experience, distancing herself from her own subjectivity.

Luz's aspirations for herself intermingle with her relation to nature, a sort of projection, since she envisions a performative nature as "she yearned for fauna more charismatic" (Watkins, 2016, p. 7). Her desires are voiced by the narrator: "Where were the wild things seeking refuge from the scorched hills? Where was the birdsong she's promised herself? Instead: scorpions coming up through the drains, a pair of mummified frogs in the waterless fountain, a coyote carcass going wicker in the ravine" (Watkins, 2016, p. 7). Instead of lively animals or plants, what was left was just still organic matter, sand and dust entering through their windows, air filled with smoke from the wildfires. Luz's idealized craving for a romantic, Edenic nature is confronted with the pestilence of the desertified landscape: "Some ruined heaven, this laurelless canyon" (Watkins, 2016, p. 7). Still, the characters insist on their own version of the American Dream⁶.

The characters' attitude towards the climate crisis is one that reflects avoidance, as they prohibited themselves to talk about water or war: "They ate crackers and ration cola and told stories about the mountains, the valley, the canyon and the beach. The whole debris scene. Because they'd vowed to never talk about the gone water, they spoke instead of earth that moved like water" (Watkins, 2016, p. 8). Thus, at first, their relation towards the environment is one that expresses inability to face the future's dangers of the climate crisis. Yet, the animal appears to remind them of all that had been repressed.

Although Luz's treatment of the prairie dog initially displays an anthropocentric standpoint, it soon reveals an actual and unavoidable approximation with the animal. After having Ray kill the rodent, she tries to justify their actions by saying: "'It's not... humane,' she said, offering him the box. 'Plus it's probably crapping everywhere'" (Watkins, 2016, p. 9). However, this act of violence forces Luz to face her shadows. First, she is reminded that her partner Ray "had, as part of his vocation, killed people" (Watkins, 2016, p. 10) in the "forever war". And then, her own place as a victim is disclosed to herself, as she may be closer to the role of the rodent than to the man

⁶ The American Dream is the utopian core of American ethos. It is characterized by the belief in success and self-actualization guaranteed by freedom, and the optimistic view of the country as an abundant land of promises. The term was popularized by James Truslow Adams during the Great Depression in *The Epic of America* (1931). In the historian's word, the American dream is "that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for every man, with opportunity for each according to his ability or achievement" (Adams, 1941, p. 404). Thus, it emphasizes one's potential of achieving prosperity regardless of their birth circumstances.

next to her. The killing of the animal becomes a motive for mourning for herself, or rather, for her three selves:

She wept briefly for the creature, and then at great length for all her selves in reverse. First for Luz Dunn, whose finest lover and best friend was a murderer and perhaps always would be, then for Luz Cortez, mid-tier model spoiled then discarded. Emancipated at fourteen, her father's idea, something he'd prayed on, amputated from him and from child labor laws. Then, finally and with great relish, she wept for Baby Dunn. Poster child for promises vague and anyway broken, born on the eve of some symbolic and controversial groundbreaking ceremony, delivered into the waiting blanks of a speech written for a long-forgotten senator [...]. (Watkins, 2016, p. 10)

This triptych of her self exhibits the same themes: objectification, vulnerability and loss of innocence. Trauma and neglect follow her life since her birth, since she became a media icon long before she was even capable of consent. The climate crisis is clearly not the only challenge in her life, although Luz's life story intermingles with the "evolution" of the water crisis. Newspaper clippings in her baby book anticipate all the basic opportunities of play or basic human needs she won't have access to: no swimming pools, no green fields, no fresh produce, no water. Against all the mediatic predictions foretelling her end, somehow she managed to endure: "Now Luz was twenty-five and hung up on the logistics. Had her parents been paid?" (Watkins, 2016, p. 11). These circumstances raise questions about whether her survival could be considered a reason for hope or whether she was still destined to be crushed by male violence just like the little prairie dog was.

Early orphaned because her Mexican mother, Luz Cortez, had drowned herself, Luz Dunn was partially brought up by her father. Billy Dunn is the epitome of the androcentric premise paired with religious self-righteousness. His relationship with his baby daughter was marked by rejection and loathing: "Billy Dunn would not have been in the delivery room, certainly not. Not his business to witness his wife's woman's body undergo its punishment. Not permitted by his temperament to acknowledge anything uterine, vaginal, menstrual, menopausal, pubescent" (Watkins, 2016, p. 12). This passage shows her father's inferiorization of all that is associated with the feminine. This, of course, did not stop him from taking advantage of the situation, since he was brave enough to approach the baby to claim ownership—"Saying her name so it rhymed with *fuzz* before her mother, channeling

Guadalaraja, had a chance to correct him. Random, how she became the goddesshead of a land whose rape was in full swing before she was even born. Baby Dunn” (Watkins, 2016, p. 12). Billy maintains a connection with Luz only as far as she is instrumentally valuable for him, that is, helps bring money to his pocket and puts food on the table. As instrumentalism lies under the logical structure of dualism, Plumwood comments that the “upperside is an end in itself, but the underside has no such intrinsic value, is not for-itself but merely useful, a resource” (1993, p. 52). At the scarce scenery of *Gold Fame Citrus*, respect for women became as rare as water.

Since her misogynous father allowed her body to be explored for financial purposes, it is no wonder Luz grows up with a somewhat internalized sense of objectification. Even when she no longer needs it, Luz puts herself in a place where she doesn't quite fit in order for financial gain. The following day after the episode of the rodent in the library, the couple goes to what they call a “raindance” at the dry canals of Venice Beach, a weird source of diversion and income. With a sense of discomfort Luz is protagonist in the ritual, though she doesn't quite fit in there: “Luz was not a dancer; she had never been a dancer. But here the rhythm was elephantine and simple as the slurping valves in the body—an egalitarian tune” (Watkins, 2016, p. 15). Luz inevitably becomes part of the exploitation, as the so-called raindance ends up being a sort of dance prostitution, while her “heroic” Ray keeps himself away. Here Luz is represented as an empty body, devoid of subjectivity in order to be turned into a product. The commodification of women is discussed by Luce Irigaray in *This sex which is not one* (1985). The philosopher and feminist explains that the exploitation of feminine sexuality involves the alienation of women in the process, because the gains extracted from process are solely withheld by men:

The exchange of women as goods accompanies and stimulates exchanges of other “wealth” among groups of men. The economy—in both the narrow and the broad sense—that is in place in our societies thus requires that women lend themselves to alienation in consumption, and to exchanges in which they do not participate, and that men be exempt from being used and circulated like commodities. (Irigaray, 1985, p. 172)

The raindance scene intermingles with Luz's remembrances of her modeling abusive times, no matter how hard she tries to push these thoughts away: “But don't feed the negativity, though you were always too flabby, too short, too hairy, too old,

too Mexican. Ass too flat, tits too saggy, nipples too big—like saucers, one said” (Watkins, 2016, p. 16). It reveals that Luz had been discarded as a model for her otherness, her Latino ethnicity, as well as for her unfitness to those unachievable beauty standards. Again, the protagonist’s condition is parallel to that of the prairie dog in the middle of the climate crisis: she is an obsolete object to the vanished LA fashion scene as the animal is an emptied symbol of rain in a waterless land—both performing a hopeless act. Her yearning for nature all throughout the narrative proceeds to evoke utopian images that are nothing but mirages, as I will continue to discuss.

1.2. Man of War: The Androcentric Point-of-view

The character Ray perpetuates androcentric perspectives in *Gold Fame Citrus* via two main features: his archetypical representation as Luz’s opposite and his emphasis on independence and autonomy from others. Whereas the protagonist is a fractured version of femme fatale and objectified ex-model, Ray is a heroic ex-soldier, initially portrayed as physically and emotionally stronger than her. However, his actions contradict his proclaimed morals. His denial of dependency upon nature and others will lead him to a long journey through the desert until he finds his way. The analysis of his character is relevant since the protagonist’s relationship with Ray plays an important role in helping shape her subjectivity.

One of Ray’s major traits is industriousness, as he stresses the importance of keeping oneself occupied at all times: “It was important to have a project, Ray said, no matter how frivolous. The Santa Anas winged through the canyon now, bearing their invisible crazy-making particulate, and Ray said she should try to keep her hands busy” (Watkins, 2016, p. 3-4). Unsuccessfully, Luz tries to make a project of things, but her efforts end up towards seemingly futile things, such as trying on every piece of clothing and accessory in the house. Nevertheless, she also fills her time exploring the library in search of biographies, her only diversion being to look up at important people’s lives; thus, she learns with names such as John Wesley Powell, John Muir, William Mulholland and Sacajawea. Not much of a reader, her partner, however, presents himself as a man of action, digging holes and scavenging in

search of useful objects and food. His diligence contrasts with Luz's physical idleness.

In order to match the protagonist's various selves—such as poster child, mid-tier model, or simply a lover—Ray also receives many labels. First, since he had been to the “forever war”, he was called a hero, “though he'd forbidden the word” (Watkins, 2016, p. 6). His past as a soldier implies his share in fearlessness, defensiveness and willingness to appeal to violence. Such tendencies are evident in the episode where he kills the prairie dog and then discards its body down a ravine. This behavior scares his lover, but he is soon to make amends.

Despite his roughness, Ray can also be gentle. A mutual care surrounds the lovers' relationship. When he offers to rescue the body of the poor animal, Luz fears for his life, and prioritizes his well-being instead of fulfilling her wishes: “She would have liked to bury the little guy properly—make a project of it—but she was certain that if Ray went down into the ravine he would never come back” (Watkins, 2016, p. 13). Then, as an act of atonement, Ray gets rid of the pestilent sand dust that was everywhere in her body and her room, surprising her with clean bed sheets; he “had snapped the infinite sand from them” (Watkins, 2016, p. 14). Thus, he reminds her of his softness, and Luz embraces the feeling of comfort from that moment as another rare thing: “She held him and watched the bloodglow pulse in the east, the last of the chaparral exploding” (Watkins, 2016, p. 14). Love continues to be precious, especially in their decaying world.

In addition, Ray is compared to a prophet, as described by the narrator: “Ray had the blazing prophet eyes of John Muir, and like John Muir, war had left him nerve-shaken and lean as a crow” (Watkins, 2016, p. 20). His resemblance to the American naturalist and explorer John Muir, to his lover's eyes, reflects her desire to trust him as one that is experienced with wilderness, someone who will make sure they will endure the natural menaces they constantly encounter and that are about to multiply. Furthermore, this association highlights their need to hold on to some form of faith, in order to justify their permanence in that scarce place.

Ray's closeness to nature is manifested by his relationship with the sea. Showing one more facet, he is a surfer—someone with that spirit of adventure that we would certainly expect from any traditional hero. The ocean for him is a place of

escapism, the thrill of it something that contains a calming effect to him and that brings him energy:

The ocean had restored him. The way he told it, a city of a ship bearing the emblem of the motherland deposited him in the riverless West, at San Diego. He was released—honorable discharge, had medals somewhere—but the whole way back he'd been jumpy, sleepless, barely keeping the darkness at the edges. Nothing soothed him until he heard the white noise of the breakers. So instead of going home to the heartland he liberated a surfboard from someone's backyard and made his home in the curl. He had a mind to surf through all crises and shortages and conflicts past and present. (Watkins, 2016, p. 20)

However, his uneasiness at the particular moment he gets out of that ship is a contradiction to his heroic posture, a proleptic sign to his real inclinations and fears, an indication that he could be running away from something.

It is next to the ocean that happens to be the couple's first encounter: "Seawatery, gulping air and clutching his board to him, Ray approached her. What was the first thing he said? Luz could not remember, but it would have been sparkling. She did recall his hands, gone pink with cold, and his pale aqua prophet's eyes" (Watkins, 2016, p. 21). The singularity of the situation enchanted Luz, since surfing was a vanishing hobby. Who would risk getting more dehydrated in a place where fresh water was so scarce? Yet, in naïveté, the protagonist falls in love with the idea. Though she would aspire to the mermaid look, in this scene it is him that possesses the alluring powers. Furthermore, through her rose-colored glasses, all about his appearance inspires beauty and softness. Ray is painted in light and pastel colors. His pink vulnerable hands represent an apparent lack of violence, his transparent eyes a window to a stainless soul. Besides, even his speech sounds "sparkly" for her, proceeding the light metaphor of their names to transmit an idea of purity and trustworthiness.

The character's relationship with the environment reflects a feminization of nature: "He told her about the sea and his needing it and [...] he said California had restored him, that he would not abandon her" (Watkins, 2016, p. 22). By expressing this clinginess to these particular parts of sea and land, Ray shows his vision of instrumentalism, a perspective which values nature as far as an object to quench a man's needs. Following, the same promise to the land becomes a promise to his lover.

Coming originally from Indiana, Ray detaches himself from the Californian identity of non-conformity and turbulence, and pledges to stay: “Some people I know have a place. Even if they didn’t, Hoosiers aren’t quitters. California people are quitters. No offense. It’s just you’ve got restlessness in your blood” (Watkins, 2016, p. 23). Before meeting him, Luz had been prepared to evacuate. However, with a few words, Ray manages to convince her to stay. Betting on the malleability of her character, he makes vows so that he doesn’t have to be alone.

Ray applied a rhetoric of devaluation in order to convince Luz of his own value. He explores Luz’s lack of direction by inferiorizing her origins: “Your people came here looking for something better. Gold, fame, citrus. Mirage. They were feckless, yeah? Schemers. That’s why no one wants them now. Mojavs” (Watkins, 2016, p. 23). Because he is an outsider, he acts as if he knows better. But Luz wants so hard to feel valued and important in some way that she decides to prove herself different from all the other Californians. She wants to resist, especially since she can’t find any meaning in going elsewhere. Love becomes her last hope.

Satirically, the feeling of restlessness is not foreign to Ray. His past in the army is not as courageous and honourable as he first claims. He had, in fact, deserted the army. He had retreated from his military duties—which would represent a risk to his life. We are later informed that he is absent without leave (AWOL), although there seems to be nothing temporary about his decision. Actually, there was no option to rejoin the army since he was outcast for drug dealing, as he explains:

“We were on leave—in San Diego,” his voice on the upswing, as if San Diego were a friend they had in common, “and one of the guys, his buddy had been busted on patrol with morphine patches plastered all over his ass cheeks. They were going to get me. I mean, I’m the only one with a case of fucking made-in-the-USA morphine patches. Fort Leavenworth.” Then, when she clearly did not know what the words *Fort* or *Leavenworth* had to do with any of this, he said, “Prison. Military prison. I, well, you know... *ran*.” (Watkins, 2016, p. 58)

Thus, these half-truths presented by the third person narrator reflect the characters’ own falsehoods. The unreliability of the narration makes the readers follow the story from Luz’s point of view. Accordingly, a broader picture becomes visible as the protagonist herself has to confront some of her delusions. In this way, her surprises often become our own. But before she knew the kind of man she was

dealing with, she had already adopted a baby with him; and to search for a better place to raise the child, Luz decided to venture through the desert alongside her hero, and to fake her own identity to do so.

In order to get the necessary resources for their future journey, they had to visit their past. With their sports car, named Melon, they travel back to their first home together—a complex headed by their old friend and cult leader Lonnie. This trip unveils some of the couple’s most painful wounds: Luz and Lonnie’s affair. Having to face the place again, memory about her conflict with Ray haunts her:

—I don’t know. I was fucked up and flattered. I liked that he wanted me.
 —Everyone wants you. It’s your job.
 —Not anymore. Not like that.
 —I want you. (Watkins, 2016, p. 65)

Luz’s infidelity not only reveals her own faults and weaknesses, but also shows how objectification shaped her own perception of self-worth or lack thereof. On one hand, since she got used to being valued by her desirability in her modeling times, Luz tries to justify her character deviation by confessing her need of male validation. On the other hand, when Ray reversely confronts her with the realization that she had been modeled just to be desired, she refuses that role—signaling a change in identity, or at least a search for becoming different. Therefore, Luz expresses a desire to go beyond the limitation of her subject as an instrument.

Besides their wounds, both lovers had to accept and believe in one another in order to continue their quest for a better home, or simply for survival. Their destiny is foretold by Lonnie through a reading of the hexagrams of I Ching’s *The Book of Changes*. While Lonnie throws his coins and reads the lines, Luz reflects upon all their worries—a necessary step for getting a correct prediction. She gets especially concerned what the trip would affect Ray: “And through that line rose the worry of worries: in what way was Ray no longer her Ray? Luz did not want to take this from him—California, all that it still meant to him—but was glad to, in a way. The sacrifice was a good sign. But what would it cost them? They were lost, yes, but lost together” (Watkins, 2016, p. 74). In a way, Luz was already foreshadowing all his instability that would follow.

Beyond that, through their metaphorical association with rocks, Luz expresses fear of losing her own grip as well. It says: “Ray who said she ought to pay attention to the ration hour, Ought to keep your eyes peeled, he said, as though hers were still coated with a glittery scrim of cosmetics, which they likely were. Ray who tethered her to rock, rock she was now ripping him from” (Watkins, 2016, p. 75). She projected on him the responsibility of taking measures to keep them rooted in reality; likewise, she pledged herself guilty for removing him from any security he had conquered in their home in Los Angeles. As she felt accountable for making the changes in their lives—something quite unusual— she sensed the blame would be on her.

Guilt unfolds the embedded perception of herself as a burden: “Here was a worry: Luz. Her whole self a worry. How had her father put it? *Luz is my cross to bear*” (Watkins, 2016, p. 75). Both the relationships with her father and with her lover influenced Luz’s understanding of herself as fragile, inferior and in constant need of protection. This constant lack of agency oftentimes disempowers her from taking action by her own means.

Although they are not yet aware of what exactly is about to happen, Lonnie’s future predictions indicate these new challenges: first, “*hesitation and hindrance. It furthers one to appoint helpers*”; and then “*difficulties pile up. Horse and wagon part*” (Watkins, 2016, p. 88). Who was supposed to take action before such circumstances? Were their fates really anticipated? With the help and supplies provided by their old friend Lonnie, the couple and their child start their journey through the desert, with the promise that they would find a town in the middle of the sand dunes.

On the road, obstacles begin to shake our hero’s and heroine’s courage and faith. As the family head East, they are each mile farther away from their last piece of paradise, and more and more dehydrated by the scorching hot sun. When they find themselves among the Amargosa dune sea, a loss of direction overwhelms them: “All the while the dune lorded over them, in front of them and behind them, to the east and to the west, somehow. A passively menacing sight and Luz could not take her eyes from it” (Watkins, 2016, p. 94). The dune presents itself to them with magnificence. Although being referred to as apparently passive, there is nothing powerless about it; the Amargosa is hypnotizing and threatening to their existence.

The encounter with the Amargosa dune sea humbles them. In his investigation on the apocalyptic space in *Gold Fame Citrus*, Mikko Mäntyniemi cites Edmund Burke's *A Philosophical Inquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful* (1757) to resume nature's characteristics in catastrophic settings: "The great vistas of nature are linked to the sense of the sublime, to a greatness that produces a sense of smallness in the viewer" (Mäntyniemi, 2022, p. 131). As the dunes "lord over them", nature asserts its authority and shows that—to quote Vera Norwood and Janice Monk—the desert is no lady.

Thus, in face of nature's supremacy and terror, Ray becomes increasingly desperate: "He looked as if he might cry, or shatter the too-close windshield with his hand. Ray's deflating faith was terrifying" (Watkins, 2016, p. 94). Ray's disbelief shatters Luz's state of mind too, since she considers that he was the more spiritual of them two. Her prophet, however, was helpless in such a situation, since they were purely in the middle of the desert, in wasteland, where nothing positive was to be found anymore: "One didn't cultivate faith and one did not cultivate anything here, save thirst and thirst and insanity" (Watkins, 2016, p. 94). Still, they "went on, the journey a stillborn they had to birth" (Watkins, 2016, p. 97). The ultimate renunciation happens when they run out of gas and Rays loses himself completely:

She started and looked through the filthy windshield to Ray, pacing up and down the trail, his long legs stabbing berserkly away from the car and back again, his body atop them a live wire, convulsing, seizing, his hands clawing at his red face, wet somehow. (Spit, tears.) [...] The man with the specimen would have called it a possession, and Luz would have, too. A possession by rage and fear and profound, unyielding despair at this most inarguable failure. (Watkins, 2016, p. 100)

In this hysterical state, Ray shows a less heroic facet. But it doesn't take long until he finds his next project: to run away. By resuming a proud posture, Ray masquerades his cowardice, and then turns to the desert in order to begin his march towards proving himself: "Ray fastened the satchel. He was doing penance for the AWOL thing. He was going to leave her alone to watch their child die, to prove what a good man he was" (Watkins, 2016, p. 102). With the promise that he would look for help, he deserts his woman and child in a totally vulnerable position, in a place "scalding or venomous or glistening with gasoline" (Watkins, 2016, p. 103). His definite decision conveys the androcentric perspective that preaches men's

independence and autonomy from nature, community and others, paralleled to the maintenance of a sense of superiority.

“Horse and wagon part” (Watkins, 2016, p. 104) is the final line that portrays the family’s parting and recollects their prophesied future. Ray, identified as a stallion, is represented as having a spirit of independence, selfishness and freedom whilst Luz is again referred to as a burden—an identity that had accompanied her life trajectory until that moment. The metaphor can also point to the dualized conceptions of men/women and human/nature, characterized by anthropocentric and androcentric discourses as excluding opposites. The separation, however, unlocks opportunities for the protagonist to construct a new subjectivity, as well as forces her to become a rock, that is, a support for herself and for the child.

1.3. Drought and Dream: Female Subjectivity in the Climate Crisis

Drought is the greatest obstacle to human survival in *Gold Fame Citrus*. However, the protagonist’s trajectory in the novel showcases problems that primarily affect women in the context of the climate crisis. Power dynamics overlap with the environmental disasters contributing to the perpetuation of social chaos and placing women in a position of even greater vulnerability. The androcentric values represented by the character Ray culminate in the devaluation of both women and nature in the narrative. The overvaluation of individualist pursuits instead of the recognition of interdependence generates many other difficulties to the characters’ paths. Above all, such character representations expose some ideological perspectives that may have led to the environmental collapse in the first place.

Ecofeminist Karen Warren, in her book *Ecofeminist Philosophy: a western perspective on what it is and why it matters* (2000), highlights the impact of environmental issues, such as droughts and floods, on women’s lives as well as on other minorities: “While all humans are affected by environmental degradation, women, people of color, children, and the poor throughout the world experience environmental harms disproportionately. Nature is, indeed, a feminist issue” (2000, p. 16). The author thus justifies the link between feminist and environmental concerns.

In addition to gender inequality, Warren also lays emphasis on class as another factor that impacts the level of people's vulnerability in face of natural disasters.

It is ironic how the severity of the climate crisis in *Gold Fame Citrus* leads to a rise in class equality among the individuals who remain in the devastated areas, since poverty becomes the norm. Gold as well as fame become increasingly obsolete, while citrus and all crops—practically extinct—become the biggest items of luxury. The collapse of agriculture in the dystopian novel shows how humanity's endeavours for the mastery of nature backfires, since nature can no longer be controlled by none of the existing technology and machinery:

Still came the scientists: climatologists, geologists, volcanologists, soil experts, agriculturists, horticulturists, conservationists. In fluxed new-booted, khaki-capped men and women from the Northeast, stalking tenure in L.L.Bean. Still came journalists, deadline-hungry, sense of subtlety atrophied. Still came BLM and EPA and NWS and USGS, all assigned to determine why a process that ought to have taken five hundred thousand years had happened in fifty. All tasked with determining how to stop the mountain's unrelenting march. All of them failed. (Watkins, 2016, p. 117)

All the failures to control the crisis call for the necessity of shifting humanity's perspectives towards nature. Nonetheless, characters like Ray indicate the persistence of anthropocentric and androcentric domineering efforts and denial of dependency upon others even when confronted by the reality of climate crisis. In his famous essay "Paradox and Dream", Nobel Prize winner John Steinbeck draws attention to the paradoxical quality of the American identity. As noted by Steinbeck, colonial perspectives persist in the American imagination insofar individuals continue to evoke paradigms that reinforce nature's domination and instrumentalism:

Americans seem to live and breathe and function by paradox; but in nothing are we so paradoxical as in our passionate belief in our own myths. [...] We believe implicitly that we are the heirs of the pioneers; that we have inherited self-sufficiency and the ability to take care of ourselves, particularly in relation to nature. (Steinbeck, 1966, p. 33)

The American Dream, however, becomes a distant image in *Gold Fame Citrus*. Every recollection of it is a token of a failure—starting with its initial setting being Los Angeles and its exodus. Mäntyniemi comments that, in the novel, the evacuation of Los Angeles "transforms the city into a monument of the deserted American dream" (2022, p. 124). In this context, we observe the protagonist's struggles to come into terms with this new reality. Luz attaches herself to the abandoned starlet mansion,

surrounds herself with designer clothes and jewellery, since money still represents a source of power for her. But still she continues to constantly fall into traps and ends up being overpowered by the male characters around her. Consequently, she is often reduced into the performance of weakened and objectified roles.

Emphasizing the image of collapse in this dystopia, Andrea Ruthven, in her criticism of the novel, argues that instead of exploring possible solutions for the water crisis, *Gold Fame Citrus* “depicts the failure of imagination as both society’s and the characters’ inability to conceive something other than the prevailing social and environmental relations” (Ruthven, 2025, p. 26). Specifically talking about the protagonist, the researcher claims that: “For Luz, this failure of imagination manifests in her inability to live a life that is not desperately clinging to (and failing to return to) her life as a symbol of the environmental collapse” (2025, p. 26). While there are indeed many instances where Luz repeats the same behavioral patterns, there’s actually more nuance to it. Oftentimes, the character is challenged to revise her values system and reimagine her relationship with nature.

A significant change in Luz’s perspective occurs when the abandonment by Ray forces her to forge a new subjectivity. In the journey alone with her child, Ig, Luz has to take up responsibility and utilize whatever means she has to fight for their survival in the middle of the sand dunes. Unlike Ray, whose desperation and claimed self-sufficiency leads him astray in the desert, Luz takes a different path: “Luz knew enough to stay in one place. That was the thing lost people never did but she would do and they would be rescued because of it. ‘It has nothing to do with inertia or helplessness,’ she told Ig. ‘Or fear.’ And to prove it she took the girl on slow walks in one of two directions” (Watkins, 2016, p. 105). Thus, she recognizes their human smallness in comparison to nature—who now completely dictated the rules.

A greater sense of vulnerability typically characterizes women’s writing approach towards the environment as concluded by Norwood and Monk in *The Desert is No Lady: Southwestern Landscapes in Women’s Writing and Art* (1987): “Women, alienated from their culture, feel lost and seek renewal in the landscape; their search is based not on transcendence but on reciprocity, on personal vulnerability rather than heroic dominance” (1987, p. 234). In *Gold Fame Citrus*, Luz’s

and Ray's distinct interactions with the landscape reveal different human perspectives towards the natural world.

In this next stage of Luz's journey, the dunes distinctively appear as agent beings. The character experiences the movements of nature: "As they walked Luz watched the horizon, too, watched it until it went meaningless, until she could no longer distinguish the valley floor from the dune field marching across it, nor the smeary peaks of the dunes from the white sky" (Watkins, 2016, p. 105). Reflecting the protagonist's altered relation with the environment, the dunes increasingly gain agency, while Luz also starts to become less passive in the narrative.

Furthermore, it is in this context that the knowledge Luz acquired with books becomes useful. The many biographies she took from the mansion are sources of wilderness skills she will have to employ. With the examples of American explorers such as John Wesley Powell, John Muir and Sacajawea, Luz learns how to engage with nature in a way that seeks adaptation rather than domination. In face of water scarcity, she establishes a strict regimen of rationing. Moreover, animal knowings become essential to their survival mode. For instance, mother and child start acting accordingly to the movement of natural lights: "Dawn and dusk they could move finally. Diurnal as Muir's mammals, they ventured out walking or embarking on a project. She stacked her biographies in the driver's seat" (Watkins, 2016, p. 106). When Luz fills Ray's previous seat in the car with the books, she relinquishes the need for control and trusts the knowledge of those who probably knew better. This attitude also discloses the obsolete state of this type of machine in the dystopian environment.

Not only mammals, but also reptiles and birds are a source of wisdom for Luz on how to stay alive in the desert. In order to defend herself and the child from the heat, she mimicked lizards and owls:

Luz vowed that they'd get a good nap routine going. That's what the creatures here did, yes? She'd read something about lizards sleeping in the shadows of barbed-wire coils. Owls burying themselves in the sand. She took the corner of a scarf in her mouth and sucked until it was wet, then ran it along Ig's hot neck. (Watkins, 2016, p. 106)

By this approximation with other forms of life, Luz learns how to synchronize with nature's rhythms. Her attitude is one that communicates mutual dependence and

care for others as she takes responsibility in protecting the child above all: “When some unseen tide brought them back, she practiced not acknowledging her severe and persistent preference to be the first of the two of them to die” (Watkins, 2016, p. 106). In this manner, the protagonist takes on the burden of maternal obligations, ensuring the survival of her young above her own.

In the desert, nature starts playing important roles in shaping the characters’ experiences. Ambiguity surrounds natural elements as they are both a source of comfort and despair for humans. Light and darkness have their traditional roles inverted in this wilderness. Apocalyptic and hellish imagery becomes prominent under the light of day, since sunlight exposure is probably the biggest threat to them and they find themselves close to a sulfur pool which becomes even more menacing under the heat. Luz battles against the effects of the sun on her body: “She let her own saliva puddle in her mouth and swallowed it, trying to coax her brain back from the sunstroke on which it was so hell-bent” (Watkins, 2016, p. 106). The sun’s obstinate fire feels like revenge on their skin; its energy an agent force endangering their existence. Furthermore, the sulfur pool brings fears and reminds Luz of her father’s religious discourses:

What was it her father said about sulfur? When you smell sulfur, you know Satan has been coming round. Billy Dunn worked on oil platforms in the Gulf of Mexico and sometimes, he said, they drilled too far and very suddenly the platform might fill with that rotten egg smell and that was, he said, brimstone coming straight up the pipeline from hell. (Watkins, 2016, p. 107)

In contrast, night comes as a relief for them. While the day is like a revengeful father, the night is a comforting mother. It alleviates fear and instigates hope, especially because its sublime darkness is balanced with the presence of starlight and moonlight. Stargazing momentarily brings back a portion of tranquility as well as dreaming to Luz’s mind:

The nights were terrifyingly beautiful, stars gaudy and tremendous, a dense and blazing laceration of them bisecting the black dome crosswise. Sacajawea would have known the name of them. The white sands of the dune fields caught the moonlight and held it. It was impossible to think these had always been here. Stars fell frequently and Luz watched for them, replaying Ray’s return in her mind, for she’d been told as a girl that the thought thought the moment you spy a shooting star always comes to be. (Watkins, 2016, p. 107)

The protagonist recovers hope that her hero can come and save her, although she may have to continue finding her own strength. Back to the light of day, the sulfur pool continues bringing bad omens. A corpse of a bighorn sheep, a supposedly extinct animal, appears provoking a sense of eeriness with it: “a bighorn sheep, bloated, its horns sawed off, though bighorns were extinct. It floated, swaying slightly in the brine. Its hoofs had been sawed, too, and there were bloody stumps where they should have been” (Watkins, 2016, p. 108). Despite the rarity of the situation, the presence of the dead animal inspires nothing but indifference in Luz as she soon starts tossing dirty diapers to its body and transforming the situation into play with the child. The protagonist’s final detached posture towards nature indicates the expiration of her dreams and yearning for a charismatic fauna and flora, since there are no signs of organic life anymore. However, this moment gains significance specially with the disappearance of the bighorn along with the pile of dirt the next morning—these movements become evidence of the everchanging nature of the dunes.

Day after day after day, Luz resists in the desert with stoic determination. As time passes, she inevitably becomes one with nature, though not in a fulfilling way. Nonetheless, since they find nothing nurturing in that wasteland anymore, her self gets progressively emptied. The element of light is the only thing left, so Luz loses her consciousness and collapses: “Luz was light, she was light-headed, light within light, her head hollow as any yucca carcass, shriveled as a blueberry, filled only with hot, stupefying light she could feel ricocheting mercilessly inside. It was the last thing she felt” (Watkins, 2016, p. 109). Luz Dunn’s disillusionment with the environment contributes to the deconstruction of romantic views of nature as nurturing and pristine.

Therefore, *Gold Fame Citrus* bridges new meanings to the historical associations between women and nature. Irony and ambiguity surround the protagonist’s closeness with nature in many forms, introducing satirical elements to the work. Luz’s metaphorical associations with nature lie on the verge of the absurd. For instance, her name refers to the only lasting natural elements, light and sand dunes; yet she is made into a symbol of hope out of the water crisis as the mediatic figure Baby Dunn. Moreover, her continuous expressed desires for a bountiful nature lead readers to realize the nonsensical and romanticized conceptions about the environment.

According to Frye, satire “at its most concentrated, therefore, is tragedy robbed of all its dignity and nobility, a universal negation that cheapens and belittles everything” (1944, p. 86-87). In *Gold Fame Citrus*, the satirical tone contributes to reveal the absurdity of human treatment of nature. Androcentric perspectives—such as overvaluation of values associated with masculinity, and categorizing men as independent and autonomous from others—are ridiculed in the novel. Women and nature are revealed to be close specially because of their systematic inferiorization and objectification or instrumentalism. Satire, thus, enhances the dystopian setting of the novel—which evokes devastation and decay—in order to raise awareness about ecological problems. Will the protagonist find an escape to this tragic conundrum?

In my reading of the novel, I highlighted the dualistic thinking that endorses the exploitation of both women and nature. Plumwood argues about the importance of challenging such power paradigms in order to reimagine human’s relationship with the environment towards sustainability and recognition of interconnectedness:

Women must be treated as just as fully human and as fully part of human culture as men. But both men and women must challenge the dualised conception of human identity and develop an alternative culture which fully recognises human identity as continuous with, not alien from, nature. The dualised conception of nature as inert, passive and mechanistic would also be challenged as part of this development. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 36)

In conclusion, Claire Vaye Watkins explores nature writing and satire to speculate and criticize the ways human experience is shaped by their relationship with the environment. As discussed, androcentric values are exposed with Ray’s character deviation. A break of trust between Luz and Ray forces her to find new ways to keep living and supporting herself and their child. On unsteady ground, Luz has to discover and forge a different self. In the next chapters, I will continue to closely explore the protagonist’s journey in the desert and how the landscape and a new community alters her subjectivity. Moreover, the cultural constructions of nature, as well as the stereotypical images of motherhood, will be analyzed.

CHAPTER 2: THE LAND AS WOMAN IN *GOLD FAME CITRUS*

Not the law, but the land sets the limit. Desert is the name it wears upon the maps, but the Indian's is the better word. Desert is a loose term to indicate land that supports no man; whether the land can be bitted and broken to that purpose is not proven. Void of life it never is, however dry the air and villainous the soil. (Mary Austin, 1903, p. 3)⁷

Nature writing is strongly present in *Gold Fame Citrus*, enriching the narrative and conceiving a very immersive setting. The desert is personified as a haunting force in the novel. Its sublime and threatening atmosphere draws attention to the severity of the drought in California and helps readers face a future reality that should be prevented in the non-fictional world. Claire Vaye Watkins appropriates traditional western representations of nature in subversive and ambiguous ways. Pastoral, wilderness and desert landscapes incorporate both utopian and dystopian impulses in this critical dystopia. In this chapter, I explore the relationship between human and non-human, also demonstrating how these dystopian and utopian images of nature intertwine with the protagonist's experience, and help bring awareness about the need to reimagine our views of nature in face of the climate crisis.

Although nature writing encompasses some defined subgenres—such as Field Guides, Natural History Essays and Travel and Adventure—in attempts to categorize it, Thomas J. Lyon asserts that: “Nature writing itself, in any case, would not rest easily in any static system, prizing as it does vitality and variety, the virtues of its subject” (1996, p. 280-281). Therefore, nature writing is a plural and hybrid genre by its very essence. Be it fictional and non-fictional, for our critical perspective, its relevance lies in the ways it showcases the impact of the physical environment in shaping human subjectivities and how people's ideologies influence their treatment of nature. Don Schesse, in his discussion of Edward Abbey's *Desert Solitaire*, suggests that: “As in all compelling nature writing, the relationship between self and nature, nature and culture, evokes important truths about self and society” (1996, p. 309). Nature writing is, thus, an important tool for rethinking and reevaluating our connection with the environment.

⁷ AUSTIN, Mary. *The Land of Little Rain*. Boston and New York: Houghton, Mifflin and Company, 1903.

Human experience is shaped by the relationship with nature. Likewise, nature can also be interpreted as both a physical reality and a culturally constructed dimension. Ecocritic Greg Garrard interprets culture as rhetoric, or “the production, reproduction and transformation of large-scale metaphors” (2004, p. 7). Understanding the metaphors and tropes through which nature has been characterized can help us comprehend human perspectives towards the environment in various social, historical and political contexts. Furthermore, Garrard argues that “environmental problems require analysis in cultural as well as scientific terms, because they are the outcome of an interaction between ecological knowledge of nature and its cultural inflection” (2004, p. 14). In this sense, ecocriticism has a way of addressing nature not only as something literal but also as a figurative interpretation of reality.

Thus, ecocriticism is more interested in the interconnections between nature and culture than their conceptual opposition. Lawrence Buell stresses the growing impossibility of understanding the environment as a pristine and separate reality nowadays:

By ‘environment(al),’ I refer both to ‘natural’ and ‘human-built’ dimensions of the palpable world. Though I shall also insist on the distinction, one must also blur it by recourse to the more comprehensive term. Human transformations of physical nature have made the two realms increasingly indistinguishable. (Buell, 2001, p. 3)

Especially in the Anthropocene, a period characterized by extensive human interference on the environment and climate, dualistic conceptions of nature and culture prove to be completely simplistic and limited.

Albeit, historically, dualistic thinking has shaped western thought, as previously discussed. The deconstruction of these dualised oppositions is targeted by the ecofeminist standpoint, since it has been an instrument for characterizing nature, as well as women and other minorities, as passive and object of domination. Ecofeminist Carolyn Merchant, in *The Death of Nature: Women, Ecology and the Scientific Revolution* (1980), investigates the historical evolution of nature’s representation in Western arts, literature and scientific discourse starting from Ancient Rome and Greece, through the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, until the establishment of Modernity. The historian identifies two main ancient metaphors

which defined nature as female. The first metaphor is the idea of nature as a nurturing mother, “a kindly beneficent female who provided for the needs of mankind in an ordered, planned universe” (Merchant, 1980, p. 2). Such imagery supported the notion that humanity depended on nature as well as emphasized the necessity of respect and care for it. The second metaphor was the image of nature as disorder, a “wild and uncontrollable nature that could render violence, storms, droughts, and general chaos” (Merchant, 1980, p. 2)—which was instrumental to the establishment of the modern idea of power over nature. In these manners, in western society humanity has projected desires and fears towards the external world in the past as continues to do so today.

The metaphor of nature as a nurturing mother is particularly interesting because it functioned as a normative moral and ethical constraint to the unruly exploitation of the Earth. This imagery was part of an organicist view, which saw the Earth as a living entity until the Renaissance or before the rise of Modernity. However, Merchant observes that these images started to be altered when crashed with human interest, especially led by a combination of lust and avarice. The escalation of mining activities in the sixteenth century introduced new viewpoints to sanction the act of digging into the earth: “The new mining activities have altered the earth from a bountiful mother to a passive receptor of human rape” (Merchant, 1980, p. 39). Moreover, the most significant shift in the cultural construction of nature occurs with the rise of the Scientific Revolution, as Merchant analyses. Modern science, founded by natural philosophers such as Francis Bacon⁸ and René Descartes, with its mechanist views of the cosmos, caused what the author calls “death of nature”. In her words:

The removal of animistic, organic assumptions about the cosmos constituted the death of nature—the most far-reaching effect of the Scientific Revolution. Because nature was now viewed as a system of dead, inert particles moved by external, rather than inherent forces, the mechanical framework itself could legitimate the manipulation of nature. Moreover, as a conceptual framework, the mechanical order had associated with it a framework of values based on power, fully compatible with the directions taken by commercial capitalism. (Merchant, 1980, p. 193)

⁸ To illustrate the Modern notion of mastery over nature, Carolyn Merchant, for instance, comments about Bacon’s utopian work *New Atlantis*, to which she refers to as “a mechanistic utopia”. In this narrative, “progress was placed in the hands of a group of scientists and technicians who studied nature altered by ‘the mechanical arts’ and ‘the hand of man’ that her secrets might be utilized to benefit society” (Merchant, 1980, p. 180).

Therefore, by gradually representing nature as still matter or a body stripped of its agency, this new philosophy endorsed the notions of control and mastery over nature by the rational conscious human mind. In this vein, Val Plumwood holds the Cartesian “network of dualisms”—and its main separation between reason and nature—responsible for the contemporary human and environmental crisis. The philosopher and ecofeminist, then, calls attention to the importance of challenging this duality in imagination by attributing mind capacities to nature:

Once nature is reconceived as capable of agency and intentionality, and human identity is reconceived in less polarised and disembodied ways, the great gulf which Cartesian thought established between the conscious, mindful human sphere and the mindless, clockwork natural one disappears. (Plumwood, 1993, p. 5)

To imbue nature with mind-like qualities is, thus, to recognize its power and destabilize the hierarchies between humans and non-humans.

In consonance with this argument, in the last decades, there has been a growing tendency to restore nature’s agency in scientific and philosophical discourse. Environmentalist James Lovelock resorts to the organicist idea of nature and invokes the mythical image of a Greek goddess by proposing the Gaia⁹ hypothesis. Lovelock postulates that all living organisms interact with their inorganic surroundings in a manner that creates the perfect conditions for perpetuating life on the planet; therefore, according to him, the Earth functions as a complex self-regulating system that can be thought of as a single organism. In response, paleontologist Peter Ward puts forward a contesting idea with the Medea hypothesis, thus evoking another mythical figure¹⁰. Analysing geological records, Ward seeks to demonstrate that multicellular life has self-destructive tendencies. In the first instance, nature is metaphorically associated with the image of a more nurturing mother, while in the second, she is the embodiment of disorder—called by the name of a mother who kills her own children.

⁹ Gaia is a primordial goddess associated with the Earth in Greek mythology. According to Christiane Sourvinou-Inwood, she is an ambivalent mother figure: threatening, dangerous and deceitful, but also nurturing. This dual nature of Gaia is seemingly ignored in Lovelock’s employment of the name and optimistic view of the planet.

¹⁰ In Greek mythology, Medea is a celebrated sorceress, daughter of Æetes, king of Colchis, and the niece of Circe. She married Jason, who came to Colchis in quest of the Golden Fleece with the Argonauts. In Euripides’ tragedy, Medea is represented as the cruel assassin of her own children, having acted in revenge against Jason, who had betrayed and abandoned her.

Running with the concept of nature as a female agent being, Belgian philosopher Isabelle Stengers continues to name our “living planet” (2015, p. 44) Gaia. In a more subversive way than Lovelock, Stengers plays with the notions of nature as nurture combined with disorder: she is possibly a good mother but one who should not be offended, otherwise her suffering would become our own. In addition, she refers to Gaia by the epithet “she who intrudes”, to call attention to the menacing reality of the climate crisis:

Gaia is ticklish and that is why she must be named as a being. We are no longer dealing (only) with a wild and threatening nature, nor with a fragile nature to be protected, nor a nature to be mercilessly exploited. The case is new. Gaia, she who intrudes, *asks nothing of us*, not even a response to the question she imposes. Offended, Gaia is indifferent to the question “who is responsible?” and doesn’t act as a righter of wrongs—it seems clear that the regions of the earth that will be affected first will be the poorest on the planet, to say nothing of all those living beings that have nothing to do with the affair. (Stengers, 2015, p. 46)

From this perspective, the return to the depiction of nature as a female entity full of agency and power is a means of challenging dualistic discourses of domination as well as reassuming the notions of human dependency on nature and interconnection with the ecosystem. In this chapter, I show that contrasting metaphors of the land as woman coexist in *Gold Fame Citrus*, manifesting different human perspectives in relation to the environment. In addition, I illustrate how dystopian and utopian impulses are tied to nature writing’s tropes in the novel, such as pastoral, wilderness and desert. These various representations reflect the protagonist’s own struggles to face the new realities imposed by the changing landscape in an androcentric social context and amid climate crisis.

2.1. The One who Refuses: American Pastoral, The Failed Experiment

The opening image of nature in *Gold Fame Citrus* is a scarce and barren landscape. The apocalyptic atmosphere is created by the oppressive presence of two elements: the merciless sun and the invading sand. This harsh and relentless environment reduces the lives of the main characters into routines of mere survival; their sluggish bodies act in self-preservation, since their energy fuel is based on nutrition deficient crackers and soda. Though they inhabit abandoned mansions with

big yards, the water has evaporated and the land can produce no fruits. The only plants left are pestilent: “Plantwise there was the dried pool slime and the gnarled leafless grapevine and spiny somethings coming through the planks of the deck, too savage to kill” (Watkins, 2016, p. 6). Wilderness, slowly but surely, invades the artificial urban reality of the city of Los Angeles. Thus, nature imposes its power by challenging human civilization showing that it won’t be tamed anymore. In the face of the climate crisis, it presents itself as a force not to be ignored.

Nature initially comes as a dystopian element in the novel, being represented as a female entity who refuses to be in service of humans’ needs and desires. Therefore, it challenges anthropocentric and androcentric perspectives which view nature as instrumental:

Nature had refused to offer herself to them. The water, the green, the mammalian, the tropical, the semitropical, the leafy, the verdant, the motherloving citrus, all of it was denied them and had been denied them so long that with each day, each project, it became more and more impossible to conceive of a time when it had not been denied them. The prospect of Mother Nature opening her legs and inviting Los Angeles back into her ripeness was, like the disks of water shimmering in the last foothill reservoirs patrolled by the National Guard, evaporating daily. (Watkins, 2016, p. 7)

The notion that nature is actively denying to fulfill people’s desires is a response to its implied obligation to serve humanity. The persistence of such exploitative expectations ironically backfires as a punishment to humankind. Further in the quotation, the image of the Earth spreading its legs is quite literal and shocking. “Mother Nature” won’t be raped anymore—unfortunately not because she has the power to stop this act of violence but because exploitation has come to a limit: every single drop of water has already been extracted. The once yielding terrain is now sterile, and the picture left is one of despair and hopelessness, since nature is portrayed as a body worn out and abandoned after its abuse.

This severe reality comes as a shock to the American imaginary due to its opposition to the more traditional trope of nature as an inviting and nurturing woman. Annette Kolodny in *The Lay of The Land* explores the metaphor of land-as-woman in literature. She remarks:

America’s oldest and most cherished fantasy: a daily reality of harmony between man and nature based on an experience of the land as essentially feminine—that is, not simply the land as mother,

but the land as woman, the total female principle of gratification—enclosing the individual in an environment of receptivity, repose and painless and integral satisfaction. (Kolodny, 1975, p. 4)

The author proceeds to explain that this edenic and oniric representation of the land in the United States is tied to the history of colonization of the Americas; it has acted as fuel to the perseverance of individuals who decided to explore this so-called promised and virgin land. In this manner, the New World came to signify the prospect of an attainable beautiful, bountiful and boundless reality.

Furthermore, Kolodny discusses that the American pastoral impulse might be an ambivalent response to the frightening reality of the New World. There had to be a comfort of imagination in order to encourage settlers to explore the unknown land: “Beautiful, indeed, that wilderness appeared—but also dark, uncharted, and prowled by howling beasts. In a sense, to make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed” (Kolodny, 1975, p. 9). In this perspective, the battle to tame the land thus began in the realm of language; the land who was a woman would be less intimidating and more prone to domestication in their imagination.

In his essay “Americans and the Land”, published in 1966, John Steinbeck comments about the relationship between the early settlers and the continent. He argues that it was marked by savagery, thoughtlessness and, especially, a tendency toward irresponsibility which persists to this day:

It is little [sic] wonder that they went land-mad, because there was so much of it. They cut and burned the forests to make room for crops; they abandoned their knowledge of kindness to the land in order to maintain its usefulness. When they had cropped out a piece they moved on, raping the country like invaders. (Steinbeck, 1966, p. 146)

The unyielding violence towards the environment caused then the erosion of soil, the destruction of forests, the imbalance of rainfall and winds and more. Steinbeck concludes that the aridity of the American terrain had always been there but was exacerbated by human exploitative action: “There has always been more than enough desert in America; the new settlers, like overindulged children, created even more” (1966, p. 146).

The outcomes of the centuries-long process of unhinged exploitation of nature in America are portrayed in *Gold Fame Citrus*. The presence of the pastoral image of

nature in the novel is highly satirical: it is a nostalgic recollection of a utopia that can't be reached anymore, its mention is nothing but a mockery to the face of the decaying institutions. This notion is summarized by the words the character Lonnie professed in the novel; California is "the failed experiment" (Watkins, 2016, p. 70). The state of nature in the novel provokes a lack of hope that is paralyzing and ends up translating into denial, such as initially represented by the protagonist's views and expectations:

Yet Luz yearned for menagerie, left the windows and doors open day and night to invite it, even when Ray complained of the dust, even when he warned that the Santa Anas would drive her insane. Maybe true, for here was this varmint scurrying in her head. Here, finally, was a brave creature come down to commune in the house that wasn't theirs—it didn't belong to anyone!—and what had she done? Booted the little fellow in the gut and locked him away. (Watkins, 2016, p. 7)

The ambiguity of Luz's longing for nature paired with the characters' subsequent violence towards it represent the ideological perspectives which contributed to the aggravation of the climate crisis in the first place: the instrumentalization of nature, as previously discussed.

Another characteristic of nature writing in *Gold Fame Citrus* is the intertwining of temporalities. The seemingly dystopian futuristic scenario is permeated with occurrences tied to the past and present of California. For instance, the presence of the Santa Ana winds has posed a threat at different times in history. "Air hazy and amber with smoke. Malibu burning, and Luz's old condo with it" (Watkins, 2016, p. 7) are recurring events in fact. The volatile and unruly behavior of climate in California has been haunting its inhabitants for a long time. In 1968, Joan Didion showed concern for the impact of the climate and boldly declared in an essay that: "To live with the Santa Ana, is to accept consciously or unconsciously, a deeply mechanistic view of human behavior" (*apud* Reft, 2014), highlighting the environment's control over human destiny. More recently, the Camp Fire in 2018 destroyed more than 7,600 homes and became the deadliest wildfire in California's history according to BBC News (2018). In addition, the Woolsey Blaze in the same year caused the destruction of luxury houses of celebrities in Malibu and other nearby communities. The current difficulty of curbing fires with modern technological devices is highlighted by researcher Aidan O. Jones who claims that "no amount of ecosystem engineering will change the fire potential of chaparral ecosystems" (2014, p. 2).

Although the region with its natural ecosystems has been shown to present high risks for human life, a sort of denial seems to lead the collective behavior. The enchanting beauty of nature masks its hidden dangers. In the novel, the human obstinate permanence in this type of hostile environment can be symbolized by the expression “Ticks clinging to the dead grass” (Watkins, 2016, p. 7) which represents some insects’ tendency to stick to their habitat even though conditions for life are scarce. Metaphorically, in this dystopia, humans are tragically attached to places which constantly menace their existence. Their clinginess to this devastated land leaves them in a constant place of vulnerability.

The authorities’ efforts to contain the crisis by employing scientific and technological methods appear as fruitless in *Gold Fame Citrus*, ultimately contributing to the rise of chaos: “The skies were batshit back then: bureaucrats draping valleys under invisible parachutes of aerosols, engineers erecting funnels to catch the rain before it evaporated, Research I universities dynamiting the sky” (Watkins, 2016, p. 8). This battle-like depiction alludes to human warring spirit against the environment, attacking it with all their might. The strong presence of technology, mostly abandoned than in use, infiltrates the natural scenery. In the characters’ own experience of the landscape, they find out that nature is far from pristine:

Once, an early canyon project, Luz and Ray hiked up the mountain called, horrifically, Lookout, and came upon a derelict cloud seeder, one of those barn-size miracle machines promised to spit crystalline moisture-making chemicals into the atmosphere. Another time they hiked up a back ridge and picnicked above that colorless archipelago of empty and near-empty tanks strung throughout the city. (Watkins, 2016, p. 8)

The dystopian reality in *Gold Fame Citrus* is materialized by a constitution of nature that refuses to nurture humans’ expectations. It is a stance against the emblematic William Mulholland’s epigraph in the first book of the novel: “There it is. Take it”. Though engineering has historically been able to supply water, build the city of Los Angeles and successfully transform the semi-arid region into a place teeming with life, it all didn’t come without a cost. The novel shows the outcomes of centuries-long attempts of the mastery of nature and how it has affected the environment in the long-run.

Opposed to the human quest for control, in the novel, the sand dunes take charge. Organic life is outgrown by inorganic agency. Rocks commonly characterized by rigidity, passivity and resistance, though susceptible to weathering and sedimentation, become increasingly agent forces in the novel: “boulders clacking together in the ravine, a great slug of rubble sluicing down the canyon” (Watkins, 2016, p. 8). The slow but steady disintegration of boulders mimic the gradual falling and reshaping of societal institutions. With this movement comes a return to more “primitive” forms of life: “Mammals were out. LA gone reptilian, primordial” (Watkins, 2016, p. 13). This indicates a warning to human beings, which are the last predominant mammal species resisting in the region despite the growing loss of their habitat. Moreover, “the bloodglow pulse in the east, the last of the chaparral exploding” (Watkins, 2016, p. 14) is an image of disintegration of any dream of proximity to an edenic landscape. The expanding desert symbolizes the decay of a human civilization, which has caused its own doom.

2.2. The One who Receives: Wilderness as a Place of Refuge?

Although the American pastoral is a distant and failed dream in *Gold Fame Citrus*, the paradise motif keeps being a recurring theme in the novel. According to Ingrid G. Daemmrigh, the pastoral motif is, in literature, an integration of different theological and mythological notions of “the site of ineffable bliss to the beginning or end of human history” (2003, p. 213). Its common features are “green trees and grass, gentle hills or steep mountains, colorful flowers, pure water, blue skies, balmy breezes, proximity to the divinity/divinities, joy, peace, harmony, and freedom from fear, work, strife, want, disease, and death” (Daemmrigh, 2003, p. 213-214). In Watkins’ dystopia, the proximity to these elements is present as a constant yearning of the characters or as a mirage. Paradise motif, thus, runs along the narrative in contrast to the apocalyptic appeal of the novel, thus maintaining the utopian impulse of this critical dystopia. However, this constant ambiguity mirrors the characters’ cyclical behaviors which convey their difficulty of dealing with the climate crisis. The prospect of paradise and its negation accompanies the path of the protagonists as a satirical reminder of the absurdity of human attitude towards the

environment, which is often characterized by greedy and lusty expectations towards nature followed by its aggressive exploitation.

In the novel, the city of Los Angeles represents a lost Golden Age to which the characters are still nostalgically attached. Between memories and make-believe, the dream of LA takes place in the characters' daily imagination as long as they find comfort in each other. However, the approach of the child Ig gradually removes Luz and Ray from their selfish ways and causes them to, little by little, confront the bleakness of their reality. In the narrative, this encounter happens after Luz participates in the so-called rainedance at the dry canals of Venice Beach, an episode discussed in the first chapter. The child comes to Luz and Ray asking for water, and they deny it, placing the responsibility on the other adults with her. But soon after, Luz starts questioning Ig's well-being: "What if those weren't her people?" (Watkins, 2016, p. 34), thus showing concern. Then, Ig comes back and they get closer to her. Through the child's lenses, their eyes are forced to see the truth. In a very symbolic gesture, Luz offers her some expensive fruit—"The baby did not know *blueberry*" (Watkins, 2016, p. 39)—as if she was handing in the most luxurious piece of food, "a vein-colored, butterflied meat" (Watkins, 2016, p. 39). In reaction, the child's impression is not of delight but of disgust as the fruit came to be "a tasteless mucus" (Watkins, 2016, p. 40). Ironically, this analogous forbidden fruit brings enlightenment not to the receiver, but to the giver, since Luz is forced to savor its rotten taste herself.

Subsequently, Luz starts becoming protective of the child, but it takes some time for Ray to be convinced that they should take care of Ig. Something that opens their eyes and confirms Luz's suspicions is realizing that Ig was being abused by her preceding caretakers. They observe the disgusting scene: "the Mojav brought his hand down on the back of the child's head, not a blow but a grip. Palming her head, he pumped the baby's face into his groin twice, three times..." (Watkins, 2016, p. 41). After much hesitation but seeing no better way to help Ig, the couple decides to adopt, or perhaps kidnap, the child, thus taking the responsibility of helping to mitigate some of the city's corruption. They simply run away carrying the baby when they see the Nut—who seems to be Ig's former warden—coming their way. Their attitude conveys the failing of institutions, which leads them to commit a crime to prevent worse things from happening, therefore taking justice into their own hands.

The Nut impersonates the symbol of evil, being described in comparison to the image of the snake: “across the dark dry canal, a serpentine figure moved easily through the churning crowd” (Watkins, 2016, p. 46). In this way, this character is depicted as a devilish creature, coming from the underworld to menace the couple’s newfound happiness with the child. The imagery of haunting evil and temptation follows the protagonists to their mansion where they take the child and temporarily establish a nuclear family. The vision of the serpent is constantly around the garden: “She saw the Nut trailing them in circles around the yard” (Watkins, 2016, p. 56). Thus, the image of the Nut reappears in Luz’s mind as paranoia. It may represent a threat to her own pretenses, since she knows that their child is illegitimate and she is continuously afraid of having this discovered by other people and the authorities.

However, their bliss was doomed to have a short life anyways: “it was joy and love for the coin-eyed baby and for each other and for everything, everywhere. But it could not last” (Watkins, 2016, p. 54). Soon the child’s fears became their own; the child’s attunement to the things that were menacing brought them closer to the factual reality. Her behavior startled them: “Sometimes Ig jumped at nothing and stood staring at the mountainside, petrified, the Santa Anas keening through the canyon” (Watkins, 2016, p. 54). As denial showed to have no place where one must take care of another, Luz starts taking agency over their destinies and plans to find a better place.

Eu-topos starts to take a different shape in Luz’s imagination. As the American pastoral becomes a complete impossibility, wilderness presents itself as another form of earthly paradise. Her list of plans includes to “find a little cottage on a sound where the air is indigo and everjeweled with mist”, “take Ig walking in the rainforest, barefoot”, “pry open rotting logs and watch grubs and slugs and earthworms at their enrichment business”, “come upon a moose”, “assemble a rainbow salad” (Watkins, 2016, p. 55) and much more. As a mother now, Luz projects her yearning for nature to the child; she wants Ig to meet the world in its entirety, to feel connected to the earth with all its rich and delightful sensory experiences. However, once more, she gets lost into her own delusions. Such romantic and “maternal” nature is out of their reach. Firstly, it is an idealization in itself. Secondly, much of the natural beauties have already been destroyed by human action. Thirdly, Ray’s criminal record sets a

limit to their dreams of freedom, and throws them permanently out of the metaphorical garden of Eden.

Yet, a new promise of a city among the Amargosa Dune Sea is presented to them as their last hope: “‘There is a town out there,’ said Lonnie, ‘run by a prophet. Very spiritual place. Very primal.’” (Watkins, 2016, p. 72). Luz, then, ridicules the idea of having a city without water and specially people’s faith in a savior:

This again. There was always some savior out in the wilderness, some senator, some patent, some institute, some cell. So familiar, this stagey faith. Luz’s father had had it; it was how he kept himself atop everyone around him. He believed harder in stupider things, and there was somehow authority in this. Luz exhaled audibly and rolled her eyes. (Watkins, 2016, p. 72)

This way, the protagonist’s point of view showcases many contradictions: Luz claimed not to be a believer herself, though fantasizing was her capital coping mechanism.

The disbelief in all declining societal institutions opened the field to the rise of a new cult. As a response to the climate crisis, nature became the object of worship for many, including Luz. From this moment on, these beliefs will be more recurrently professed, especially by the characters to be found in the desert, in the colony among the sand dunes. The alternative faith was epitomized by Lonnie in anticipation:

In fact there was no water crisis, he maintained. Theirs was a human crisis. What they called drought was merely the mechanism of a long overdue social contraction. A little agony was just what this place needed. Reintroduce hardship into the regional narrative. Sift out the posers and moneymen, the tourists, the sun-bathers, the whores. Slough off the bourgeoisie! Euthanize the comfort culture! After: a pure city, liberated from its toxic pecking order, rid of its meet-ups and mixers, its principals and agents and managers murdered, a city of freed assistants, a city pure of heart. (Watkins, 2016, p. 77)

Denial of the climate crisis became the first trait of this insurgent religious rhetoric. In fact, to the denialist¹¹ point of view, environmental disaster supposedly became instrumental for nature’s higher purposes. It removed humans from the responsibility of taking care of the land and scapegoated the “intruders”, saying that whoever died was not worthy in the first place. Among all this, the Amargosa acted as the powerful

¹¹ Denialism is the rejection of established facts in order to support a biased narrative, thus creating a distorted view of reality.

divine force, namely a “bitter” female and thus also revengeful nature, who discriminately operated a spiritual and social selection. Interestingly, this new faith reenacted the old New World myth of an untouched wilderness. This idealized image of the environment is explained by Garrard in the following quotation:

The idea of wilderness, signifying nature in a state uncontaminated by civilisation, is the most potent construction of nature available to New World environmentalism. It is a construction mobilised to protect particular habitats and species, and is seen as a place for the reinvigoration of those tired of the moral and material pollution of the city. Wilderness has an almost sacramental value: it holds out the promise of a renewed, authentic relation of humanity and the earth, a post-Christian covenant, found in a space of purity, founded in an attitude of reverence and humility. (Garrard, 2004, p. 59)

Though traditionally wilderness is represented in opposition to civilization, in *Gold Fame Citrus*, the civilization versus nature dualism is deconstructed through ambiguity. The border between this pair is quite uncertain. In the context of the climate crisis, nature sets the law and order; but its unbalance also reflects on the establishment of a disorderly society. The city of Los Angeles becomes an uncivilized and chaotic setting while nature becomes the ideal cradle for a new civilization. It is not simply a place of refuge and reinvigoration for the tired humanity, but an opportunity for starting over and building something new. Doubtful or not of its potential, in the absence of an alternative, Luz and Ray have to venture among the wilderness to find exile in the desert.

Utopianism leads their path as the abandonment of the urban wreck brings the prospect of finding a better place. In Luz’s yearning, she spots the Amargosa in the horizon and pictures it as a heavenly comfort, a getaway place of beauty and color. It even inspires her sense of interconnectedness with nature, since she recalls John Muir’s teachings:

Luz studied the mountains ahead, watched the sunset coloring them as the things gone from them: lilac, plum, lavender, orchid, mulberry, violet. Pomegranate, one of the last to go. John Muir had written how when we try to pick out anything by itself we find it hitched to everything else in the universe. Above those spoilt purple mountains materialized a glowing wedge of light, whiter than the sun, thin, blurred, and radiant. Snow, Luz thought, unable to stop herself. (Watkins, 2016, p. 84)

Their first encounter with the dune sea, however, does not fulfill Luz’s expectations: “But there was nothing cool or blue or airy about this calcium-colored

crust capping the range. It throbbed with heat, glowed radioactive with light” (Watkins, 2016, p. 84). The transforming landscape then assumes a sublime quality. Though the Amargosa is not quite what the protagonist had imagined, its power starts to influence the characters, as they increasingly become in tune with nature’s rhythms: “They watched this sandsnow mirage, hypnotized by fertilizer dust and saline particulate and the pulverized bones of ancient sea creatures, though they did not know it. Did not know but felt this magnetic incandescence working the way the moon did, tugging at the iron in their blood. Knew only that it left them not breathless but with their breaths exactly synchronized” (Watkins, 2016, p. 85). In this experience, the borders between fear and awe are unclear. Here the novel’s dystopian and utopian impulses coexist, and nature becomes this ambiguous site of both hazard and solace.

The family’s most significant finding among the desert is the forest of silver yucca. This is something they longed to show the child. “‘Her first forest’, said Ray” (Watkins, 2016, p. 86), as in Luz’s wilderness to-do list. What they encounter is an uncannier reality than expected:

On and on for miles staggered the woody skeletons, the monocrop broken only occasionally by a feathery date palm, drought-weary, bowed in half, its fruitless head laid on the lifeless ground. But the palms were rare and in the main the valley stretched on and out and up in tessellations of pale soaptree yucca, spiny heads grafted to thick and hearteningly hairy trunks. (Watkins, 2016, p. 86)

The yucca trees are compared to human bodies lined up in a bowing position, lifeless due to the severity of the drought. Their oddly flowery description of the yucca forest evinces an opposite reality of devastation and deformity. They are hollow trees analogously to T. S. Eliot’s hollow men: “Shape without form, shade without colour,/ Paralysed force, gesture without motion” (v. 11-12). At first, the tone of the scene is very solemn: “Luz held Ig to her as she walked among the moon-cast shadows of the yuccas, smelling charcoal, saline. The baby went quiet, as if even she, irreverent devil that she was, recognized they were traipsing through something sacred” (Watkins, 2016, p. 86-87). Luz deems the trees to be ancient and wise, and thus respectable.

The soft touch of the child, however, shatters the trees down to pieces and, with this, all the illusion, as they find out that the trees were “Dead, without moisture

enough to rot" (Watkins, 2016, p. 87). Their earnest demeanor soon gives place to a more cheerful mood. The family starts playing among the cemetery of trees and the place suddenly loses its sacredness: "Ray felled another plant husk and crushed it beneath his boots, its desiccate death rattle vastly satisfying. Ig reprised her hiccup laugh and clapped" (Watkins, 2016, p. 88). The destruction of the trees' carcasses amused the child even more than the original intent to worship nature. Ig's laugh is meaningful. It is a picture of innocence and naivety in the face of disaster, since she is yet incapable of recognizing the seriousness of the situation. But when the adults follow her immature behavior, play becomes a two-sided dilemma: laughter brings a comic relief and helps them deal with tragedy as they have to confront their fears and persevere among the worst of times; but it also runs the risk of becoming mockery and reinforcing disdain for nature and normalizing its desecration. Discomfort follows this moment of pleasure: "A supernatural stillness overtook them, the fear they had tried to laugh away" (Watkins, 2016, p. 88).

Their dreams of finding a better place alongside nature gains nightmarish connotations. Paradise motifs, tied to pastoral and wilderness fantasizing, start to give place to apocalyptic imagery. The desert, an ever-changing labyrinth, becomes clearly a disorienting and inhospitable setting. The lack of sense of direction puts them in a vulnerable position: "Keep heading east. East was all. But without the sea, Luz had lost what little bearings she had" (Watkins, 2016, p. 91). Furthermore, hopelessness takes place with their encounter with sulfur pools formed by mine tailings. It brings back to Luz's memory fears from her childhood installed in her mind by her father's pious preaching:

In the sulfur pools squatted slick, bulbous mineral hives, steam surging from their slit openings like eyeless worms surfacing, belching mustard gas into the air. The thick rankness carried Luz to her father's living room [...] This is Satan's little stocking stuffer. This is how he tells you he's a-coming. (Watkins, 2016, p. 99-100)

However frightening this supernatural association might be, the reality of this natural phenomenon also causes fear and despair due to its factual danger. Actually, the sulfur pools are not something caused by devilish creatures, but the result of human interference and exploration of Earth's entrails with mining activities.

These allusions to hell in the novel come from the Judeo-Christian tradition, which puts forth ideas of wilderness as a site that "combines connotations of trial and

danger with freedom, redemption and purity, meanings that, in varying degrees, it still has" (Garrard, 2004, p. 61). Accordingly, Watkins' work puts side by side these contrasting meanings of wilderness in order to create conflict and constantly break with expectations. Though humans still strive for control and mastery over nature amidst climate crisis, the landscape is far from a passive and welcoming receiver. The desert in *Gold Fame Citrus* is an unyielding agent force that acts according to its own laws. Regardless of how culturally constructed nature might be in our imagination, the novel both recollects and deviates nature writing tropes, thus calling attention to the need to reinvent the ways in which we construe, perceive and relate to the environment.

2.3. The One who Reacts: Nature versus Man Interlude

The agency of nature becomes even more clear in *Gold Fame Citrus* second book, which starts with an interlude dedicated to nature writing. Polyphonic discourses composed of scientific, mediatic and testimonial perspectives aim to explain the origin of the expanding desert. The fate of the main characters is left on hold while we are introduced to a glimpse of the Amargosa Dune Sea through satellite image introduced by the omniscient narrator: "From space it seems a canyon. Unhealed yet scar-tissue white, a wound yawning latitudinal between the sluice grafts of Los Angeles and the flaking, friable, half-buried hull of Las Vegas. A sutureless gash where the Mojave Desert used to be" (Watkins, 2016, p. 113). The transforming landscape is compared to a hurt body, so viscerally harmed and exploited that its wounds remain open with no prospect of recovery.

However damaged, nature remains resilient. The sedimentary rocks, eroded into sand, are not defeated: they seem to gain even more life with movement. This evokes the animistic view which attributes life or spirit to all sorts of natural objects. Paradoxically, these non-living minerals are described here as full of power, agency and even free will:

Closer and the eyebain swoons again: these mountains move as if alive, pulsing, ebbing, throbbing, their summits squirming, their valleys filling and emptying of themselves. Mountains not mountains. Not rock, or no longer. Once rock. Dead rock. The sloughed-off skin of the Sierra, the Rockies, so on. Sand dunes. Dunes upon dunes. A

vast tooth-colored superdune in the forgotten crook of the wasted West. (Watkins, 2016, p. 114)

The return to animism in nature's representation in the novel is thus a rejection of mechanism, which "involves a stripping process, the stripping out especially of mindlike qualities such as agency and goal-directedness" (Plumwood, 1993, p. 115).

In addition, this transforming landscape is contradictory and deceiving. Its form and appearance do not correspond to its content. From the distance, it looks like mountains, though it is far from something solid and steady. It is called a dune sea, because it looks and moves like an ocean of sand, though there is no water. The desert then takes the form of a vast cemetery for human civilization and natural resources. The repetition of the expression "Buried beneath" and the listing of everything that is now covered by the dunes—such as "The world's tallest thermometer", "The Calico Early Man Site", "Quartz country", "Ephemeral lake country" and so on (Watkins, 2016, p. 114-115) —creates a sorrowful and mournful tone.

Also listed are all the efforts to hinder the intrusion of the Amargosa in the inhabited areas. But as a symbol of inevitability, the expression "Still came the dune" (Watkins, 2016, p. 116-117) and its variations echo in repetition through the pages. The dunes are perceived as an organism: "the world's most invasive species no species at all" (Watkins, 2016, p. 116), which suggests its deceptive character. Even in its inorganic existence, the Amargosa is a strong presence, unyielding to human attempts of control through technological interventions or environmental engineering. The damage has been done and the process of desertification seems irreversible.

Although the Amargosa is personified as a female entity, part of the metaphors avoids humanizing her. In many representations, the comparisons remain in the realm of the non-human: "The Amargosa was a disease: a cancer, a malignancy, a tumor. A steamroller, a plow. A hungry beast, a self-spawning corpulence, a bloated blob gobbling land, various images of appetite, projections of our ugly, innermost selves" (Watkins, 2016, p. 120). Being defined in terms of monstrosity, she keeps being the Other. The land becomes sometimes an obstinate and malevolent being: "The Amargosa was angry, cruel, or uncaring—personification inevitable and forgivable too, for at times the mass did seem to move with discernment. [...] It has

been called the devil incarnate, but also the wide, open eye of God” (Watkins, 2016, p. 120-121). This ambivalent nature is fearful and mysterious and, therefore, sublime.

Furthermore, the desert is described as a virgin land: “No one has circumnavigated the Amargosa, no one has ventured into its interior, and no one has crossed it” (Watkins, 2016, p. 122). For some, this could be intimidating, though, for others, alluring: “While it’s a fact that certain places woo, the Amargosa’s pull was said to be far beyond topographic charm. It was chemical, pheromonal, elemental, a tingle in the ions of the brain, a tug in the iron of the blood. The dune beckoned the chosen, they said” (Watkins, 2016, p. 124). Belonging and longing for this desert landscape are also reported feelings. Through these lenses, the Amargosa is described as a siren that sings a song which lulls men to her bosom, but then threatens them: “the Amargosa is both siren and jagged reef, its good vibes a blessing, its curse just as likely” (Watkins, 2016, p. 125). This welcoming but deadly nature embodies the same stereotypical images women have historically been limited to: from nurturing mother to unruly witch—one to be exploited, the other to be tamed.

These various discourses trying to comprehend and describe the Amargosa reproduce centuries-old conceptions about nature that are limiting and demeaning. They express especially anthropocentric and androcentric values which, on one hand, instrumentalize the land according to its usefulness and capacity of fulfilling one’s desires; but on the other hand, seek to impose power over nature and deny dependency on it.

As the territory becomes obsolete for humanity, governmental authorities make sure to stamp the land as worthless: “BLM’s *Survey of the Area Surrounding and Encompassing the Amargosa Dune Sea* reports a population of zero. The one-page document—the Bureau’s shortest survey to date—is itself salted with words like *inhospitable, barren, bleak, and empty*” (Watkins, 2016, p. 122). The territory, then, becomes abandoned and a non-place: “A desert deserted, the official line” (Watkins, 2016, p. 122). However, the narrative presents the promise of a colony, an oasis among the desert, opposed to the bureau’s estimation. Once more, a symbol of hope and resistance appears as a trace of utopianism in the middle of the dystopian reality.

After the view of the desert from space, a zoom in at the end of the chapter puts human life in perspective on Earth. The colony is spotted and the fate of our characters is again brought back in sight: “And beyond that, in terrain not yet subsumed by the dune, an anorexic wannabe orphan languishes in a vintage car on the shore of a sulfur lake, abandoned with the nameless child she took. Through playing house, dying of thirst” (Watkins, 2016, p. 126). This time, Luz’s experience with the child assumes another dimension: their lives are small in the grand scheme of things, albeit not unimportant. Thus, the movement of lenses, momentarily shifting the attention from the characters’ plot to nature writing, proposes an anti-anthropocentric approach, possibly an antidote to the climate crisis.

Despite all the discourses trying to seize nature within the realm of language, in *Gold Fame Citrus*, the Amargosa Dune Sea rarely fits the descriptions humans try to impose. Through the pages, the natural world assumes different forms, often challenging dualistic views and gendered limitations. The recurring presence of ambiguity and the scarce occurrence of certainty in the novel invites the reader to imagine nature in different manners, or even to allow preconceptions to dissipate and open space for new ways of seeing. Besides, the characterization of this environment in constant metamorphosis alludes to the reality of the Earth in the Anthropocene. The consequences of human violence towards the environment have created such imbalance, instability and destruction that it seems that now nature can only be comprehended in dystopian terms.

CHAPTER 3: MOTHERHOOD MYTHS IN *GOLD FAME CITRUS*

*I hold your sorrows, hold your fears
Hold your anger in my tears
Nobody asked me to
But that is what I'm meant to do*

*'Cause I'm woman
And I'm mother
Oh, I'm a ship inside a bottle
'Til the levee breaks*

(The Last Dinner Party)¹²

In *Gold Fame Citrus*, mothers and children are rare creatures, due to the severity of the water and climate crisis which makes it difficult to bear and raise children. As the environment increasingly becomes barren, women also become sterile. In this context, motherhood gains significant importance, even connotating sacredness. Thus, for the protagonist, Luz Dunn, becoming a mother is an opportunity of empowerment; but her decision also traps her into a world of obligations and social expectations about the role that a mother should play. In this chapter, we investigate how motherhood and its stereotypes help shape the protagonist's subjectivity amid the climate crisis.

Motherhood is a puzzling concept that accompanies women's experiences from childhood play to adulthood. In feminist theory and activism, motherhood has been a subject of great debate. Within this discussion, Adriana Teodorescu claims that the women–nature connection is a main characteristic in the social construction of Western contemporary motherhood. She states that “The idea of having children might be the last essentialist value of the Western world” (2018, p. 91). This means that motherhood is often idealized as a natural inclination for women, who are deemed to have maternal instincts. From this view, the complexity of women's experiences as mothers are ignored. In consonance with this argument, Fontes de Oliveira states:

By conditioning motherhood to biological determinants, patriarchy reinforces the idea that women are naturally caregivers. However, motherhood can be seen as an acquired social practice, an

¹² The Last Dinner Party. “I Hold Your Anger”. *From the Pyre*, 2025, <https://open.spotify.com/album/0EAXMn91yQml5xvO6LtVhk>.

experience not strictly determined biologically, but a *knowing* that women acquire, which they may learn with and through their bodies. (2015, p. 70)

Thus, giving space to women's narratives about motherhood is essential to re-signifying it as a place of wisdom, power, and agency for them.

Adrienne Rich, in *Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution*, first published in 1976, denounces that motherhood, as an institution forged in patriarchy has used women's power and turned it against them:

The power of the mother is, first of all, to give or withhold nourishment and warmth, to give or withhold survival itself. [...] The idea of maternal power has been domesticated. In transfiguring and enslaving woman, the womb—the ultimate source of this power—has historically been turned against us and itself made into a source of powerlessness. (Rich, 1986, p. 68)

In this manner, women's bodies have been stigmatized as something shameful, but paradoxically considered worthy when bearing a child. Therefore, under patriarchy, the body—a site of deep knowing for women—becomes a motive for their own oppression.

Rich sheds light on the difference between motherhood as lived experience and as an institution. The legacy of Rich is discussed and continued by Andrea O'Reilly, who goes further differentiating both notions of motherhood into separate terms, "motherhood" and "mothering". She defines:

The term "motherhood" refers to the patriarchal institution of motherhood that is male-defined and controlled and is deeply oppressive to women, while the word "mothering" refers to women's experiences of mothering that are female-defined and centered and potentially empowering to women. (O'Reilly, 2004, p. 2)

Thus, O'Reilly shows the importance of women defining and signifying their own experiences as a form of resistance. To investigate women's perspective on mothering is important since it challenges the male subjective view of women and mothers, one filled with stereotypes and paradoxes.

Interestingly, the same opposite archetypal images surrounding the traditional representations of nature—nature as a nurturing mother, and nature as

disorder—concern the stereotypes directed to women. These two contrasting images are alluded to by Rich:

Throughout patriarchal mythology, dream-symbolism, theology, language, two ideas flow side by side: one, that the female body is impure, corrupt, the site of discharges, bleedings, dangerous to masculinity, a source of moral and physical contamination, “the devil’s gateway.” On the other hand, as mother the woman is beneficent, sacred, pure, asexual, nourishing; and the physical potential for motherhood—that same body with its bleedings and mysteries—is her single destiny and justification in life. These two ideas have become deeply internalized in women, even in the most independent of us, those who seem to lead the freest lives. (Rich, 1986, p. 34)

Therefore, the sacredness of motherhood and the profanity of women’s bodies are polarizing concepts that value a single idealized model of womanhood in detriment of the others, as well as designs the model of what is to be a good mother. This stereotype is epitomized by the figure of the Virgin Mary, or Madonna¹³—a self-sacrificing mother, stripped of desire and immune to temptation. Julia Kristeva points out in “Stabat Mater”, the Madonna is a contrast to Eve; she also explains that the “story of the virginal cult in Christianity amounts in fact to the imposition of pagan-rooted beliefs in, and often against, dogmas of the official Church” (Kristeva, 1987, p. 237)—which indicates the controversial origin of such an influential myth¹⁴.

The idea of what it is to be a mother is historical and culturally determined. Shari L. Thurer investigates the stereotypes of the good mother throughout history, and asserts that this myth is reinvented in many societies at different times. She states that in contemporary society: “A sentimentalized image of the perfect mother casts along, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers’ lives” (Thurer, 1994, p. xi). The modern woman is loaded with the responsibility of holiness in relation to the child, which often puts exceeding pressure over her behavior; as Simone de Beauvoir suggests: “mystification begins when the religion of Motherhood proclaims that all mothers are exemplary” (2011, p. 632). Moral imperatives surround the experience of mothering with shame and confusion, depriving women of their own subjectivity in order to serve others and, ultimately, reach an unattainable standard. The author,

¹³ The word “Madonna” comes from the Italian phrase *mia donna*, which means “my lady.” In Christian tradition, Virgin Mary was the mother of Christ; but she also represents a mother figure for all Catholic believers, since she is responsible for interceding with God on behalf of sinners.

¹⁴ In this instance, we use the term “myth” not in the sense of falsehood, but referring to traditional stories and/or idealized concepts rooted in culture.

then, advocates for the need to understand and value mothers for their humanity and personhood: “There is a glaring need to restore to mother her own presence, to understand that she is a person, not merely an object for her child, to recognize her subjectivity” (Thurer, 1994, p. xii).

Besides this model of good mother embedded in Christian and patriarchal values with the image of the Madonna, another important and much older myth is the cult of the Great Mother: a goddess figure, also interpreted as an archetype by the psychologist Erich Neumann since she appears across cultures. She represents a powerful and ambivalent mother figure, who can give but also take life. By investigating societies in which the Great Mother was honored, it is evident that once women were much more venerated, and their bodies were seen as a source of power, as they are capable of operating miraculous creation—something alien to the male experience. Thurer exemplifies a distinct sort of mothering introducing the cavewoman:

Old Stone Age mothers weren't burdened by the modern fetishes of chastity, modesty, maternal altruism, or, in today's terms, “quality” time. And cavebaby may not have been worse off for it. To be sure, prehistoric women nursed their children, but there is no evidence suggesting that they were in their children's thrall. The requirement of exclusive devotion to one's child came much later. Perhaps this lack of personalized maternal attention was so provoking to early man that, when he finally attained the upper hand, he slowly but insistently displaced the Great Mother by multiple male sky gods — later, one male god — and created a patriarchal social order. (Thurer, 1994, p. 2)

The Great Mother sets a completely different model for the relationship between humans and nature. The author writes: “The Goddess was immanent, not transcendent; She was located within each individual and all things in nature, not above them” (Thurer, 1994, p. 9). It is interesting to notice how the metaphors between divinities and the natural world reflect in the establishment of different social hierarchies. A female goddess associated with the Earth was much more aligned with ideas of female empowerment, while the predominance of sky gods served to reinforce male dominance in society. Therefore, understanding that gender roles are culturally contingent and historically specific is essential to comprehend and question power dynamics that mold society and individual experiences and identities.

In our ecofeminist reading of *Gold Fame Citrus*, we will examine how both the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering influence the subjectivity of the protagonist, Luz Dunn, amid the climate crisis. We investigate how the decision of mothering shapes her perception of self, behavior and decision-making; and also examine the roles she has to socially perform the expectations concerning motherhood. In this dystopian scenario, motherhood is a multifaceted territory for women, containing the potential ground for empowerment, submission, or resistance.

3.1. Baby Done: Mothering as a Source of Empowerment

The experience of becoming a mother is transformative for the protagonist, Luz Dunn. Previously in the novel she had been stuck in the same patterns, continuously being objectified and occupying a submissive position. But after adopting a child, she urges to establish herself as an agent subject, and fight for her and the child's survival. The first mother-child encounter in *Gold Fame Citrus* is filled with wonder, marking the importance of this moment for plot and character development. The baby appears as a sort of miracle among the surrounding decay on the scorching hot beach. The protagonist is struck with surprise: "Luz could not remember the last time she had seen a little person" (Watkins, 2016, p. 30). Although the child is around two years old, her appearance uncannily resembles a baby straight out of a womb: "She looked up at Luz with eyes like gray-blue nickels, sunk into skeletal sockets. Her skin was translucent, larval, and Luz had the sense that if she checked the girl's belly she would be able to discern the shadows of organs inside" (Watkins, 2016, p. 30). Her description brings the illusion of purity, as if the child's body remained untouched by the merciless sun, or as if her innocence hadn't been taken away by the moral perversion around her. It is more likely, however, that she suffered from anemia and that, in her gentle manners, there was an implicit cry for help.

This moment represents the birth of the mother-daughter bond. Soon after Luz starts developing affection for Ig. Their connection happened very easily: "Luz smiled, and the child smiled too, and when she did Luz felt an unbearable welling of affection, both for the girl and from her" (Watkins, 2016, p. 31). Luz behaves as if she had acquired an instantaneous maternal instinct and wants to protect the child, even

though her partner tries to prevent her behavior. However, Luz begins to ignore all exterior discouragements and, for once, prioritizes her own convictions. An obstinate sense of responsibility guides Luz's following actions as she realizes that the child was suffering abuse. Seeing Ig being violated causes discomfort, and also a need for action. In the role of caring, Luz finds self-importance and strength: "For the first time in her life, she was absolutely essential. 'I am acutely engorged with purpose,' she whispered" (Watkins, 2016, p. 38). The significance of the moment lies in the fact that it represents a shift in the protagonist's power status. She forgets about her own vulnerability to focus on someone else's needs, thus making herself more resilient and empowered. Seeing the child as a victim in need of protection makes Luz rightly enraged:

Luz was not through. Not hardly. She was spellbound by the group's filth and their relentless youth and their drug-depleted gazes—indeed, the more she watched them the more they embodied stories she'd heard of vile things happening in the Valley. Traffickers charged quadruple for children, and many hosts refused to take them, so toddlers were left to cook in cars, older kids locked in the apartments parents fled. Or the children became the currency. These tales, along with the group's obvious and unforgivable neglect of the child, confirmed for Luz their malevolence. (Watkins, 2016, p. 38)

The sudden connection that the protagonist experiences towards the child reveals more than a maternal desire. We may argue that Luz sees in Ig a project of herself. She knew instinctively that there was some menace for the child, because she understood what childhood was like in environmentally devastated California. She wouldn't want any other girl to have Baby Dunn's destiny. Regarding the significance of the name imposed on Luz as a poster-child, Heather J. Hicks comments that Baby Dunn suggests "a loss of innocence, as well, potentially, as a loss of life—baby *done*" (2018, p. 637). Luz's affinity towards Ig, then, works as an opportunity to heal the parts of herself that were broken and abused, her lost childhood. The tenderness of the mother-daughter union showcases how important they came to depend on one another: "Then, the child spotted Luz once more. She smiled a crooked smile, but it wasn't until she came toward Luz, at an all-out tottersome run, that Luz recognized how she ached to hold the girl again. The baby bowled into Luz and toppled into her lap" (Watkins, 2016, p. 38). In this longing for each other, their connection reveals to be mutually beneficial, as Luz provides care while the child brings a sense of purpose.

Luz intended to protect the child from harm in that hostile environment. Nevertheless, as they spent time together, it became evident that some of Ig's innocence had already been taken away. First, they see Ig being abused by one of her previous caretakers, as analysed in the second chapter. Then, they observe that the child's behavior was improper for her age: "Beneath the silliness, they noticed an eerie adult quality about the girl. She touched. She moaned to herself. Her speech lurched forward and back, progressions and regressions" (Watkins, 2016, p. 43). She was strangely acquainted with adult manners, knew how to modulate her speech, and perform different roles to adjust and to survive.

Dealing with these signs of trauma and temper tantrums were just some of the parenting challenges. The protagonist has to reinvent herself and even assume a somewhat different morality: "She was beyond determining her own fitness and had been for some time. And yet, here she felt solid—righteous. She peered fiercely into Ray's prophet eyes aflame. It had been such a long time since she believed in anything. 'I cannot accept that there is nothing we can do. I won't.'" (Watkins, 2016, p. 45). She takes on a much more determined stance and vindicates her own agency; she begins to rely less on her partner and more on herself.

In addition to her internal transformation, the protagonist's worldview is also shifted by becoming a mother. The previous avoidance in dealing with the dangers associated with the climate crisis is replaced with a more realistic perspective towards the environment. The perishing nature around them is seen as a constant menace to their survival: "it was the holes where the trees had been that unsettled Luz, dark, expectant as graves. There were never so many hazards in the world as there were today. Love made you see them all" (Watkins, 2016, p. 63-64). The holes caused by the absence of trees, literally, represent dangers in their path; but, metaphorically, they also foreshadow the feared scarcity of resources in their future lives. Luz expresses her constant preoccupation with the child:

Here was one worry: Ig. She was worry pooping into an Hermes scarf, worry with skittering coin eyes, worry moaning in the daytime, worry panting at the heat, worry howling through the night. Worry strung out on ration cola, worry with its bulbed head in Luz's lap. Worry drowsy but fighting it, always fighting it, worry worrying the gauze blooming from her mouth. Worry gathering all other worries to them. But Ig was too delicate to resent, too pearly-skinned to solve,

and right now, stroking the tip of her nose with the tip of the nini, vastly too gentle, so much like a godsend. (Watkins, 2016, p. 73-74)

Besides her fragility and constant need of care, the child remains resilient and, thus, becomes a symbol of hope and security for the mother. Though parents are typically anchoring figures in the children's lives, in Luz and Ig's relationship, these roles are not strict and often inverted. The mother depends on the child to keep herself firm and soothed as well as much as the child does. In the novel, nature writing is employed to express their mutually beneficial bond through their metaphorical association with lichen:

She went lichen, pressing her palm to Ig, her own flat, cool boulder. She and Ig and John Muir were slate blue and sea green. They were a tuft of moss in Yosemite before Yosemite was a dry, ruined chasm ringed by hot granite knobs. They were a spray of fungi leaning out over Crater Lake before it went entirely crater. They were lichen on stone, dormant beneath the snowpack of a hangnail glacier in a crook of the Cascades that no one knew about, that no one even knew the name of. (Watkins, 2016, p. 77)

By comparing the child with a stone to which Luz, a lichen, is attached, it is established not a parenting dominating hierarchy, but a mutual dependency within the family. The mother provides protection against the harsh environment while the child presents a grounding effect. Besides, the inclusion of Ray in their ecosystem—compared in this quotation to the naturalist John Muir—reveals the protagonist's strong reliance on partnership for support. Together, the family stands reminiscent of a far-gone utopian dream, characterized by evocative elements of a pristine nature, and marked by the presence of established solid social units. The mother-daughter symbiosis is beautifully described as following: "Luz hunkered, unfurled her sagey petals, breathed through boreal ruffles, absorbed with her felt fins snowmelt and fog and mist and dew, all things moist, all things cool, and passed them to Ig" (Watkins, 2016, p. 78). The mention of nature in this lush and vivid manner provokes a momentary sense of hope in the narrative.

Overall, the mothering experience presents itself as a source of empowerment for the protagonist of *Gold Fame Citrus*. By becoming a mother, Luz reframes her personality, moving from her previous submissive attitude to a more agent stance. She resists and protects the child so that Ig won't suffer being as abused and objectified as Baby Dunn once was. Moreover, her role as a mother is one that challenges androcentric values—such as denial of dependency on nature and others,

and power over others. The relationship established between Luz and Ig is interdependent and mutually beneficial, as illustrated by the lichen metaphor. Thus, the mother-daughter connection symbolizes the importance of care in their hostile and devastated environment. Furthermore, it brings awareness to the need of rethinking relationships, within humans and with nature, in less domineering and more interconnecting terms.

3.2. Madonna or Medea: Stereotypical Images of Motherhood

Mothering is surely an empowering experience for Luz Dunn in the beginning of the novel, as she reclaims agency over their lives to take better care of the child. In addition, the child brings joy and purpose to the characters' lives inhabiting the abandoned mansion in Los Angeles. But the protagonist's undertaking as a mother is encountered with new issues when the characters meet communities, such as in Lonnie's complex, and in the colony among the sand dunes. Since navigating motherhood alone is ultimately not an easy task, the support of other women becomes essential to Luz in her labor. Concerning the importance of surrogate mothers and community in mothering a child, Fontes de Oliveira comments:

The mother as the main person responsible for the child is actually a notion of modern society, as the nuclear family becomes reduced and the community is separated from the process of mothering. [...] Surrogate mothers are common in different communities because many mothers have to endure various hardships and need each other's support. (Fontes de Oliveira, 2015, p. 78)

However beneficial, the relationships with other mother figures also bring many expectations that trouble the protagonist's identity as a mother. In this section, I explore the important parts other women play in the protagonist's mothering experience and investigate the motherhood stereotypes present in the narrative.

The first character to assist Luz in taking care of the child is Rita. She is described as a woman strongly connected to nature. Even in her appearance, she looks like she belongs to the earth: "Rita, Lonnie's girl, her carrot hair tufted into berms by body soil, the green-black at the tips the last of her grown-out dye" (Watkins, 2016, p. 62). The description continues and then displays the change in her looks from before and after the climax of the water crisis. When she had access to an

abundance of natural resources, she had been healthy and strong; now she is as physically weak as Luz:

Rita had been stocky, plump as a flounder, big shelf of an ass and gigantic breasts that led her around, made her seem powerful. Luz had always been afraid of her, even when they were supposedly friends. But Rita was thin now, so thin that her tattoos seemed withered. The half-sleeve art nouveau Holy Mother on her right forearm [...]. (Watkins, 2016, p. 62-63)

The changes in Rita's body symbolize a decline in her power with the progression of the environmental collapse and her consequential loss of health and fertility. Even the image of the Holy Mother tattoo in her arm has faded, indicating her failure to embody an ideal of female authority. Accordingly, this characterization demonstrates how women's worth, in a patriarchal society, is frequently tied to their role in reproduction.

Even though Rita loses much of her power as a woman, she is still able to help Luz in her mothering enterprise by providing supplies for the baby, such as diapers, formula milk and a car seat. But she also becomes resentful and shames Luz for her past wrongs—making sure to remind her that she has once cheated Ray with Lonnie before they moved to the starlet's mansion. She says “He's too good for you, you know” (Watkins, 2016, p. 79), implying that Luz is not valuable enough for her partner. And then she complements by explaining “It's not your fault, though. He's too good for anyone” (Watkins, 2016, p. 79). Rita's speech showcases how men are easily excused for their wrongs and violence, while women—especially when carrying the weight of motherhood—are heavily loaded with moral imperatives. Such social conditionings weaken women's relationships with one another.

Later in the narrative, Luz and Ig are abandoned by Ray in the middle of the desert, as discussed in the first chapter. After almost dying alone of heatstroke, mother and child are rescued by Levi and are taken to a colony close to the Amargosa Dune Sea. There, another woman offers support and care for them. Dallas is introduced in the novel as a mother figure in a nearly mythical tone and possessing goddess qualities. Luz wakes up seeing Dallas's image as follows:

The figure—a woman— turned in the seat now. She slowly extended both her bare feet—fat, pink bottoms black, grazed by the soiled hem of a flowing, wrinkled white skirt—into the aisle. She was topless, with

wide hips crowned by rolls and a soft paunch resting on her waistband. (Watkins, 2016, p. 129)

In her fragile state, Luz's first reaction towards this woman was fear. Taking satirically exaggerated proportions, Dallas is referred to as a giantess:

The giantess came at her still.
 "Get away," said Luz, loud.
 "Shh," said the woman again, kneeling with some difficulty beside Luz. "She's eating." She leaned close—Luz smelled a sourness rising from her—and there, in the wad of cloth was Ig, suckling the giantess's left breast. (Watkins, 2016, p. 130)

With some more discernment, Luz is able to come back to her senses, and feel gratitude for the help she has gotten, and for both of them being safe: "Luz felt her breath come back to her, and other things with it: relief, joy, the weight of responsibility, a seasick sensation born of both having and having not failed the baby" (Watkins, 2016, p. 130). Her startled response to the situation shows that she genuinely worried and cared for Ig.

Dallas embodies the stereotype of the good and nurturing mother, which inevitably causes Luz to compare their bodies and what they could provide for the child. While Dallas's body was a symbol of fertility itself, Luz's was the opposite: "Luz looked at her own austere breasts, her dark nipples veering slightly away from each other. 'We gave her formula.' Though she hadn't." (Watkins, 2016, p. 131). She begins feeling guilty for her more sterile conditions and having a deemed unnatural style of mothering and feeding. Thus, shame and comparison pressure the protagonist's identity as she feels pressured to embody an idealized version of motherhood. Her insecurity is then amplified by Dallas's judgments:

"I hate to see young people eating that poisonous crud. My oldest was on the breast until she was four. Kid was the healthiest little nub in Mendocino. Happy, too" [...] "She's back East now," said Dallas, by way of full disclosure, perhaps, a gesture to her own motherly imperfections. (Watkins, 2016, p. 131)

In this excerpt, Dallas displays condescending manners and carries a sense of moral superiority; but then she adds some signs of her own faults—perhaps showing empathy for other mothers, or expressing disappointment with a job that entails too much self-sacrifice.

Furthermore, Dallas starts to represent a mother figure for Luz as well, nursing her and aiding during her healing process. Dallas brings food which seemed impossible to find in the desert: “clean leafy greens, supple strawberries and a golden smile of cantaloupe” (Watkins, 2016, p. 134); she accompanies Luz when she is mourning for Ray—who, according to the people from the colony, had died; and even provides motherly advice, though her behavior is not always gentle or soft. When Luz has difficulty in dealing with the fact that Ray had abandoned her and the child, Dallas forces her to confront reality and question her own beliefs. In this instance, Luz displays some awareness about the performativity of her behavior and the gender roles she and Ray used to personify daily:

“Then where was he going?” Dallas was obstinately frank, and this confirmed Luz’s assumption that she’d had a difficult life. People with hard lives don’t waste time on euphemisms or manners.
 “To get help,” Luz said. How ridiculous that suddenly sounded.
 Dallas again said, “Hm.”
 “He was being a hero. I let him. Made him.”
 “You didn’t make nothing.”
 “I was always needing saving. That was our deal—damsel, woodsman.” (Watkins, 2016, p. 137)

One of Dallas’s most significant teachings, which will heavily influence Luz’s belief system, concerns the community’s relationship with nature. In the colony, people generally conceptualized nature as an ambivalent female entity. The sand dunes are seen as a single personified organism; they act like a mother who gives and takes lives, has control over life and death, similar to the Great Mother in mythology: an archetype that integrates opposing motherhood stereotypes—Mother Nature is both a Madonna and a Medea. Within this logic, Dallas justifies Ray’s supposed death, claiming that the dunes operate a selection of their offspring, welcoming only those deemed worthy: “‘The dune curates,’ she said. ‘It knows who it wants to be here, brings us to it. Pushes others away. He wasn’t right for this place, though I know it hurts you to hear it. Trust me, I know. We’re all where we’re supposed to be, believe me’” (Watkins, 2016, p. 160-161). Adopting this discourse as truth, Luz makes peace with Ray’s death and even feels relief with it, since it meant that Ig’s origin story could be kept secret with her. She could carry on identifying as a mother without interference: “Ray was dead and thus the secret dead inside Luz. Though she could not be said to have honored anything in her life to this point, she

would, she knew, honor Ig's first request: *Don't tell anyone, okay?*" (Watkins, 2016, p. 161).

Throughout the remainder of the novel, Dallas will increasingly assume a predominant mothering role in Luz's and Ig's lives: "*Mama*—Dallas's word in Ig's mouth, though all three of them needed it" (Watkins, 2016, p. 161). While their collaboration is beneficial and creates better care for the child, with time, Luz is distanced from her daughter mainly through the influence of the character Levi. Adapting to life in the desert brings new challenges to the protagonist concerning her identity, belief system and relationship with nature. The implications of this will be explored in the following section.

3.3. Our Lady of the Dune Sea: Womanhood as Performance

Though the protagonist's first contact with wilderness ended up being quite nightmarish, in the colony, the desert is painted as an *eu-topos*: a place where food and water is abundant, and the characters are unrestrained from labor and free to indulge in physical pleasures. In this garden of earthly delights, the community claims to establish a relationship with the environment based on the ideas of interconnection and dependence towards nature. People seem more attuned with natural rhythms, moving their settlements to adjust to the fluctuations of the dune sea, and they ultimately worship and respect nature as a divine entity. In this setting, the status of mothers and children take on sacred connotations.

These beliefs were preached by the self-proclaimed prophet and dowser Levi Zabriskie. By employing religious rhetoric combined with natural science discourse, this man institutes himself as the community leader. His entire persona is constructed in order to produce an image of authority, often in a satirical tone. Starting from his name, his identity is clearly forged—his first name recalls a biblical figure while his last name is a direct reference to Zabriskie Point, a part of the Amargosa Range in the Death Valley in California. Besides, his physical appearance also inspires dominance: "He was a large man. [...] His skin glowed coppery behind his pale tangle of beard, as though the sun had evacuated all the pigment from his facial hair and relocated it to his face" (Watkins, 2016, p. 165). Levi's power status is evident since

all the members of the colony surround him, displaying admiration but also submission. In this instance, Dallas is portrayed as Levi's complement: both of them epitomizing a model of femininity and masculinity for the colony:

Levi was their north. Their compass needles quivered in his direction. His stance was wide, as though he were readying himself to shoulder a great burden, a burden he would lug willingly and with grace, his little teeth winking all the while. Even Dallas, sturdy as a mountain, appeared at Levi's side and leaned into him. As they embraced, another gust bolstered the fire, melting their two forms together. (Watkins, 2016, p. 165)

In this community gathering, Luz notices that, alongside Ig, the way she was perceived by others had changed significantly. The attention she receives reminds her of the times she had been recognized on the streets for her modeling jobs. She had learned to adjust and act unbothered by the strangers' reactions, thus concealing her own self to be simply an object: "she was professional wallpaper, her job to replicate a human being without the mess of one" (Watkins, 2016, p. 167). If before she had only been noticed because of her looks and body, in that place Luz had been transformed into a token of something deeper, solemn, respectful:

Since girlhood, the gazes of men and boys had been a kind of consumption, gulping her in not because she was beautiful—because with her bad skin and bad teeth she was not beautiful, not without the tricks, "certainly not street pretty," her agent often barked into her earpiece—but because she was thin and her bones showed in places like a partridge on a plate. But at the dune, instead a glance to her face, then her feet, then to Ig slung around her. Pity? There was some. The story got around, she knew: a wife lost her husband, a widow with a baby. But something beneath the pity. A smile that, she realized in time, meant the child was triggering the saddest memories of their happiest moments. (Watkins, 2016, p. 167-168)

Thus, Luz realized that in that moment, as a mother, she provoked profound emotions in people, instead of only attracting attention to her thinness, that is, to her conformity to a certain beauty standard. This gives her a sense of self-importance. According to Judith Butler, "gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence" (2010, p. 34). Luz momentarily feels aware of the performativity of her role in motherhood; but her quick adherence to the character demonstrates how easily gender performance becomes part of one's self, given proper repetition and social reinforcement. Luz had presented herself as Ig's biological mother—and tried to meet the social expectations that came with it—for long enough to make it become part of her identity:

No matter. Here, the damsel delivered her greatest role. She played long-suffering, she played pure. A mother.

Only—and her coach had said this would happen, the miraculous transmutation into character, a notion that Luz had always found a little frightening—she wasn't playing. Another surprise. Here, she was a good woman. (Watkins, 2016, p. 168)

Womanhood turns out to be an interminable series of method acting exercises. To be socially accepted and valued, Luz is inclined to switch from one character to the other depending on the occasion. From the moment of this realization on, motherhood increasingly became a social currency for her. Would she use this power for her own advantage or let others benefit from it instead?

Levi knows very well how to play with gender and sexual politics in order to increase his own status. He seized the moment of the environmental crisis and social vulnerability as an opportunity for establishing a new faith and cult, thus offering hope amidst chaos. By claiming to be part of a counter-narrative and counterculture in society, he gained a position of trust and authority. He claims to challenge androcentric values; in theory, he supports dependence and connection with nature and community. For instance, "The girls", Levi's mistresses, express the belief that he rejects dominance over the earth. They say: "He dowses with his hands, rather than a rod. The phallus would defile the process. Men have wagged their rods at the Earth plenty" (Watkins, 2016, p. 173). In contrast, Jimmer—the healer of the colony responsible for treating every illness or affliction—presents a different perspective to the matter, showing that Levi had only adapted his discourse to the plausible circumstances according to the environmental conditions: "He uses his hands because he can't find branches. When was the last time you saw a tree?" (Watkins, 2016, p. 174). However, Levi's status as a miracle worker was nothing but a facade to avoid raising suspicions against his expeditions of robbery and plunder. Behind his image of savior lie hands stained with blood, and a regime built on violence. This shows that the colony was tied to a system of exploitation, even though most of its members remained in complete alienation.

Hope became a weapon in Levi's hands. With his words and artifices, he painted a world full of life and divinity. He reinvented the world through discourse, convincing people that there was a purpose for climate change and that nature, in fact, provided for them:

He somehow unearthed confidence and serenity from deep wells of fatigue, revealed the sublime subtext in the long list of civilization's failures. He brought, as he spoke, a verdant world to them—transformed the colony from a place of isolation and hardship to a place of beauty and abundant blessings. He invited the yuccas to lift their heads, regrew the wild grasses, reran the rivers [...]. It seemed possible, as he spoke, that his words might summon thunderheads, that his voice might bring rain. (Watkins, 2016, p. 184-185)

Therefore, Levi's strong and charismatic manner of speaking—typical of a populist politician or religious cult leader—was able to move people and gain their commitment to his purposes, especially making them see and believe in what was not there: the presence of an abundant nature that served the needs of humans. In a metaphorical way, his supposed ability to govern the environment reflects the actual power he held over people's minds.

Within this context, Luz gradually abandons her initial skepticism and is seduced by Levi's rhetoric. He invites her to join him in his place and there, accompanied by the use of a drug—a root that apparently everyone else chewed—she starts digesting his discourse and detaching from reality: "If she went she would get used to the root's fustiness and it would give way to an earthy oolong flavor and the softest sensation of floating" (Watkins, 2016, p. 191). This drug leads her into oblivion and ensures her adherence to the colony's beliefs. Levi convinces her that he has conducted a thorough survey of the region and cataloged new species. He shows her a book called "Neo Fauna of the Amargosa Dune Sea: a primer", where there were listed and illustrated species such as: blue chupacabra, burrowing dwarf owl, dumbo jackrabbit, incandescent bat, land eel, mojave ghost crab, ouroboros rattler, wandering joshua and much more. In this manner, Levi fabricates biodiversity to compensate for the lack of it in this anthropogenic biome. Numbed and deluded by the drug, these fantastical and satirical creatures are accepted as real by Luz's imagination: "Luz carried this bestiary everywhere she went, showing no one but Ig. It felt secret, sacred, and she needed to be close to it. [...] Luz needed to meet the beasts in different lights, and with different people swirling about, to be sure that they were real" (Watkins, 2016, p. 201). This shows how, desperate for comfort and safety, she became malleable. In this manner, Luz is again caught believing in an idealized and romanticized version of nature, as the following quotation illustrates:

The world was that expansive. Now there were tortoises out of Dali and Technicolor lizards and wandering trees for Ig. Suddenly this was a land of *could*. Flamboyant, vibrant, polychrome and iridescent, there was turquoise, pink, olive, yellow and red. [...] And what was vibrancy but being very, very alive? She and Ig were an example in her mind. It was soon very obvious that the world was made of unseen wonders, which we might call miracles. (Watkins, 2016, p. 202)

Luz started to confuse the images from the book with reality. Mainly due to the effects of the root, the land acquires magical qualities and colorful nuances in the protagonist's imagination. This results in a delusional perception of reality that refuses to acknowledge the barren conditions of the desert in favor of a world of promises.

The counternarrative Levi promoted was critical of the exploitation of nature, especially tied to the American history of colonization and the Western Expansion. He affirms that the government's purpose to evacuate the region and establish it as a wasteland was to actually use the desert as a field to dispose of nuclear bombs:

"Of course, this is a natural process we're talking about. This is the inevitable result of our own savagery. And we want to stop it because it reminds us of our tremendous neglect and of the violence we've done to this place. Your friend Powell knew that. [...] Step one: establish that it's barren. Step two: destroy it". (Watkins, 2016, p. 207)

Fact and fiction coexist in his conspiracy theory, thus creating uncertainty and ambiguity, and making it believable for those who, like Luz, desperately needed a comforting message: "Like this she could believe all things, the ghastly and impossible truth, plus the lie she needed badly, needed in order to put one foot in front of the other: the baby would never die" (Watkins, 2016, p. 210). In her vulnerable condition, the confusion Luz experienced was so overwhelming that it made her want to hold on to any possibility of control and certainty she could reach; and these psychological comforts Levi made sure to provide within the community, offering oversimplified explanations to the complex issues of the climate crisis.

Under the influence of the drug and Levi's manipulation, Luz gradually has her agency as a mother stripped away. She is reduced to performing a symbolic image of motherhood, while the actual experience of mothering is executed by Dallas. However, both of them are led to occupy a place of submission—a condition legitimized, within Levi's rhetoric, for supposedly being the Amargosa's plans. When Luz gets very close to Levi as a lover, she starts neglecting taking care of Ig, leaving

the responsibility to Dallas, whose resentment becomes evident. One evening, before Luz goes out to Levi's place, Dallas confronts Luz, making sure to tell her that her help is not on Luz's behalf but because she believes in bigger purposes. Dallas grabs Ig and declares "I'll take her. I'll always take her. But don't make the mistake of thinking I'm doing anything for your sake. There's a whole great goddamn world out there that has nothing to do with you." (Watkins, 2016, p. 213). It is only at this moment that Luz realizes Dallas' previous connection with Levi and that they had a baby together before she arrived in the colony, thus justifying Dallas's lactation. Dallas tells Luz that her baby came out dead, but, being a believer, she comforts herself with the justification that nature made her serve Luz's baby: "Seems you're the plan, now. Apparently the Amargosa requests I be your wet nurse" (Watkins, 2016, p. 214). Once she loses her child, Dallas becomes obsolete and neglected by the community and, especially, by its leader, who shows a strain of misogyny in his discourse towards his ex-lover. When Luz questions him about his history with Dallas, he says: "That's what my relationship with Dallas was like, in the end... *earthly* '—as though the word had a foul aftertaste" (Watkins, 2016, p. 216). Therefore, Levi exposes how he sees women solely as instrumental to his power pursuits, devaluing their bodies and dismissing them when they fail to fulfill his desires.

Playing the role of the Madonna is presented to Luz by Levi as a deceptively empowering opportunity; the responsibility placed on her is actually a threat to her freedom. She is pressured to abandon her individual identity in order to fulfill a collective role and act like their savior. She was to be made into the symbol of the colony's triumph in a commercial, representing the idea that the desert had to be inhabited and preserved by humanity for its sacredness, as Levi reveals in the following:

"We need you both, and we need it to be big and wholesome and beautiful. Transcendent. Madonna and child."
 He saw her hesitancy, perhaps. "Think about it. You of all people were brought here. No one survives out there, but you did. Ig did. This is Zion, Deseret, the New World's Holy Land. You see? Ig is our baby Moses."
 It was brilliant, it would work, and Luz could not agree to it. (Watkins, 2016, p. 229)

This brings Luz back to her past of objectification as the poster-child Baby Dunn, a role in which she is trapped once more. She resists submitting to the role, wanting to protect Ig from exposure, but also to safeguard her own right to subjectivity: acting in that way would be equivalent to emptying herself in order to embody an ideal that once had been imposed on her without consent.

Outside of human conflict, nature presents itself as a driving antagonistic force in the narrative. The movement of the Amargosa Dune Sea is taking the colony towards a mountain range that would block any attempts of escape. The landscape is described by the third person narrator:

Beyond this mortar of impossible promises rose a massive, alien mountain range. Though it was the dune that approached the sheer sawtooth mountains, and though the colonists were accustomed to their nomads' vertigo, all at the colony felt the sinister peaks bearing down on them. (Watkins, 2016, p. 230)

The dangers presented by this environment conveys anxiety to the characters, who are pressured to deal with this imminent problem, bringing the narrative to a climax. Then, denial and fear drive the community to find a scapegoat. Superstitions arise and Luz thinks she was the one to blame:

A symptom of some poison at the colony, was Dallas's theory, some infiltrating toxin within. Jimmer conceded this could be the case. He wandered the colony with his smudge stick, deposited agates and crystals in strategic locales. Luz craved a whole cache of them beneath the Blue Bird, for she knew her lies had invited the range. (Watkins, 2016, p. 231)

Instead of seeking real solutions to the problem, the characters insist on denying the dangers of remaining in that environment and continue to imagine justifications for nature's supposed fury, and that puts pressure on Luz. Women historically have been condemned for deviating from the gender roles established for them. Luz's refusal to fulfill the role of a mother, in the performative sense, is wrapped in guilt. Thus, when she opposes the naturalized institution of motherhood, her actions are considered to dismantle the so-called natural order—but which is actually a male dominated social order. The dangers approaching the colony were simply the symptoms of their own mistaken actions and beliefs.

Feeling threatened by the reality of facts, Levi resorts to more aggressive measures to fight Luz's resistance, ensure the execution of his plans and make her

confess the truth about Ig. First, he uses violence during sexual intercourse to instill submission. He forces her to participate in one of his orgies where she feels really oppressed: “She was embarrassed. She was embarrassed and she was suffocating. I can’t breathe, she called out, though no sound was made. She wondered how many such calls for help were up inside each of the girls” (Watkins, 2016, p. 235). As all of them forced Luz with their bodies, sexually violating her, she became divided between trying to resist or deciding to surrender. In that moment, she recognizes that she may not have been alone in her struggle. The other girls’ performance and acquiescence to Levi’s desires reveals how they all acted solely to please the man. Levi then blames Luz for not being so eager to please as the other girls and tries to instruct how “to be truly selfless” (Watkins, 2016, p. 236), that is, to be completely submissive.

Moreover, Levi contributes to making Luz passive through drug addiction. When Ray finds the colony and meets Luz again—after having gone through his own journey of imprisonment and escape—he notices that she was hollowed inside:

Something was different about her, not just her darkened skin or wind-thinned hair or the sand all over her. Beneath all that, she was caved in, fervent. Manic but vacant. A little mad, maybe, or just saddled with a mighty hurt [...]. Suddenly it was clear that the big man was to blame not only for Ray’s injuries but Luz’s too. (Watkins, 2016, p. 282)

Luz’s altered state indicates a loss of identity. She was emptied and oblivious by the drug and Levi’s influence, since the fantastical alternative reality created by him could only be maintained if one was lost in a state of madness. This reveals that this leader employed different types of violence to ensure his power. For instance, Levi was responsible for physically hurting Ray during their journey through the desert, as Ray tells when he tries to warn Luz against Levi’s wrongs by saying: “He was the one on that lorry—the one who attacked me” (Watkins, 2016, p. 287). But much worse violence was directed towards Luz, who had been psychologically, sexually and emotionally abused, and ultimately turned into an object of domination.

In this fragile state, Luz starts to distance herself from her responsibilities as a mother, neglecting the child and even allowing Levi to offer the root to Ig when she is unable to deal with one of her tantrums: “Soon Ig was suckling quiet and wide-eyed on the cot—‘That’s her mind’s knot untying,’ Levi said. ‘Perfectly natural.’” (Watkins,

2016, p. 296). With this speech, Levi displays his method of controlling people's mind with the aid of the drug. Alienation and obedience to his regime are deceptively painted as a form of spiritual transcendence. When Luz falls completely under his control, she takes Ig with her. Losing her own power and agency, Luz can no longer offer protection and care for her daughter. This shows how the harm to the mother gets to the child.

At the peak of her addiction, she chews a whole sack of root, and forgets about all worries. It is then that Luz's carelessness mostly causes terrible consequences: Ig gets really hurt, probably bitten by some venous animal, such as wasps or scorpions, while wandering alone in the wilderness. Her injuries are described in the following: "Ig's body told the story: one whole side of her swollen to bursting and black, her left arm bloated and prosthetic-looking, unable to bend, her neck swallowed, her eye sockets screaming red seams between two bulbs of waxy flesh" (Watkins, 2016, p. 300). The child's grotesque appearance is alarming. This shocking image forces Luz to start confronting her dreary reality.

But it is only when the healer Jimmer challenges her that Luz comes back to her senses. Thus, he plays an important part in making Luz take action over her life again. Jimmer mainly points out the selfishness of her behavior by saying:

"[...] you aren't even thinking about her. That would involve too much foresight and consideration on your part. That would imply a plan and some sitting and thinking about what would be best for someone other than Luz, and you haven't ever done that, have you? Now, I've made mistakes. I've lost people. But you've thrown them away. There is an important difference. You're waiting for someone to come scoop you up. Well, you want to know who comes along and does the scooping? Scavengers. You're busted up, anyone can see that. But tell me why you've got to bust up this little one, too. Are you lonely? You want a companion down there, in the sinkhole you've become? Shame on you." (Watkins, 2016, p. 302-303)

Jimmer's lecture calls attention to the ways Luz had been hurting herself and the child. He criticizes her avoidance in taking action on her own, therefore, submitting to a victimized position. Referring to scavengers, he alludes to the attitude of individuals such as Levi who prey on other people's weaknesses. This speech moves her and, after a short discussion with him, she decides to put a final stop to her addiction: "I don't want it,' Luz told him and told herself" (Watkins, 2016, p. 302). Her stance is strong, though facing reality is equally harsh. The protagonist finds it difficult to

navigate the world without any numbing substance, being very unpleasant to endure the hostile environmental conditions: “Luz found the rootless world hot and lacking, scooped out, herself a bored husk blowing through. In her beige sobriety she clung to the idea of Ig, whose reported recuperation was the only gift life had left her” (Watkins, 2016, p. 310). The expression “a bored husk blowing through” in the quotation metaphorically represents Luz’s internal emptiness and lack of purpose, as if she were simply an object without substance being carried aimlessly. But during this fight against withdrawal, Ig acts like an anchor to her mother. Thus, the child provides hope, giving Luz a reason to resist in this moment of fragility.

The root, therefore, works in the novel as a metaphor for people’s denialist tendencies towards the climate crisis. Without the intoxicating effect of this drug, the protagonist starts to see reality more clearly for what it is, letting evidence materialize the truth instead of relying on biased explanations. The narrator describes the facts that the protagonist came to realize: “Objects and artifacts and evidence and epiphanies: No one’s name was their name. Everyone here was running from something” (Watkins, 2016, p. 311). The end of the illusion is marked by Luz’s realization that there were no actual citrus trees around there. No fruit would grow in that devastated terrain, as the quotation demonstrates:

And that was how the last of her whole lush and infinite miracle world dissolved, finally, leaving behind only its brutal scaffolding: sun of suns, drought of droughts, no rain, no rivers, an impossible pile of sand approaching an unforgiving range. Barren and bereft and lifeless, just like the pamphlets said. Leave or die. No more complicated than that. No other dimension, no buried menagerie and no trick of the eye or ear or heart could make it otherwise. (Watkins, 2016, p. 312)

The last measure Luz took that severed all her ties with that world of fantasy was reuniting with Ray, thus going back to her actual roots and restoring parts of her identity. Their reconciliation also symbolizes a change in the couples’ power dynamics and gender performances. If before Luz had identified as the burden and Ray as the driving force, now their relationship was much more interconnected, representing a mutual dependence: “horse and wagon and a new wondrous not knowing which was which” (Watkins, 2016, p. 313). Thus, this also means his breakage with androcentric values.

However, the couple's resistance presents a threat to the colony's established order, so they have their lives menaced by a fire and, having survived, they are expelled from the community. Levi negotiates their exile, promising to provide them with resources as long as they leave the child behind. But even before his offer, she had already started realizing the complexity of her situation, knowing that she would not be given the chance to have everything her way. She would have to choose between staying with the child or leaving with her partner:

Ray was at one end and Ig was at the other. The algebra of the situation was balancing itself in her mind. Dallas was a better mother than she'd ever be—that was true, even before Levi said, "If you leave Ig, I will let you go. More than that. I'll give you a vehicle, food, water. I'll show you the way out. You'll go on with your life like you were meant to. Like you planned. The two of you." (Watkins, 2016, p. 335)

The idea that Dallas would take better care of the child comes as a comfort for Luz. But it also reflects her powerlessness in the situation, since her failure as a mother is more due to her imprisonment in an instrumental role of motherhood than her lack of efforts to provide care for the child. She was made into an ideal and a performance that distanced herself from the actual mothering experience. This system of domination and oppression results in Luz's conflicted subjectivity—one that fails to recognize the limits of its own self and others' projections. Without a choice, she convinces herself that leaving Ig would be a relief and would mean a return to her actual identity:

These were her people. Speculators and opportunists, carnival barkers and realtors, imagineers, cowards and dreamers and girls. Mojavs. Eyes peeled for the flash of ore, the flash of camera, the wet flesh of fruit. Gold, fame, citrus. Every erotic currency harvested green or yellow or the profound underground black of oil gone red-brown when slid between two fingers. Clear—whatever color you want it to be. (Watkins, 2016, p. 338)

All these traits and more are connected to the typical personalities of the history of the Southwest of the United States. They represent a synthesis of people who came to the region during the Western Expansion or continued to immigrate later to this land, looking for the promises of freedom and wealth. Due to her past as poster-child and model, the protagonist places herself within this plural identity. Luz, after all, had been shaped without consent to perform the many roles of the Southwestern identity. She was less of a subject and more of an object, molded to

embody the country's myths. In this manner, the issues confronted by the protagonist resemble the problems related to the conception of nature imposed by androcentric thinking. The discourses around both women and nature in *Gold Fame Citrus* convey the attempts to control and shape them through discourse, defining them according to men's wishes to control, subdue and exploit.

Analyzing the novel's final scene, we observe that nature is represented as a powerful force with its own will and agency: "The flood came upon them like an animal, like a vengeful live thing, earth-colored and savagely fast. Ray took it for a sandalanche at first, as the wriggling fingers surrounded the lorry. Its true properties came to them both at the same time. They looked at each other" (Watkins, 2016, p. 338). When the long-awaited rain comes, it does not come to fulfill humanity's wishes but to act according to its own laws. Thus, in the narrative, the representations of nature challenge the androcentric front.

Hypnotized by the beauty of the rain, Luz jumps out of the car into the water: a leap of faith taken in the wrong direction. In this impulsive state, she repeats her mother's fate, drowning herself. The protagonist's destiny sheds light into the reasons why her mother—a character who vaguely appears in the narrative and whose voice remains silent—had such a tragic fate; she may have been led to despair by male oppression. These sequenced occurrences are analogous to Ophelia's ending in Shakespeare's "Hamlet" after being driven mad by patriarchal society. These woman characters have a similarly ambiguous ending: on one hand, their demise represents the tragic and unjust consequences of an oppressive system in which they are victims; but on the other hand, death is a place of resistance and freedom from fulfilling an ideal imposed upon them.

The protagonist of *Gold Fame Citrus* undergoes a similar path, and the reasons for her desperate act are ambiguous. Luz's last words disclose uncertainty when diving into the flood: "'I'm okay,' Luz shouted back over the miraculous roar of water, all those prayers answered late. 'I'd be okay,' she revised, smiling before she slipped forever under, 'if I could just get my feet under me'" (Watkins, 2016, p. 339). On one hand, she could have reached a complete state of delusion, consequently losing touch with reality and risking her life. On the other hand, she could have made a deliberate choice, taking agency over the only thing she could at that moment—her

death—thus refusing to be part of anyone else's plan. Therefore, Luz's open-ended destiny can be interpreted both as a result of alienation or as an act of resistance. Moreover, the precariousness and vulnerability of her situation showcases the consequences of the oppression of both women and nature in the novel, as androcentric values create further difficulties for human survival when dealing with the climate crisis.

CONCLUSION

Men come and go, cities rise and fall, whole civilizations appear and disappear—the earth remains, slightly modified. The earth remains, and the heartbreaking beauty where there are no hearts to break. Turning Plato and Hegel on their heads I sometimes choose to think, no doubt perversely, that man is a dream, thought an illusion, and only rock is real. Rock and Sun. (Abbey, 1990, p. 219)

In this dissertation, we read Claire Vaye Watkins' novel *Gold Fame Citrus* through ecofeminist lenses, investigating how the protagonist Luz Dunn constitutes her subjectivity in the climate crisis. We draw the conclusion that androcentric values permeate discourses and attitudes regarding women and nature in the narrative, such as the denial of dependency, relations of power over others, and instrumentalism—that is, the valuing of women and nature only to the extent of their usefulness to men. These notions endorse the oppression and exploitation of women and nature to maintain an order established by male power and culture. Since subjectivities are shaped by the culture around them, the protagonist personifies many of these traits, which are oppressive to herself.

In Chapter 1, "Women as Close to Nature in *Gold Fame Citrus*", I analysed how the association between woman and nature help shape the protagonist's constitution of subjectivity, demonstrating that this connection is underlined by the androcentric logic—which endorses the domination and exploitation of both women and nature. In addition, I explored how the combination of elements from other literary genres within this dystopia enhances its critical dimensions. For instance, the presence of satirical elements throughout the novel, with the constant use of irony and exaggerated stereotypical characters, criticizes anthropocentric and androcentric ideologies, as well as emphasizes the oppressive atmosphere of the novel and the decaying reality of the institutions.

Furthermore, in Chapter 2, "The Land as Woman in *Gold Fame Citrus*", I concluded that Claire Vaye Watkins appropriates traditional tropes of nature writing, such as pastoral, wilderness and desert in a subversive manner. I showed that utopian and dystopian impulses oscillate within the representations of nature, which

creates ambiguity and uncertainty in the narrative. Nature is imbued with agency in the novel, thus confronting androcentric attempts of control, and challenging dualistic views and gendered constructions. In addition, the novel displays the reality of the environment in the Anthropocene: as a result of human exploitative behavior, nature becomes unstable and volatile, often presenting itself as an antagonist force.

Finally, in Chapter 3, “Motherhood Myths in *Gold Fame Citrus*”, I explored how motherhood, both as an experience and institution, help shape the protagonist’s subjectivity in the climate crisis. I argued that mothering is an empowering experience for Luz, which leads her to taking more agency over her life. However, the domineering rhetoric of the character Levi strips motherhood of its power and transforms it into a place of oppression for Luz. This leads the protagonist to a conflicted subjectivity, which fails to recognize the limits of her own self and other people’s projections. In conclusion, I interpreted Luz’s open-ended destiny as both a result of alienation or as an act of resistance, in response to the constant androcentric oppression throughout her journey. Ultimately, she becomes the symbol of the water crisis in the American Southwest and, with her doom, shows what may happen to humanity when it tries to bypass nature.

In addition, throughout the dissertation, I supported our reading of *Gold Fame Citrus* as a critical dystopia, proving that it maintains an utopian impulse. Hope permeates the narrative and is presented by alternative societies, such as the colony in the desert which is a potential *eu-topos*. However, a model for dealing and mitigating the crisis is never really achieved in this fictional world, due to the presence of recurring anthropocentric and androcentric features in society. Although the novel does not provide the antidote for the problem, it does suggest the causes of humanity’s ruin and the implications of repeating the same old patterns. Thus, the novel provides relevant speculation for a matter that urges for attention in our contemporary times, and that calls for action so that we may avoid arriving in a future state of hopelessness.

Therefore, *Gold Fame Citrus* may be seen as a warning against the real dangers of the climate crisis and anthropogenic interference on the planet. Regardless of the discourses that seek to shape the landscape according to human designs, nature actually moves according to its own laws. There is often a mountain

range setting the limits and telling us to stop; there is often a wind, a wave, or even a sand dune, signaling for us to change the route. Ignoring these signs may only direct us to our own doom. No human impatience, violence or obstinate desires can fight nature without running the risk of leading to its own destruction. If we continue to insist on nurturing idealized and romanticized views of nature, we may sooner or later come face to face with the fact that the land is no mother.

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