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Gabriela Kozakiewicz
University of Warsaw

Queer Vegetal Desires and Monstruous Flourishings: More-than-Human Intimacies in Speculative Plant Fiction

Abstract

This article seeks to further expand academic perspectives on crip and queer intimacies by engaging with speculative plant fiction. Open to bold experimentation in style, language, and the limits of what is conceivable, the speculative mode provides an excellent space for envisioning bodies and desires that traverse the human-nonhuman boundary. The narratives examined in this article bring queer/crip intimacy into contact with the vegetal realm, an encounter that is often overlooked. Yet, even the speculative accounts of human-plant kinship can activate those aspects of vegetal being which unsettle conventional notions of subjectivity and relationality, much like queerness disrupts fixed identities and normative practices. The article presents a diffractive analysis of three short stories that narrate intimacies beyond the human: "Water" (2014) by Ellen van Neerven, "Seedlings" (2018) by Audrey R. Hollis, and "Desfloración" (2019) by Ángelo Néstore. By depicting intimate entanglements of human protagonists with flora—whether through explicit interspecies eroticism or human-plant hybridization—these texts challenge (hetero)normative models of pleasure, embodiment, identity, and relationality. To fully engage with the critical and conceptual stakes, the analytical framework combines queer ecologies, crip theory, critical plant scholarship, and selected insights from posthuman thought. The Anthropocene, as famously argued by Haraway, calls for a specific type of stories, capable of fostering kinship across species. Taken together, the analyzed "phytospeculations" demonstrate how human–plant bonds not only transgress conventional boundaries, but reconfigure them, thus positioning more-than-human intimacy as a site of (eco)crip/queer resistance, survival, and regeneration.

Keywords: literary and cultural plant studies, speculative fiction, queer theory, crip theory, phytospeculation.

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INTRODUCTION

As environmental catastrophe becomes our lived reality, a growing number of intellectuals call for a reevaluation of the instrumental treatment of nonhumans and for the creation of stories that foster kinship across species (Haraway, *Staying*; Tsing; Dooren and Rose). Simultaneously, as the systemic context grows increasingly hostile to bodily trans/deformations and non-conforming identities, both scholarly and artistic explorations of crip and queer experiences become invaluable. Arising from these complex concerns, this article seeks to expand academic perspectives on queer and crip intimacies by analyzing how this quality can be mobilized within narrative environments to traverse the species divide—more precisely, how nonnormative intimacy emerges in fabulated relationships with plants. To this end, the article turns to speculative plant fiction, as the speculative mode provides an excellent space for envisioning bodies and desires that destabilize the human-nonhuman boundary.

The narratives examined in this article bring queer and crip intimacy into contact with the vegetal realm, an encounter that remains largely overlooked and fraught with ethical risks. For a study grounded in plant humanities, entering into dialogue with queer and disability theory—let alone advocating for nonhuman kinship—requires working through the legacy of discursive violence. Comparisons to animals and plants have long functioned as strategies of dehumanization aimed at queer, disabled, racialized, and otherwise-nonstandard bodies, whose alleged proximity to nature is continuously mobilized to justify their oppression and exploitation (e.g., Ray and Sibara). Yet the recent expansion of work by queer and crip theorists that engages with ecocriticism and posthumanism—giving rise to intersectional fields such as queer ecologies (e.g., Sandilands; Luciano and Chen) and eco-crip theory (e.g., Clare; Kafer; Taylor)—suggests that such dialogues are becoming vital. Intimacy, in particular, emerges as a key site of convergence among scholars attuned to queer modes of subversion, compelled to "embrace . . . sexual pleasure and transgression as foundational to environmental ethics and politics, and resistance to heteronormativity as part and parcel of . . . green strategy" (Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson 39).

Strikingly, despite their immense generative potential and theoretical resonance, sustained encounters involving queer and crip theories alongside plant humanities remain scarce. Several concerns crucial for crip and queer scholars, including the stigmatization of anomalous bodyminds[1]

[1] This term, conceptually abolishing Cartesian dualism, was introduced into disability scholarship by Margaret Price in her 2015 article "The Bodymind Problem and the Possibilities of Pain."

and desires, converge with particular intensity around critical reflection on plant-being. Vegetal modes of existence, as critical plant scholars have shown, defy the conventional Western norms of embodiment, subjectivity, and relationality (Marder, *Plant-Thinking*). Plant propagation, in all its diversity, unsettles normative reproductive scripts, destabilizes gender binaries, and routinely transgresses species boundaries. Vegetation can thus help theoretically reconfigure intimacy, in accordance with Marder's assertion that "the front line in the fight for the liberation of sexuality from metaphysical and onto-theological constraints cuts through the being of plants" (*Plant-Thinking* 88). As this article argues, through literary analysis, even speculative accounts of human–plant kinship can activate these disruptive vegetal qualities that resonate with queer and crip challenges to normativity and systemic oppression.

What follows is a complementary analysis of three short stories that narrate intimacies beyond the human: "Water" (2014), authored by a non-binary writer of Yugambeh and Dutch origin, Ellen van Neerven; "Seedlings" (2018) by a US writer, Audrey R. Hollis; and "Desfloración" (2019) written by Ángelo Néstore, a non-binary artist residing in Spain.[2] I refrain from applying the term "comparative" to the sort of theme-focused analysis proposed here, which involves literary works from diverse cultural backgrounds without the clear intent to examine the intricacies of their contexts or treat them as exemplary of their respective traditions. Instead, I propose to think of the following analysis as an exercise in "diffractive reading,"[3] in a sense used by Birgit M. Kaiser as a potential response to the methodological challenge of "re-calibrat[ing] 'comparison' under conditions of increased entanglements on a planetary scope" (276). Such an approach is built upon Karen Barad's notion of diffraction and its application as a method of reading—one that juxtaposes insights from multiple domains (or texts), "reading them through one another" (Interview 52)—to allow diverse literary works to meet, relate, and mutually illuminate shared concerns.

Coming from different cultural and geographical contexts, all three stories present more-than-human intimacy as a site of subversive pleasure and transformative political potential. Thus, I argue that human-plant intimacy in these texts does not merely transgress the conventional boundaries—it reshapes them. As their protagonists renegotiate

[2] All the citations from this story have been translated from Spanish by me, in the absence of an English translation.

[3] Or else, given the vegetal focus of this paper, as an instance of what Astrid Møller-Olsen refers to as "companion plant reading," i.e. bringing together "individual stories that, like the gourd or the bean, help one another grow in the reading and bring their own linguistic, cultural and historical contexts to the field of comparative literature" (124).

relationships with the self, community, and environment, these narratives envision how more-than-human intimacy might offer resistance, survival, and regeneration not only to the queer/crip subjects but to all beings rendered precarious by environmental and societal collapse.

"WATER": FROM VEGETAL DESIRE TO ECO-POLITICAL ALLIANCE

Set in the near future, "Water" traces five transformative weeks in the life of Kaden—a queer Australian woman of Aboriginal descent—who begins work for a corporation commissioned by the government to construct "Australia2." Presented as the pinnacle of numerous retributive pro-Indigenous reforms, the project involves creating a second island, where Aboriginal people would settle and rule; a phantasmal substitute for the lost ancestral territories. Its construction requires invasive land-forming methods and the relocation of the area's predominantly Indigenous inhabitants. The project, however, is stalled by the appearance of the so-called "sandplants": sentient and articulate humanoid plants. Kaden's task is to persuade these creatures to abandon the islands, allowing the construction to continue. To gain the plantpeople's trust and understanding of their nature, the protagonist starts delivering a special anti-insect formula to the communities scattered around the islands.

Most descriptions of the plantpeople are tainted by a similar ambiguity: "She has a face that's like me and you. With space for two small eyes and a hint of a mouth. Am I blind not to notice much difference? Of course there is the body of them, shaped like a post, covered in prickles except for the hands" (van Neerven 78). The plantpeople's obvious human resemblance, conflicting with distinctly unhuman aspects, provokes a two-fold reaction of fascination and repulsion. Their not-entirely-human bodies fill Kaden with discomfort, as she notices "an *awkward* tangle of roots and limbs" (87), or even experiences fear as "their shoulders swing back and forth like some smooth stroke" (89). Such mixed reactions to departures from standardized body images are well documented in disability scholarship;[4] yet these interpretations alone miss the added uncanny of roots and

[4] See, e.g., Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's account of cultural responses to disability in the US, oscillating between fascination with crip "freakishness" and repulsion-driven attempts to remove disabled people from public view (55–80). Importantly, the strategy of highlighting the perceived vegetal features in certain humans, particularly those with physical or mental impairments, has historically served to accentuate their supposed biological inferiority, as evidenced by the widespread use of plant-based metaphors (such as "human weeds") in both US and Nazi eugenic rhetoric (see O'Brien).

reedlike, wind-tossed motions. The vegetal intrusion into this otherwise familiar embodiment heightens a sense of essential, insurmountable difference, conveyed in Lynda H. Schneekloth's claim: "[p]lants are the ultimate alien" (253).

Indeed, the plantpeople's transgressiveness extends beyond mere physicality. For instance, they do not conform to a binary vision of gender—which "is not predetermined . . . only communicated" (van Neerven 78). Another aspect—science-fictional, albeit debated by contemporary botanists and plant-inspired thinkers—is their intelligence. Demonstrated by the capacity to communicate in English, adapting to the normatively human, colonially entangled language and structure of thought, the plantpeople's intelligence is constantly questioned. Even Kaden doubts that they might have cognitive capacities similar to humans or be capable of processing emotions. This reluctance can be seen as indicative of the internalized normative standards of intelligence and rationality, reproached by critical theorists for their arbitrariness as well as complicity in biocapitalist agendas. To varying degrees, the verdict of intellectual inferiority has justified assuming control over individuals and populations, rendering them available for exploitation: "[T]heir distancing from Western civilization's most prized capacity of rationality ha[s] served as the rhetorical basis of their dehumanization" (Mitchell and Snyder 556). Apparently, histories of prejudice, mobilized to gatekeep personhood and its concomitant privileges, instantly resurface when the vegetal subaltern learns to speak, even in a work of fiction.

"Water" further problematizes the question of plant consciousness, speculating on the extent of the plantpeople's sentience, including their conception of death. These issues converge when one of the vegetal characters explains how they experience pain: "When I'm away from sunlight. When I see others ripped. But not death. Death doesn't affect me" (88). By echoing Heideggerian view of death as constitutional to human existence, this passage points to another distinctly nonhuman—yet, according to Marder, specifically vegetal—trait of the plantpeople: their lack of concern with individual survival, supplanted by a plural sense of self, "a mode of being in relation to all the others, being *qua* being-with" (*Plant-Thinking* 51). Grounded in this relational, transcorporeal model of consciousness, Marder's interrogations of death through the plant lens destabilize the life-death antinomy by showing that the withering of some parts does not prevent the collective from flourishing—sometimes even stimulates growth ("Resist" 30). Perceiving one's death not as tragedy or sacrifice, but as an organic stage and potential nourishment for the more-than-human community, is essential to grasp the plantpeople's mindset and actions as the narrative unfolds.

Confronted with radical difference—and the threat it poses to the primacy of anthropocentric reason and interests—fictional human authorities adopt strategies closely mirroring those employed by nonfictional governments to combat figures designated as "aliens." These strategies involve the dissemination of biopolitical concerns regarding the proximity between the species, exemplified by the monologue of Kaden's supervisor:

> [I]t's come to my attention, through research, that as these sandplants can closely resemble us and mimic our behaviour—well, some people in close proximity can find themselves getting quite attached. Now that's fine, in the same way that of course we get attached to our cat or dog, maybe even to our mango tree that's been in the backyard for a few generations. But there have been cases of sexual attraction. . . . But it is unnatural if you take it that couple of steps further. The government has recognised the danger—it is, of course, illegal to be in any way romantically involved with them. (van Neerven 97)

The character voices a state-sanctioned view on interspecies intimacy, mobilizing discursive mechanisms designed to discipline sexual dissidents: from appeals to "unnaturalness" to threats of legal prosecution. Historically, analogous measures have been enacted to produce a sense of social undesirability and legitimize control over countless nonfictional bodies and populations, specifically in the sphere of sexuality and reproduction. As demonstrated, for instance, in Eli Clare's powerful essay "Yearning toward Carrie Buck," the practices of incarceration and state-mandated sterilization of the "feebleminded"—be them people with disabilities, sexually active maidens, or poor whites—as well as anti-miscegenation and anti-immigration policies stem from the same eugenic impulse traversing patriarchal sanctimony, white supremacy, class prejudice, and obsession with able-bodymindedness. Tellingly, Kaden's supervisor claims to draw his conclusions from "research," foregrounding the centrality of the power-knowledge apparatus in the production of pathologized minorities. Moreover, his position is sanctioned by tradition: not coincidentally, his argumentation reflects the Aristotelian "ladder of nature," linking acceptable levels of intimacy to a given entity's place in the hierarchy of beings. In light of this speciesist logic—which, as crip theorists remind us, constitutes only one materialization of the broader biocapitalist tendency to rank beings according to their proximity to privilege-ossifying standards of intelligence, embodiment, and productivity (Fritsch, "Toxic")—since the plantpeople belong to the lower tier reserved for vegetation, any attachment with them is irreconcilable with the myth of human exceptionality.

To preserve this myth and synergistic hierarchies, the fictional authorities implement mechanisms that precipitate the plantpeople's elimination more directly than denigrating discourses. The formula distributed by Kaden is revealed to serve this insidious purpose: instead of nourishing them, it has debilitating and, eventually, lethal effects. State-funded research is thus mobilized to intervene in the plantpeople's bodies at the cellular, metabolic level, clearing the way for "progress" (and profits). Given the larger context of retributive action towards the Aboriginal community, this thread reads as an obvious allusion to the colonial methods of subjugation and extermination that the Indigenous and other racialized people have been historically subjected to. At the same time, the formula quite literally represents the insidious work of cure, which, instead of being a manifestation of care, becomes a socially accepted channel for "the desire to eradicate disability," poignantly criticized by Clare for its complicity in the physical elimination of marginalized communities ("Notes" 258–59).

A specifically vegetal counterpart illuminating this storyline can be found in weeds—often overlooked victims of homogenizing and optimizing practices. As Brylska points out, weeds are targeted by the same eugenic rhetoric that casts difference as a threat to a healthy, pure, and fully controllable human body or population (79–83), the vegetal equivalent of which is the perfectly manicured lawn (cf. O'Neill[5]). This drive towards the eradication of (bio)diversity manifests in the use of herbicide, widely regarded as an appropriate response to *weed invasion*, regardless of its environmental toll. Like weeds—known for resilience—the plantpeople emerge as victims of fantasies of total control over ecosystems and, by extension, as vegetal allies in struggles for environmental and community preservation. Thus, by refusing to participate in the genocidal scheme of big business and state, Kaden not only rejects the racist biases, but also "resists this logic of foundational speciesism taken for granted by the normative human world" (Mitchell and Snyder 559). Her decision is, however, only partially motivated by interspecies empathy; an equally important, if not decisive factor, is the growing intimacy between the protagonist and the plantpeople's leader, Larapinta.

The political gravity of this erotic entanglement, defying biopolitical state propaganda, becomes evident in the relationship's early stages, looming over Larapinta's attempts to seduce Kaden:

[5] In her art-as-research project, Cynthia O'Neill maps conceptual connections between dandelions and disabled bodyminds, revealing analogies in the construction of deviation, impact of the social models of exclusion, and use of chemical toxicity targeting all those who do not belong and thus should be removed.

> She is brushing up against me in the dinghy again. Surprisingly, her prickly skin doesn't irritate mine. . . .
>
> "I've been thinking about you," she says. . . .
>
> "You don't think," I say. "It's just processes."
>
> "I have been thinking . . . a lot. I have enough intelligence. . . . I think we do have what you call a 'sparkle.'"
>
> "It's a spark. It's not a fucking *sparkle*."
>
> She's not taken aback at my outburst. "Finally. A political statement." (95–96)

This banter between future lovers, during which Kaden's preconceptions are challenged, playfully alludes to the galvanizing potential of queer/trans monstrosity. The passion-indicating spark that appears between a human and a nonhuman, soon to be involved in transgressive romance, is reminiscent of the electric jolt that brought Frankenstein's monster to life. "Water" celebrates this revitalizing force of queer more-than-human intimacy, showcasing its ability to "empower and radicalize" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 392), to fuel the political agency of disadvantaged communities.

This message is reinforced by the portrayal of sexual encounters between the characters, showing intimacy not only as a site of resistance to the political oppression, but as a possible pathway towards more livable futures. A foundational ecosexual binding of environmental care and queer pleasure is at work here (Sprinkle and Stephens). Sexuality becomes the sphere where the human-nonhuman boundary is tested—not without excitement—and eventually overcome, proving this barrier to be porous enough to allow the flow of physical tenderness and passion:

> What will I discover in this uncharted experience? How much of what it means to be human will sway deep in my mind like a ship. I see her eyes are open, those green unhuman eyes, watching. . . . suck on her bottom lip, surrender my teeth. She makes a noise that I could only interpret as arousal. . . . To feel she is human now is a lie, I must be with who she is. (van Neerven 102)

This passage stimulates imagination to envision intimacies that traverse the human-nonhuman divide, suggesting that the lover's taxonomical affiliation might hold less importance than the sustenance and joy derived from their relationship. This intuition is confirmed by the dialogue that

immediately follows the sex scene, in which Larapinta pronounces "I am renewal" and presents "her flowers, one on each fingertip of her right hand" (103), as proof of her capacity to adapt to love. The literal post-coital blooming of the character positions queer eco-sex as an antidote to the detrimental tendencies of Western erotic imagination,[6] scolded by Luce Irigaray: "The West has focused on the fruits more than on the flowers. And carnal love has become the way to produce children and not make lovers flower" (38). Consequently, this image can be viewed as a symbol of mutual flourishing attained through ecological lovemaking—through crip/queer erotic entanglements with nonhuman actors.

The renewal heralded by Larapinta soon encompasses Kaden, catalyzing a reconsideration of the categories previously unquestioned by the protagonist, including the bounds of loyalty and mutual interests linking her to the nation, the Indigenous community, and the plantpeople. More-than-human intimacy lays the ground for the character's discovery of different forms of kinship: she reconnects with her family, reclaims the Aboriginal heritage, and develops a sense of belonging to the ancestral land, endangered by the plans to construct "Australia2." We could view this process, following Deleuze and Guattari, as an instance of "becoming-minoritarian," since the most prominent aspect of the protagonist's evolution involves rejecting the dominant discourses in favor of her Indigenous identity, represented in the text as the discovery of emotional connection to her relatives as well as her native island.

Yet, many subtle hints open this text to a more radical interpretation: a personal account of the nonhuman turn. Indeed, rather than seeking humanity in her lover, Kaden is compelled to reexamine her own positioning as a human—in an unmistakably queer gesture, since, as Luciano and Chen remind us, "'full humanity' has never been the only horizon of queer becomings" (188). Crip theory, too, exposes the interests behind the pervasive cultural resistance to recognizing disabled subjectivities as

[6] One such tendency, criticized by disability scholars, is the continued desexualization of people with disabilities, which either completely invalidates or pathologizes pleasures experienced and evoked by disabled bodyminds. I align with Ojrzyńska and Vaidya in suggesting that the ecosexual framework holds emancipatory potential for crip sexualities, due to its conceptualization of pleasure as decoupled from dominant body standards or physical capabilities, neither necessarily genital nor explicitly sexual (including, for example, breathing techniques recommended for outdoor practices), but instead extending to all body parts and beyond them, toward the environment (cf. Vaidya 143; Ojrzyńska). Ecosexuality, then, with its invitation to overcome the pain of injustices by indiscriminately loving the Earth and its inhabitants—in both sexual and non-sexual ways, but always with healing in mind (Sprinkle and Stephens 23)—might be seen as a less oppressive and much-needed instantiation of cure, as opposed to its violent manifestations informed by ablecentric ideologies, which Clare problematizes in his writings.

fully human (e.g., Mollow 307–09; Puar 78–84). Recent crip scholarship has further compromised anthropocentric primacy by favoring relational models of identity based on shared vulnerability to injury (e.g., Taylor 250–03) or even promoting "cross-species identification" (Mitchell and Snyder 559–60; 563–64).

"Water" proves particularly attuned to these insights in its depiction of Kaden's inner transformation. Namely, the less normatively human Kaden becomes, the more vegetal qualities she exhibits, which suggests that the intimate exposure to plantness reshapes the character. In a retrospective passage, the protagonist recalls: "[W]hen I was little, Dad and I lived off the sun. We spent the whole day in the fields. Never in the shade. And I lost the wide-brimmed hats my mother bought me on purpose" (van Neerven 91). This rediscovered capacity to draw nourishment from sunrays, humorously evoking photosynthesis, veers the character's seemingly superficial change into the nonhuman, vegetal territory. Another hint at Kaden's inherent plantness is woven into her name, as the word "kaden" denotes "orchid"[7] in the language of her father's tribe. The alliance between the protagonist and the vegetal realm is thus presented as constitutive of her being, as an element she needs to embrace in order to save her cultural and environmental heritage from obliteration by humans.

The fight for the millenary heritage and the environment cannot be a solitary one, the narrative reminds us, as it culminates in the rebellion of the Aboriginal people against the neo-colonial government. Important allies, or rather instigators of this uprising, are the plantpeople, who are revealed to be ancestral spirits, reawakened to protect both nature and culture from the violent forces of neoliberal capitalism. The realization that Larapinta and her tribe incarnate the endangered landscape does not diminish the relevance of the vegetal dimension of their embodiment. To the contrary, van Neerven's decision to anchor queer agents compromising heteronormative sexual policies and settler-colonial endeavors in plant bodies complements the vision of this more-than-human alliance of the dispossessed. After all, as convincingly argued by Catriona Sandilands, in neoliberal biopolitics where "intensive (ab)use of plants is the rule" and

[7] Far from coincidental, this choice reflects the persisting fascination with orchids, whose diverse floral shapes—so, essentially, the variety of their reproductive strategies—earned them the status of the cultural symbol of the hypersexualized life of flowers. In fact, the abundance of orchid specimens is a direct result of their promiscuous sexual life: "The spectacular floral diversity of orchids has often been attributed to their intricate and intimate interactions with their pollinators" (Tsai et al. 101–02). Orchid, a quintessence of the power to adapt to the needs of various pollinators to ensure mutual survival, a plant whose existence is shaped and secured through co-evolution with beings dissimilar to her, seems a perfect counterpart for a character involved in transformative vegetal romance.

"people and animals are increasingly organized and controlled *like and even as plants*" all earthly life comprises "the vegetariat" ("Vegetate" 22)—the oppressed community of those whose life is not considered meaningful, and too easily turns expendable. "Water," therefore, offers a speculative insight into the revolution of the vegetariat, rooted in intimacy, affect, and concern for mutual survival.

"SEEDLINGS": CACTI DEFIANCE OF REPRODUCTIVE AND REHABILITATIVE FUTURISM

"Seedlings" recounts the story of Pamela, who literally pushes the boundaries of the human, willingly transforming herself into a vegetal hybrid. The premise of the narrative challenges the traditional perception of the human body as singular, bounded, and impermeable, gravitating instead toward heterogeneous visions of corporeality, such as Lynn Margulis's concept of the holobiont. A text that foregrounds the relationship between body and environment—in fact, undermines the very idea of an external environment by locating the vegetal Other within the protagonist—calls for an attuned analytic framework. Hence, this section relies on the eco-crip theoretical proposition advanced by Matthew J. C. Cella: "the ecosomatic paradigm." As a tool for literary analysis, the ecosomatic approach, by assuming "the inseparability of ecological context and somatic experience," enables readings that trace how "changes to the body lead to subsequent changes in one's perception of and experience with being in the world" (Cella 184, 172). Fittingly, the symbiotic merge between the character and a succulent begins on the bodily surface:

> Pamela swallowed a cactus and grew spines. They shot up through her pores, inches long and thick and stiff. They lay flat with the hair on her head. Everywhere she had hair, she grew spines instead. She enjoyed it, that first day, feeling them push up through her skin. . . . there wasn't a single place which was soft. She loved, so deeply, being an untouchable thing. (Hollis)

Pamela's transformation, as foreshadowed in this opening passage, will soon encompass her sensibility, reshaping how she experiences and inhabits the material and social environment, including a newly discovered pleasure: untouchability.

Although the use of the word "untouchable" here is literal, it nonetheless elicits associations with social exclusion. Pamela's paradoxical enthusiasm with the pariah status conferred by her monstrous corporeality raises an

important question: what exactly is she hoping to escape from by assuming vegetal embodiment? An explanation I propose is that her former female body was *too touchable*, subjected to discursive and physical violence.[8] This intuition is reinforced by Meeker and Shabari's point regarding femi-queer artists who identify with plants: "By becoming plant, they have located themselves outside of or in opposition to the socially accepted norms of woman- or personhood" (174). The narrative offers more clues to sustain this reading; for instance, the passage about Pamela's refusal to pluck her eyebrow spines: "[T]hey were creeping towards the center. It would have mattered to her except she didn't need to care about being beautiful anymore" (Hollis). Evidently, cross-species embodiment offers Pamela relief from the asphyxiating beauty standards and disciplinary pressures imposed on women. At the same time, hybridity frees the protagonist from the ableist imperatives to strive for the normatively healthy and productive body—a stance that resonates with Johnson and McRuer's notion of "crip willfulness," defined as "a refusal to act in accordance with the system of compulsory able-bodiedness" (136). Pamela's vegetal embodiment thus emerges as an adaptation choice, celebrated for the distance it introduces between her and society.

Nevertheless, "Seedlings" does not eradicate the possibility of physical intimacy. If anything, Pamela's cacti-corporeality inspires innovative approaches to sex, prompting her and her partner to revise familiar patterns of caress and pleasure: "Things had been different since Pamela swallowed the cactus. The sex was certainly more creative. Lydia would crack her open now, stroke the moist, water-bearing seams that made up her insides, moving with exquisite care. Pamela would wear gloves" (Hollis). The sensual language describing the women's erotic encounters suggests that adaptation to hybrid corporeality has enriched rather than limited their physical connection, further cripping and queering their already nonheteronormative lovemaking. Similarly, non-sexual intimacy remains largely uncompromised, with tender gestures still common between the partners: "Lydia leaned down and kissed her carefully, between the spines, her lips as soft as waterbeds."

Gradually, however, the couple's intimacy begins to falter. This shift cannot be attributed to the accommodations required by a nonstandard body, but rather to Pamela's transforming sensibility, increasingly shaped by vegetal—more precisely, cacti—desire. The protagonist grows repulsed by the excess moisture produced by her partner's body; at one point,

[8] The motif of vegetal transformation as an escape from patriarchal violence recurs across literary traditions, from ancient Greek myth (e.g., Daphne) to contemporary Korean fiction, exemplified by Han Kang's *The Vegetarian*.

Lydia's skin is compared to "a baby vole or some other hairless, wet thing that had never seen the sun," an image hardly meant as flattering. In turn, Pamela's fantasies become populated with images of her new succulent kin, until she finds herself "obsessed over the height of the saguaro, the wispy beard of the old man cactus, the plump lush fruit of the prickly pear." As this divergence in preferences grows—extending beyond sexuality—the partners become estranged and eventually split, accelerating Pamela's disengagement from the human world.

The character's visceral aversion to water contributes to her alienation from the physical and social environment, neither of which shares her "dream of deserts":

> And everywhere, this strange overabundance, this ridiculous fecundity. The world seemed laden with water, with gifts. . . . When she woke, their front yard was covered in dew and she wanted to faint from the richness of it. The feeling wasn't entirely pleasant—she had dreams of the strange softness, in which she might sink and drown. It was not the first time that she thought she could not raise children here but it was the first time that thought had come to her with such force.

Evidently, the more succulent the character becomes, the less at home she feels in her surroundings. The ecosomatic lens helps to unpack this process: it appears that the cactus within Pamela has brought its habitat requirements with it; consequently, as vegetal presence gains prominence within her bodymind, Pamela's somatic experience of the environment clashes with her altered needs. Crucially, what emerges is not simply discomfort, but a quiet resistance to the universal reliance on water and its life-sustaining promise. Despite her cacti entanglement, Pamela's aversion to reproduction cannot be understood as purely vegetal, given how constitutive proliferation and growth are to plant-being (Marder, *Plant-Thinking* 160–62). The protagonist's withdrawal from her previously articulated desire to have children must therefore arise from a different drive. In what follows, I read Pamela's stance as an instance of queer/crip rejection of futurity.

Pamela's withdrawal from reproduction emerges from an experience of profound unbelonging—one that resonates with queer and crip critiques of futurity. Lee Edelman famously identified the persistent hostility toward queerness as a reaction to its structural opposition to the core drive of dominant heteropatriarchal culture, which he termed "reproductive futurism" (13–14). Pamela's refusal to participate in repronormative, anthropocentric futurities—represented by a fecund watery ecosystem—aligns with Edelman's call to renounce parenthood and, by

extension, the regime in which the central figure of the Child functions as an antidote to queerness, stabilizing the socio-political order. Pamela's turn away from the figurative Child thus signals a radical affirmation of her queer identity and, simultaneously, an act of disidentification with the anthropocentric order and its biocapitalist reproductive agenda.

Anna Mollow's cripping of Edelman's approach reinforces this interpretation by exposing a synergistic drive, also rejected by Pamela: "rehabilitative futurism," or the ableist fantasy of a future purged of disability and difference (288–89). As Mollow shows, dominant culture casts both queerness and disability as identity-disintegrating and potentially dehumanizing forces that must be neutralized in the name of a healthy, optimized human future. Therefore, rejecting the "humanizing enterprise" (307)—by relinquishing the aspiration to be recognized as fully human—emerges as the only ethical escape route from a social structure based on the production of countless abjected others. Renouncing privileged species-belonging and parenthood thus marks Pamela's departure from both reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms and toward multispecies horizons that have no need for the category of the human. Aligned with her transition into a cacti hybrid, this gesture liberates her from normative pressures, hierarchies, and homogenizing future scenarios, opening space for inclusive, queer, posthuman futures and kinship.

Paradoxically, the theme of reproduction becomes central to "Seedlings" imagery and plot. In all instances, though, its renditions contradict the normative heterosexual discourses, expanding the horizon of reproductive imagination to encompass transgressive, queer registers. Importantly, Hollis models the sensations of the physical transformation into a succulent on pregnancy. One case in point is found in the following formulation: "like a sea cave has been constructed in your rib cage, like you consist of crystalline structures slowly filling with water." This monstrous yet tangible description harmonizes with the trajectory of "queer self-birthing" proposed by Barad, who explores the monstrous origins of trans bodies—re-assembled and brought back to life, renewed—maintaining "comparison/contrast" to the actual birth (Shelton 120). Consequently, Pamela's transformation could be seen as "radically queer configuring of spacetimemattering" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 393), an instance of queer (self-)actualization that encompasses entire corporeality, becoming the dark double to the figure of the Child.

Additionally, the narrative challenges heteropatriarchal scripts of childbearing by bringing the vegetal dimension into the picture. In fact, the plant element in Pamela seems to take over, involving the protagonist in one of the myriad modes of vegetal propagation—cloning, i.e. producing

plant offspring that, albeit unconscious, quite literally is flesh of her flesh. However, the firstborn lump, conceived and born unintentionally, is not even recognized as her progeny at first, eliciting an ambiguous reaction reminiscent of confronting the abject:

> She picked up the thing that had so recently been part of her. . . . It lay completely still in the palm of her hand, tiny and prickly and stubbornly alive. Hard and round and genderless, with tiny spines that looked as soft as cuticles, ready to sprout and grow. Pamela set it on the ground by the foot of the bench and walked away from it, feeling freed. (Hollis)

Pamela's first nonhuman offspring is thus abandoned, in a reiteration of her earlier refusal to raise children.

Despite this initial rejection of her monstrous progeny, the protagonist soon adopts a stance of genuine care, sparing no effort to provide the buds with the best conditions for growth: "She had purchased soil from a nursery and was patting it down around the little cacti, humming to them as she worked. Didn't plants like music?" The resulting image of domestic bliss denaturalizes heteronormative models of reproduction and familial bonds, loosening the grip of patriarchal fantasies around relationality. Importantly, the description of Pamela's offspring echoes patterns found in cultural representations of people with "severe" disabilities, marked by muteness, immobility, and doubts surrounding their consciousness. The narrative thus codes the buds as crip beings. Pamela, once again, steps outside the "broad cultural logic of disabled children positioned as having no or foreshortened futures" identified by Fritsch ("Cripping" 19), indicating that multispecies care may offer alternatives to the neoliberal biocapitalist horizon of capacitation or withering. Though Pamela's progeny will never become productive protagonists of normative futures, alongside their mother-plant they form a non-speciesist, life-sustaining community. Arguably, Pamela's transition into plant parenthood strikes the most powerful blow to the logic of reproductive and rehabilitative futurisms.

Therefore, Pamela's reaction to the disintegration of her relationship with Lydia—closely resembling a heteronormative family unit—is telling:

> She should have felt devastated and she kept waiting for the feeling to arrive. . . . Pamela let her mind wander, not thinking of the child she'd wanted, with dark eyes and ferocious spines, not thinking of the wife she'd wanted, strong and prickly, but instead thinking of the lumps on her back, the spaces inside of her. Broken hearts leak water. What a waste. (Hollis)

Instead of accusing the character of vegetal numbness, I interpret her capacity to remain composed as a sign of being grounded in "response-ability"[9] towards her cacti offspring. This scene marks a radical severing of the lingering ties between Pamela and the realm of anthropocentric desires, i.e. future-oriented normative fantasies organized around the figure of the (proper) Child. The narrative's promising alternative, discovered through intimate entanglement with plants, is to derive a sense of belonging from eco-queer/crip relationality. This insight takes on particular urgency in the Anthropocene, as continued adherence to productivity-obsessed heteropatriarchal trajectories increasingly points toward "no future." If, however, any futures remain attainable, they will require queer transgressions of heteronormative scripts and ableist fantasies, alongside commitment to more-than-human cooperation.

"DESFLORACIÓN": MESSAGE OF SOLIDARITY FROM MARTYR SAINT OF QUEER ECOLOGIES

Simultaneously succinct and poetic, "Desfloración" is structured in three parts, set decades apart (in 2019, 2035, and 2101, respectively). Each depicts a critical phase in the life of a queer protagonist. This narrative construction allows Néstore to showcase the erosion of the social environment without compromising the centrality of Iris's experiences. While the relaxed, convivial atmosphere of the geographically indeterminate small-town community recedes under the pressure of politically-charged anxieties around difference, the character's evolution takes an opposite direction, leading her to embrace more-than-human alterity. The turning point in Iris's trajectory is the realization that her body is intimately entwined with a plant.

Occurring during puberty, this pivotal episode reveals how, instead of developing into female sexual organs, Iris's intimate parts are overtaken by vegetation:

> [W]hen she reached sixteen, tiny, shy greenish hairs began to sprout from her clean and scantly covered pubis, something that, at first, already seemed serious and horrified even her, who had always been a weirdo. Day after day, however, those strands grew thicker and thicker, and more vigorous, until they became long, strong filaments, resembling the stamens of a flower. . . . One sultry summer morning . . . in front of the

[9] Understood, after Haraway, as an attunement to more-than-human relationalities and an accountability for one's role in sustaining complex webs of kinship, "response-ability" names a feminist ethical orientation "in which questions of species difference are always conjugated with attentions to affect, entanglement, and rupture" ("Symbiogenesis" M32).

> mirror, she sensed with a blurred vision that some white and corpulent petals had invaded her crotch . . . a magnolia caressing her young thighs. (Néstore)

The fact that the character's body is inhabited by a flower not only confounds the rigid distinction between the species, challenging the post-Enlightenment vision of subjectivity, but also establishes the text as a narrative of queer becoming. Given the prominence of a mirror reflection for grasping Iris's true hybrid nature, this fragment seems to intentionally mock the normative, anthropocentric model of the self—formed along the lines and stages identified by Lacanian psychoanalysis. The model that is partially to blame, according to many contemporary thinkers, for the human's exploitative approach towards all those who fail to fit into such a narrow definition of the subject (e.g., Deleuze and Guattari 232–309).

The queer nature of Iris's awakening is suggested by the clear affinities between this episode and the nonfictional experiences of some queer people, specifically, a sense of dissonance produced by the mismatch of their gender/sexual identities with their physical embodiment. Yet, what ultimately legitimizes such a reading is the vegetal aspect of the protagonist's transformation. The botanical details of this hybridization—the fact that the character's floral genitalia exhibit both male and female reproductive organs of flowering plants, i.e. pollen-producing stamens and an ovule-bearing pistil—reinforce its queer dimension by evoking the transgressive nature of plant sexuality, non-conforming to the heterosexual binary vision of gender and reproduction (see Baumann). In short, the mature form of Iris's *becoming* proves to be an entanglement constituted, in part, by a hermaphrodite flower—a revelation which not only queers the character, but also "expos[es] the monstrous face of nature itself in the undoing of naturalness" (Barad, "Transmaterialities" 413).

Initially, the corporeal monstrousness horrifies Iris who, unlike the protagonist of "Seedlings," had no intention to become a vegetal hybrid. She even tries to rip the flower off, yet the pain makes it impossible. In search of an alternative solution, the protagonist "dipped her fingers into the heart of the flower: the pistil sucked in those little tentacles, releasing a thick and sticky nectar, which sent a shiver of pleasure through her whole body, a sudden and intense electric discharge" (Néstore). Thus, Iris discovers sexual pleasures offered by her weird, hybrid body; pleasures intimately entwined with the plant realm, achieved through the stimulation of her vegetal genitalia. Much in the spirit of ecosexual experimentation (Sprinkle and Stephens), this scene hints at the possibility of considering the flower as an active agent of pleasure. The author's choice to conceptualize orgasm by reference to "electric discharge" could be read

as a humorous gesture of including the vegetal voice, based on the fact that electric impulses constitute an important channel of plant communication. Crucially for our interpretation, though, this specific phrasing highlights Iris's affinity with Frankenstein's monster, in line with Barad's reflection ("Transmaterialities" 388–91). Just like in the queer reinterpretation of Frankenstein's laboratory, in "Desfloración" an electrical discharge (of more-than-human pleasure) shocks the queer monster to life, illustrating the potential for ecstatic self-birth of agents whose mere existence disturbs the hetero-patriarchal social order.

The disciplinary apparatus of this order instantly targets Iris:

> No doctor was able to find a scientific explanation for Iris's strange case, but there were many who labelled her as perverse, savage or barbaric, pushing her beyond the boundaries of the human. Her few friends, facing such doubt, stopped hanging out with her for fear of a hypothetical contagion, and her parents, terrified, encouraged her not to leave the house. . . . And her pleasure became more and more solitary. More solitary and monstrous. (Néstore)

This passage epitomizes the power-knowledge's ability to weaponize morally charged diagnosis against potentially subversive entities, leading to stigmatization and isolation. Here, accusations of perversion are explicitly tied to Iris's bodily abnormality,[10] allowing us to read her as a crip character. This framing, in turn, reveals a particularly fraught entanglement between disability and vegetation; one that emerges in the context of diagnoses and problematizes identification with plants—the horror of plant-diagnosis. As Ewelina Godlewska-Byliniak demonstrates, for people with disabilities whose existence is routinely devalued through comparisons to vegetation, a plant affinity evokes rather fear of "vegetating" and recollections of stigmatizing representations[11] than hopes for emancipatory alliance. This tension resonates with Iris's initial rejection of the flower, whose ineradicability forces the character to embark on, to use Godlewska-Byliniak's turn of phrase, "a complex process of negotiation with plant(other)ness in the process of constituting one's identity." Such negotiation requires not only dismantling ableist stereotypes of disability and reductive visions of plant life, but also freeing

[10] But, as Kafer reminds us, socially disabling effects of diagnoses traverse identity lines: "Queer kids, kids of color, street kids—all of the kids cast out of reproductive futurism—have been and continue to be framed as sick, as pathological, as contagious" (32).

[11] Perhaps best expressed by the direct citation from the performance of Aleksandra Skotarek, actress with Down Syndrome, which Godlewska-Byliniak analyses in her article: "Plant, this is my life. Plant, don't take away my rights, I won't let you shape me, I am of human needs."

the self from anthropocentric constraints. For Iris, and perhaps not for her alone, this emancipation unfolds through the reevaluation of plantness and more-than-human intimacy.

To this end, the narrative mobilizes a classic crip/queer activist strategy of creative takeover, targeting both the content of moralizing sexual discourses and the narrative structures through which they have historically operated. The former type of hijacking targets plant-sexualizing discourses, redeployed against their original disciplinary intent as a validation of ecosexual queer pleasures. Indeed, the story is fueled by a counter drive to a persistent tendency in post-Darwinian cultural production that buttresses heteronormativity by "infus[ing] plant reproduction with human notions of erotic pleasure and moral aberrance" and presenting botanical findings in ways that "paint plants . . . as sexual deviants" (Jacobs 171). Néstore, in turn, infuses human sexuality with "libertine" plant sex, thereby freeing erotic pleasure from stifling moral frameworks. Thus, "Desfloración" not only recovers sexual pleasure for queers and crips, but also frees nonhumans from the cultural filters imposed on them, opening the possibility of intimate environmental connections. The same reappropriative trickstery operates on the formal, narrative level. Drawing on Christian tradition—abounding in exemplary storytelling designed to discipline deviation—Néstore models their counternarrative on hagiography. Through a blasphemous travesty of this morally instructional genre, the text seeks to inspire devotion for a new kind of prophet—a crip/queer ecological saint.

The portrayal of Iris follows the hagiographic pattern from the start, including the recollection of her birth, during which "intense scent of wildflowers filled the room" (Néstore). This miraculous event foretells the character's exceptionality, as if she were destined to tread a different path, filled with metaphysical musings and search for the divine. Indeed, Iris turns into a pensive child, suspicious of dominant discourses, particularly those regulating what it means to be and act "as a human." From the outset, the protagonist is also depicted as an example of posthuman piety, bonding with nonhuman entities, such as animals and dolls, with an intensity that marks her relational capacities as "divine," located beyond human—or at least anthropocentric—reach.

It is precisely this message of solidarity with the abject(ed) Others[12] that constitutes the essence of Iris's subversive teachings. Even in her

[12] Aligning with the "cripistemological" urge to "attend to rejected and extraordinary bodies," articulated in recent disability scholarship that assumes a non-essentializing, intersectional understanding of crip(ped) subjects, extending to all beings pushed into the structural position of precarity and debilitation (Johnson and McRuer 134–35).

final moments—pursued by a bloodthirsty mob determined to "purge" their community of her deviant presence—the character enacts a mode of kinship that eschews the conventional vectors of identification, extending instead to those whose humanity has been put into question:

> she was awakened by the increasing clamor of the mob. She noticed that a sticky nectar had trickled down her right leg. . . . She traced the path of the transparent liquid with her hand and, in a surge of nostalgia, thought of the children-not-children in the Gaza Strip, of the people-not-people seeking refuge cradled by the waves of the Mediterranean, as she lifted her wet finger to her nose. The dense, unmistakable scent of her sex mingled with the gentler, fresher scent of the grass on which she reclined.

The force of this passage lies partly in its abrupt turn to metonymy: in an otherwise lyrical, elliptical, and only vaguely localized narrative, Néstore suddenly invokes Gazans and refugees crossing the Mediterranean. They appear not as interchangeable metaphors for alterity as such, but as historically specific figures through which ongoing practices of dehumanization become legible. By explicitly referencing pushback-facing refugees alongside Palestinians under Israeli occupation—prior to the current escalation of the genocidal campaign—the passage confronts the reader with the contemporary dynamics of state violence. It strongly resonates with crip theorizations of biopolitical control exercised through the expansion of vulnerability, particularly with the insights of Jasbir K. Puar. In *The Right to Maim*, she demonstrates how the Israeli state asserts dominance by maintaining Palestinians in a condition of perpetual exposure to harm, "rendering populations available for statistically likely injury" (xviii). Gaza thus becomes a paradigmatic site where neoliberal racial capitalism manufactures and profits from (spectres of) disability, implementing a logic Puar terms "biopolitics of debilitation" (72–73). In the optic proposed by "Desfloración," debilitation emerges as a potential line of alliance beyond standardized identities—a conviction internalized by Iris, as she stands in solidarity with those rendered expendable. Crucially, Iris's solidarity is anchored in corporeality, in the shared, vulnerable *zōē*, materialized through the nectar secreted by her vegetal genitalia. By conflating plant sap with intimate human fluids, this nectar constitutes an amalgam of liquids essential for life. Paradoxically, Iris's unique capacity to sustain life across difference precipitates her death, completing her transition into a queer vegetal martyr.

Yet, just as the story is about to culminate in a lynching, a conventional hagiographic trope, a queer ecological miracle happens, offering Iris a peaceful death. The character physically dissolves into her surroundings:

> The wind carried the screams of terror, which hit Iris's exhausted face as she placed one hand on her flower and with the other dug a small hole in the damp and submissive earth. She was aware that, before long, that human flame would reach her. . . . In a torpor akin to sleep, Iris pushed her fingers in and out of her body at a vertiginous rhythm. . . . As the mob advanced through the lawn to conquer her, it found a vast field of magnolias in bloom. (Néstore)

Faced with the imminence of her own demise, Iris turns to the very aspect of her embodied self that renders her monstrous and expendable in the eyes of her perpetrators—the magnolia between her thighs. She also invites the earth itself into this erotic entanglement, digging the hole in the ground, perhaps in preparation to plant her seed. In search of protection, Iris enters into a sexual communion spanning human, vegetal, and elemental realms, guided by queer ecological conviction that true intimacy is achieved through "pleasures that are not heteronormative, not genital, not geared to ideologies about where the body stops and starts" (Morton 280). Finally, as if completing a sacramental rite, Iris orgasms for the last time, an instance in which her human form disperses into a colony of plants, symbolically embracing the plurality of vegetal being and her non-identity of compost, now nourishing her more-than-human community of followers.

Iris's piously queer life and miraculous passing establish her, even if ironically, as a veneration-worthy figure: an ecosexual saint and a crip heroine of the ever-resurging vegetariate. "Desfloración" can thus be viewed as a blasphemous parable of more-than-human regeneration, attainable through the solidarity among the subaltern and intimate alliances with the environment. Iris, the prophet of queer ecological lovemaking, preaches that as long as there remain any entities for us to love and care(ss), the chances for more livable futures are not all lost.

CONCLUSION

The analyzed narratives portray fabulated forms of crip/queer ecological resistance anchored in an affective, response-able approach to plants. While all three texts can be read as instances of Haraway-inspired "storytelling for earthly survival" (see *Staying* 143), each offers a different yet complementary perspective on multispecies intimacies endangered by the disabling of social and ecological environments. "Water" portrays a human-plant romance entangled in colonial and ecological exploitation. "Seedlings" describes corporeal transformation that challenges heteronormative and ableist templates for desire and reproduction. Finally, "Desfloración" frames ecosexual devotion to more-than-human kin as a counterforce to the systemic debilitation and

persecution of otherness, feared for its capacity to destabilize the status quo. Together, these three narratives expand the imaginary repertoire of subversive intimacies between humans and plants, emphasizing human—essential but not privileged—involvement in multispecies assemblages.

The article demonstrates that plant-fictional engagements with intimacy do more than unsettle normative models of pleasure, embodiment, identity, and relationality: they chart speculative pathways toward more livable futures by "following plants into much queerer territories of living and relating" and revealing the potential of vegetation to inspire "new, 'anthro-decentric' possibilities" (Sandilands, "Fear" 426). The proposed readings give more substance to the premises of queer ecologies, trans*planting* the scope of queer critique into explicitly multispecies terrains, and framing intimacy as a force of ecological resistance. At the same time, my analysis shows how attention to the vegetal can advance crip theory's goals of reclaiming pleasure and environmental connection for disabled subjects. These narratives reveal models of intimacy that oppose the ableist trope of triumph over nature, instead promoting ecological practices of "caressing it, gazing upon it, breathing with it" (Kafer 143). Taken together, these interventions extend the conversation across disciplines, positioning speculative plant fiction as a vital archive for imagining strategies of more-than-human survival in times of planetary crisis.

Building on these readings, I would like to advance *phytospeculation* as a critical term for naming speculative practices, both in fiction and theory, that foreground vegetal agents and approximate their perspectives, recognizing plants' positionality as offering valuable insights about the world. In short, phytospeculation means inviting plants to share their experience as part of multispecies entanglements, significantly impacted by the discursive and material effects of human activity. The introduction of plants into storytelling and "storying"—a term Haraway treats as synonymous with "worlding," in that it ensures that our precarious world(s) continue to exist (*Staying* 40)—functions here not to reinforce human centrality, but to question it and encourage non-anthropocentric modes of understanding. Phytospeculations thus emerge as fictional rehearsals of urgently needed scenarios of resistance and flourishing, grounded in more-than-human solidarity.

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Gabriela Kozakiewicz is a PhD candidate at the University of Warsaw, where she researches "phytospeculations"—speculative fictions that venture to render plant perspectives, explore the specificity of vegetal being and community-making, or otherwise infect the human with plantness. She holds an Erasmus Mundus Master's degree in "Crossways in Cultural Narratives," completed at the University of St Andrews, Universidade NOVA de Lisboa, and Universidade Federal do Rio de Janeiro. Literary and Cultural Studies researcher by training, philosopher at heart, and a proud alumna of the interdisciplinary Artes Liberales College at the University of Warsaw. Her wide-ranging interests include literature, posthumanist thought, dance studies, totalitarian architecture, wine, and all things Portugal.

https://orcid.org/0000-0002-1884-4768

gj.kozakiewicz@uw.edu.pl