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Making Babies and Making  
Home in an All-Female World:  
Reproduction, Sexuality and  
Belonging in Nicola Griffith's  
*Ammonite*

All-female worlds, often utopian, are a central part of the feminist science fiction tradition. In constructing these worlds, a vital aspect that authors need to rethink is reproduction. How this has been done varies widely, as do the representations of family formations and conceptions of kinship found in these narratives. Examining 'reproductive solutions' and how they are represented as part of cultural, social, and political contexts and systems allows us to explore feminist reproductive futurities; that is, we can explore ways in which feminism can reformulate conceptions of both reproduction and kinship, and—importantly—possible connections between these and a future free from genderbased oppression.

In this text, I focus on Nicola Griffith's novel *Ammonite* (1992), which is set on the all-female planet of Jeep and follows the experiences of Earthborn anthropologist and newcomer to Jeep, Marghe Taishan. The novel is first put in the context of other all-female sf narrative worlds, such as Gilman's *Herland* (1915), Russ's *Whileaway* (a parallel universe found in "When It Changed" (1972) and *The Female Man* (1975)) and Charnas's *Motherlines* (1978), in order to identify certain recurrent themes and tropes and highlight how *Ammonite* reworks these themes. In this way, the discussion aims to do justice to the plurality of feminist positions, focusing on varia-

tions and differences in how these common concerns are tackled. Although *Ammonite* does not claim to be utopian, the novel still largely comes across as such and speaks to this tradition, as is also noted in *The Science Fiction Handbook*, where the novel is said to be an “update of the feminist utopian tradition of the 1970s.”<sup>1</sup>

In the subsequent discussion of *Ammonite*, there are three thematic foci. The first theme to be explored is how the novel represents reproduction not only as a biological process but also as a mental one; secondly, sexuality and its connection to reproduction on Jeep will be discussed. The third theme is the notion of belonging, of being part of a world or community and how the novel connects this experience to reproduction. While all three thematic foci are clear in the novel, the main thematic concern comes across as that of belonging, which is explored both through the protagonist’s personal history and the sometimes violent conflicts between the different groups on Jeep. By reading sexuality, reproduction and belonging as forming an intricate web of meaning in the novel, the analysis aims to highlight reproductive re-conceptions as a central aspect of not only *Ammonite*, but of feminist futurities. In terms of the connection between sexuality and reproduction in an all-female world, *Ammonite* constitutes what I find to be a powerful refutation of heterosexual normativity and resonates in interesting ways with Russ’s *Whileaway*. The emphasis on belonging in the novel and, in particular, belonging represented as part of a biological process that involves changes to the genetic makeup of the inhabitants of Jeep, is interesting in the understandings of matter that it opens up. Since the analysis will focus how the text links biological material on the one hand, and cultural, social, and mental processes, on the other, materialist feminist conceptions of matter as agential forms a theoretical background. The connections between genetics and belonging also means that the novel is highly topical at a time when we increasingly talk about identity and kinship in terms of DNA, as evidenced for instance in the growing number of online DNA tests and services designed to help people find a supposed national or cultural heritage or their more immediate heritage in the form of biological kin. *Ammonite* thus speaks to the feminist sf tradition of which it is part as well as to the present moment.<sup>2</sup> As feminists at a time when questions about human survival and a planetary future are more topical than ever, we need to actively imagine and formulate avenues of change that resist not only gendered oppression but also exploitative and extractive anthropocentric logics. In doing this, we do well to employ works such as *Ammonite* and the tradition they draw on and contribute to as texts to think with and through.

## *Ammonite* and a Feminist Utopian Science Fiction Tradition

Griffith's *Ammonite* is set on the planet Jeep in a distant future when exploitation and colonization are universewide rather than worldwide. People from Earth colonized the planet centuries earlier but lost contact with the colonizers, and the planet is now under re-colonization by the Durallium Company. This is generally referred to as Company, a profit-hungry corporation that often engages in unethical behavior. A virus infects their first (re)settlement, killing all the men and about twenty percent of the women, and quarantine is established. Marghe Taishan, an anthropologist-linguist, is sent down primarily as a test subject for a newly developed vaccine but also to learn about the all-female native population, that is, the original colonizers. During her journeys to discover their history and the mysteries surrounding them, primarily their method of reproduction, Marghe is kidnapped by the Echraidhe tribe. She eventually manages to flee and almost dies in the severe winter storms but is rescued and makes a life for herself in the community of Ollfoss. Believing the vaccine to be a failure, Company blows up the orbiting space station and leaves the planet. However, it is understood that they might return and that this would pose a threat to both the original settlers and the women who have now made the planet their home.

Although all-female feminist utopias look different in many respects, they usually share some common traits. The setting is often rural, sometimes evoking pastoral idylls as in *Herland's* bountiful gardens, and sometimes harsher landscapes as in the "grasslands" of Charnas's *Motherlines*. Russ's Whileaway in *The Female Man* also comes across as rural, even though certain scenes and information suggest that the setting is more complex. Often, Fredric Jameson's term "world-reduction" appears apt. To convey the utopian core, the worlds presented cannot be too complex, too rich; Jameson describes the process as one of "ontological attenuation in which the sheer teeming multiplicity of what exists, of what we call reality, is deliberately thinned and weeded out."<sup>3</sup> Rural and often barren settings are part of this "weeding" process, an aspect of Le Guin's utopian work in both *The Left Hand of Darkness* and *The Dispossessed* that Jameson discusses. Even if *Ammonite* does not claim to be a utopia, the novel employs world-reduction to create a backdrop for Marghe's development. This comes across most clearly in the sections narrating her captivity with the Echraidhe, whose cold, snow and icefilled empty plains evoke Le Guin's Winter in *The Left Hand of Darkness*. However, as we will see, Marghe's subsequent physical

and psychological movement is one of immersion in a rich web of connectedness, thus suggesting other ways of structuring utopian experiences.

Some aspects of this immersion are sexual. The role of sexuality in feminist all-female worlds<sup>4</sup> has changed over the last century. In Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *Herland* (1915), an all-female utopia is an asexual world per definition, heterosexual normativity being so hegemonic as to make a utopian lesbian sexuality apparently unwritable. In this textual world, the reintroduction of men equals the reintroduction of both sex and romance. In Joanna Russ's *The Female Man* (1975), the protagonist Janet from all-female Whileaway guffaws at the idea that no men should mean no sex, but she does so in a fictional version of the contemporary 1970s US, where her response is met with a matching incredulity, and not only from men. A response from Griffith's agent to her second novel *Slow River* shows that the heterosexist norm is in no way eclipsed. This is how Griffith retells the conversation in "War Machine, Time Machine:"

Not long after I sent the *Slow River* outline to Fran, my agent, she called: 'This is not a selling outline.'  
'Why not?'  
'Well,' she said, 'in *Ammonite* Marghe had a girlfriend because she had no choice, poor thing. But why does Lore like girls?'  
'Because she is a dyke, Fran,' I said, and I fired her.<sup>5</sup>

Even when sexuality is present in these all-female worlds, it is typically separated from reproduction. As we know, severing the link between heterosexual intercourse and reproduction (through contraceptives and abortion) has been one of the central struggles of 20<sup>th</sup> century feminism. However, in feminist imaginary constructions of reproduction in all-female worlds there is no such pre-existing link. Rather, connecting sexual acts and reproduction is a choice, and one that is rare. Instead, reproduction often takes place in apparently non-sexual environments or circumstances. For instance, the merging of ova that constitutes conception in Russ's *Whileaway* is just mentioned in passing, but there is nothing to suggest that the procedure involves sexual acts. Other solutions have been received as more provocative, such as the *Riding Women* in Charnas's *Motherlines* using a stallion as part of the reproductive process. While not involving an actual genetic mixing, the stallion's semen is necessary for reproduction and the ritualistic mating described in the novel has both mythological and sexual dimensions.

On *Jeep*, as we will see, there is a connection between sexuality and reproduction, but not a straightforward one. Indeed, the character of this connection suggests a recognition of sexuality as not necessarily predicated on the logic of the couple. Both mental and physical closeness are important, and the novel refuses clear distinctions between biological and mental processes. Thus, the link between reproduction and sexuality is not severed in *Ammonite*. Rather, the novel constructs several new links in a web of reproductive connectedness. This web is constitutive of the third aspect to be discussed here – that of the connection between reproduction and belonging. Belonging – making a home – is a main concern in the novel. In this, it draws on the tradition of the ‘visitor to utopia’ whose shifting reactions are supposed to mirror those of an intended reader. However, the centrality of Marghe’s personal development is unusual and moves the novel out of this tradition, in that it asks readers to relate to her personal experience rather than react to social principles or structures. Following the lead of Wendy Gay Pearson in “Towards a Queer Genealogy of SF,” Marghe’s struggle to find this home (a struggle that is not only made difficult by the circumstances she faces, but equally by her own resistance) can be read as analogous to the uses to which the genre of sf itself can be put by marginalized or oppressed groups.

It comes down to this: in a world where so many of us are unable to find a home, a place which is both materially and affectively livable, should we not all be able, at the very least, to find a home amongst the seemingly infinite planes of the imagination? ... If, indeed, what makes life unlivable for us is the way in which our world’s understanding of gender and sexuality categorizes us as incomprehensible, insane or even inhuman, is not science fiction one of the places we might turn to find our own humanity even in the very figure of the alien him/her/itself?<sup>6</sup>

The idea of a feminist futurity as a place where we ‘find our own humanity ... in the ... alien’ is returned to at the end of this chapter.

As this very brief insertion of *Ammonite* into a feminist utopian sf tradition has indicated, the novel certainly speaks to this tradition but just as clearly does so with a selfconscious difference, to some extent with an agenda to make a difference. Griffith acknowledges that “[she] couldn’t have written *Ammonite* without the trail-blazing of Russ and Le Guin and Wittig.”<sup>7</sup> However, as she stresses in another text, she is “tired of womenonly worlds where all the characters are wise, kind, beautiful, stern seven-foot-tall vegetarian amazons who would never dream of killing anyone. [...] Women are

not inherently passive or dominant, maternal or vicious. We are all different. We are people.”<sup>8</sup> This position is clearly conveyed by the novel, portraying societies that in varying degrees include conflicts and violence; nevertheless, a utopian sense of the possibilities of an all-female world remains, at least for me as a reader. This utopian sense points, indeed, to the fact that a world in which women are recognized as fully human in all the variety that this entails is in itself utopian. In this way, too, *Ammonite* writes itself into a feminist utopian tradition. As Charnas explains about writing *Motherlines*:

With the spectrum of human behavior in my story no longer split into male roles... and female roles..., my emerging women had natural access to the entire range of human behavior. They acted new roles appropriate to social relationships among a society of equals, which allowed them to behave simply as human beings—tenderly, aggressively, nurturingly, intellectually, intuitively...<sup>9</sup>

Both *Ammonite* and *Motherlines*, then, eminently exemplify the potential of all-female worlds in helping feminists think differently about the present. In addition to this, *Ammonite*'s engagement with conception and pregnancy as both biological and mental processes—and the concomitant challenging of any easy distinction between the two—and its embedding of reproduction within webs of connectedness, posits the making of babies as a key utopian moment.

## Reproduction in Body and Mind

The first thing to take note of when it comes to reproduction in *Ammonite* is that families are not organized around the making of babies; while mothering or nurturing activities certainly take place within families, they do not depend on them, nor are they restricted to them. At the same time, there is not a complete separation between family structures and reproductive activities or relationships. Families are largely made by choice, choices that can be based on romantic or other forms of love and affection, but that are also motivated by material advantages or the gaining of prestige. The complexity of family constructions is also a result of the fact that, on Jeep, reproduction is achieved in two different ways that have different implications for kinship structures. Figuring out how reproduction works among the all-female, Earth-originating population of Jeep is one of the main plot drivers of the novel, together with, and

increasingly explicitly linked to, the threat of the virus. This virus is the mysterious main antagonist, but also, as we gradually learn, the enabler of new life for the women of Jeep, including Marghe and the other newcomers. Through the central role that the virus plays, the novel explores matter as agential, resonating with works of material feminism<sup>10</sup> (see e.g. Alaimo, Alaimo and Hekman, Barad, and Bennett). Indeed, Bennett's description of her influential work *Vibrant Matter* (2010) as "an ontostory that plays with and begins to play out the idea that non-human things and forces actively shape the bodies they encounter, including the humans who never fully possess or control them"<sup>11</sup> reads as an apt description of the virus as such a non-human force.

Without tracing the long and gradual process of Marghe's learning how reproduction on Jeep works in detail, it is worth noting that we first follow Marghe's observations based on what she hears and sees of the Echraidhe and later the Ollfoss communities she lives in, in the form of her anthropologist's notes on kinship structures. The conclusions she draws are sketchy and tentative and when we finally encounter the process in more detail, we do so through Marghe's first-hand experience. This transition in perspective reflects Marghe's own trajectory from observer to participant, from isolated professional who remains in control through distancing devices such as her recorder, to a member of a family and a community. Thus, the way in which reproduction is narrated brings to the fore its role in Marghe's process of belonging. In the novel there is no expository explanation of exactly how the process works, how genetic variation comes about or what the role of the virus is. This remains something for researchers to figure out. The fact that the reader is not presented with a factual exposé or 'revelation' of the truth about reproductive functions further emphasizes reproduction as lived experience, rather than object of study.

The women of Jeep can reproduce through a form of parthenogenesis, thus drawing on a long feminist tradition that notably includes *Herland*. This virgin birth, as is clear in Gilman's utopia, typically expresses asexuality, the separation of reproduction from sex through the abolishment or cancelling out of sex. As I have argued elsewhere, this has both heterosexist and anti-diversity underpinnings, emphasizing cultural and social homogeneity and stability based on genetic homogeneity. However, *Ammonite* does something very different with parthenogenesis, something that depends on the blurring of boundaries between what we define as mind and body. Whereas the process of parthenogenesis is often left unexplored and simply

presented as a biological fact in passing, in *Ammonite* it is an important part of the narrative. Unlike, for instance, Charnas's *Riding Women* and their use of horse semen to start the process of parthenogenesis, in *Ammonite* the development of a fetus does not start with a biological prompter of any kind; instead, it is initiated through a mental process called deepsearch, through which people can experience and control their autonomous bodily systems. While the reader is never shown parthenogenetic reproduction through individual deepsearch in the novel, deepsearch generally is emphatically shown to be an intimate experience that puts the person into close contact with herself, the physical world around her and her own history. Children conceived in this way share their mother's genetic make-up. Marghe thinks of them in terms of twins, as when she observes Aoife and her daughter Marac: "Marghe looked over at Aoife's face, all hollow and muscle, and wondered if it had ever been as soft as her daughter's, even before the scar. Aoife and Marac were identical twins, separated in looks only by time and circumstance."<sup>1213</sup> This process, while strange, is something that Marghe can conceptualize. But there is another form of parthenogenesis that Marghe struggles to understand. She discovers that there are daughters who do not look like their mothers' twins and realizes that these daughters all have something called "soestre," a sister of a kind but a girl born of another woman. Marghe comes to realize that: "Being soestre must have something, somehow, to do with the alteration of genetic information passed from mother to daughter."<sup>14</sup>

Marghe continues to learn about this phenomenon but finds it hard to accept: "The term soestre means those who are born after their mothers somehow synchronize their biorhythms and, through a process which I assume bears similarities to the control by a trained person of her otherwise autonomic nervous system, stimulate each other's ova to divide."<sup>15</sup> While we do not learn the details of how this works, we do experience it through Marghe. Again, there is a textual move from her previous life as a researcher to her experiences on Jeep that neatly corresponds to the overall development of her character. Before arriving on Jeep, Marghe has learnt – first through yoga, then through medically supervised biofeedback techniques – to control her physical responses to stress, fear and other strong emotions and early in the novel we learn that "[s]he had hoped to write a paper on biofeedback, autogenics, and the super-normal experience in myth."<sup>16</sup> Instead, this is exactly what she comes to experience at first hand as she learns about the control the Jeepians exert over their reproduction, a control that results in soestre, which in turn is a phenomenon that to Marghe's mind moves in

the borderlands of the mythically impossible. When she experiences it herself the process is strikingly real, as we will see, highlighting how what does not make sense when studied from the outside can become both real and meaningful when experienced. The process of reproduction, then, whether it be one woman's creation of a daughter or two women's creation of soestre, is both a mental and a biological process. Conception is achieved through mental stimulation and the ability to do this is conferred through the virus that is an endemic part of Jeep. Thus, biology and mind are not only inextricably linked in reproduction, but the very distinction between them becomes difficult—perhaps even meaningless—to uphold.

By way of illustration, the following passage describes Marghe's experience of linked deepsearch with her lover Thenike:

And Marghe was standing before the cathedral that was Thenike's body and all its systems, as Thenike stood before hers. She stepped inside. It stretched far over her head, a vast, echoing space. She wandered, laying a hand here, against the muscles sheathing the stomach, a hand there, between ribs. She stopped and looked in a side chapel where bronchioles narrowed to alveoli. She wandered on, noting cells and bones and connective tissues, glands and tubes. Ovaries.<sup>17</sup>

The description of Marghe moving mentally through Thenike's body is markedly physical. She not only sees but also touches the space and lays her hands on Thenike. Furthermore, the metaphor of the cathedral adds to the blurring of boundaries between mind, or soul, and body. Marghe then watches Thenike ovulate, aware of the same thing happening in her own body and notes the electrum thread that is the virus.

Marghe stepped closer, reached out cautiously. The electrum thread inside shimmered and sang, and the ovum almost . . . changed. Marghe withdrew her hand.

The virus had altered everything. She saw how she could change the chromosomes, how she could rearrange the pairs of alleles on each one. If she reached in and touched *this*, enfolded *that*, the cell would begin to divide. And she could control it – she and Thenike could control it.

Marghe felt the connecting tension as Thenike stood waiting. She could do it. She would do it; Thenike would match her.

She reached out again and the thrumming electrum strand that was the virus coiled and flexed and the cell divided. Marghe searched her memory of those long ago biology lessons: mitosis. But altered, tightly controlled and compressed by the snaking virus until it resembled a truncated meiosis.

Chromosomes began their stately dance, pairing and parting, chromatids joining and breaking again at their chiasmata, each with slightly rearranged genetic material. ...

As they multiplied, Marghe felt the tight tension, the connection between these cells that would divide and multiply inside Thenike, and those that would grow inside her own body: fetuses. Fetuses that might one day be born as soestre.<sup>18</sup>

Reaching out and touching are verbs that connote physicality, but ones that are also used to carry metaphorical emotional or mental meanings, do both at the same time in this passage. Although the reaching out is mental, it affects biological change. Tensions and connections are physical realities but happen equally between biological components that touch and interact, as through the mental connection between Thenike and Marghe. The distinction between the two sets of meaning, the literal or physical and the metaphorical or mental, becomes pointless. The explanation of the biological process itself follows a similar pattern. While the description of mitosis turned into meiosis, enabling genetic diversity and a diploid progeny, draws on biological knowledge about how these processes work in non-mammal earth species and thus constructs a biological reality, the description of a connection between the cells making up the embryo in Marghe's own body with the embryo in Thenike's body moves this biological reality into an arena of metaphor, again unsettling any stable distinctions.

## Reproduction and Sexuality

Parthenogenesis on Jeep, then, is both a mental and a biological process, but how should the relationship between reproduction and sexuality be understood? The definition of parthenogenesis (from the Greek words for virgin and creation) is asexual reproduction, emphasizing that it is managed by a sole individual. As we have seen, reproduction in *Ammonite* does not conform to this definition. While conception achieved on your own and that achieved together with somebody else result in different fetal genetic properties, the processes appear to be basically the same. An appropriate analogy would be masturbation and intercourse. We never witness the start of a pregnancy achieved by a woman on her own in the novel, so to what extent this process entails dimensions of sexual pleasure is left out of the story. However, from descriptions of deepsearch, the process likely involves an intense sense of presence, a being in oneself that is

clearly both a mental and a physical experience similar to the creation of soestre. That the experience of making soestre has – or at least can have – sexual dimensions is clear. The opening of the scene between Marghe and Thenike cited above reads as unequivocally sexual, signalling intercourse in not very subtle ways:

‘Put your hand on mine. Feel the pulse in each fingertip, mine and yours. Yours and mine.’ Thenike slid on top of her, muscle on muscle, her mouth an inch from Marghe’s. ‘Breathe with me. Breathe my breath.’

It was hot; their skin was hot, and their breath. In and out, in and out. And Marghe gave up everything, gave her breath to Thenike, took Thenike’s into her lungs. Then their arms were wrapped around each other, eyes open, staring deep, and Marghe let herself slide down that long deep slope, that slippery slope, sinking in, right in, right down, until she *was* Thenike, was Thenike’s pulse, Thenike’s breath, until she could skip back and forth, her breath, Thenike’s breath, back and forth. Back and forth.<sup>19</sup>

In addition to physical intimacy, the repetition of reciprocal movement that characterizes the passage emphasizes that not only has making soestre sexual dimensions, but the closeness involved is also both intense and reciprocal. This experience is a far cry from the virgin maidens of *Herland*. But while reproduction has sexual components, and in particular the conception of soestre requires both physical and mental intimacy, without the sexual differentiation of gametes, sexuality is not reduced to a vehicle for reproduction.

Indeed, one of the strengths of the novel is its portrayal of sexuality on an all-female world as simply human. Heterosexuality is not present as a point of reference, comparison, or contrast – men are neither missed, nor is their absence celebrated. Sexuality is a human experience. As Marghe witnesses two women kissing at a gathering, she becomes aroused and embraces this emotion: “She could have taken her sexual energy and smoothed it down, but she wanted to let it burn through her, she wanted to enjoy being alive.”<sup>20</sup> To me, descriptions of physical attraction appear to avoid falling into the gendered stereotypes that typically code them in a heterosexual economy. One instance of such a balancing act is when Marghe watches Thenike in the bath house, before they have become lovers: “She had pinned her braid on top of her head, and the ladder rungs threw shadows over the tight stomach and lean slabs of muscle over her ribs. Hard muscle, soft skin, taut sinew. Marghe wondered how that would feel.”<sup>21</sup> Traditionally female markers such as “braid” and “soft” are seamlessly combined with the equally tradi-

tional masculine ones of “slabs of muscle,” “hard” and “lean” and the result conveys Marghe’s sexual attraction to Thenike in ways that affirm a present relationship, rather than a missing, or missed, heterosexual relationship. In their first attempt to link together in deepsearch, after having lived together to let their minds and bodies become synchronous in their rhythms,

they lay facing each other, naked, skin to skin. They stroked each other’s face, hands, arms. Rested fingertips on the pulse at the other’s wrist. Marghe’s forehead was damp with perspiration, and they were both breathing fast. ... ‘Is this it [deepsearch]?’ Marghe asked. She was scared. ‘No. This is something different. Do you feel it?’ She touched Marghe’s forehead with a fingertip. Marghe’s bones seemed full of hot, liquid gold. She could feel the heat of Thenike’s belly and groin close to her own.<sup>22</sup>

They go on to have sex, making clear how close the mental connection involved in deepsearch is to physical intimacy, how sexuality is part of the web that connects mental and biological aspects and thus makes Jeepian reproduction possible. The passage simultaneously emphasizes that sex and reproduction can neither be equated, nor causally connected. Both reproduction and sexuality are materially and discursively completely disconnected from heterosexuality in the novel in a successful erasure of heterosexual normativity. However, the dyadic logic, while challenged, remains more intact in the novel’s engagement with both reproduction and sexuality. The absence of descriptions of ‘one person parthenogenesis’ leaves unexplored possibilities of primarily reproduction but to some extent also sexuality as disconnected from a dyad of lovers.

## Reproduction and Belonging

As already indicated, the linked deepsearch through which soestres are conceived is related to the trance used by a young girl to search for her adult name in a rite of passage that involves delving into one’s past. Deepsearch is thus central to the creation of ties of belonging that stretch across time and is consequently a good starting point for discussing the third foci of this article — that of belonging and its links to reproduction. Marghe notes that “[t]he deep trancing necessary for reproduction has acquired mystical aspects for the Echraidhe. The rite of passage is attended by a ritual trance, called deepsearch, which, the Echraidhe claim, allows the adolescent to somehow access the memories of her

ancestors.”<sup>23</sup> This turns out to be true in a literal sense, as Marghe herself eventually experiences. In addition to making reproduction possible, the virus also enables storage of and access to memories through the DNA of the women of Jeep. Through the mental process of deepsearch and the biological component of the virus, the making of a future through procreation and the experiencing of a past are not only made possible but are also simultaneously inextricably connected. This connectedness not only challenges our notions of the relationship between past and future, but also the distinction between personal memory and cultural memory. Connection to communal memories also entails connection to place, sometimes in potentially problematic ways. As Thenike tells Marghe: “There are those who know their village so well, through the eyes and hearts of so many before them, that they ... can’t bear to place their feet on a path they have never trodden, on soil they have never planted with a thousand seeds in some past life as lover or child.”<sup>24</sup> What might be problematic on a personal level can also pose a threat at a community level. Thenike explains the increasing destructiveness of the Echraidhe tribe in terms of shared history: “Because their sisters’ mothers are also their choose-mothers’ sisters. They’re born too close. All their memories interlock and look down the same path to the same places. Each memory reflects another, repeats, reinforces, until the known becomes the only.”<sup>25</sup> Thenike herself is “fortunate enough to have the memories of a thousand different foremothers, some clear, some not.”<sup>26</sup> A need for cultural diversity is thus indistinguishable from a need for genetic diversity. Parthenogenesis in *Ammonite*, then, is certainly not a celebration of homogeneity. It is suggested that the virus can even transfer memories from non-human sentient beings, opening up the possibility of transspecies genetic and cultural communication.

For Marghe — the outsider-protagonist so common in utopian traditions — her narrative journey is, as we have begun to see, about belonging; her professional identity as an observer must be cast off as she learns to belong. However, this is not only about learning to feel at home in a new world. The narrative is very much an existential one about daring to be hurt, to be vulnerable. Marghe, who has never made a home anywhere, brings habits of distancing and control formed over a lifetime to Jeep. While children are recognized as important for the survival of the women of Jeep (the threat of the powerful Company developing a vaccine to eradicate the virus that would render them infertile remains throughout the novel), pregnancy

at an individual level is not presented as ultimate self-fulfilment, or even as something to be particularly longed for. Once she has survived the virus, Marghe is desperate to learn to deepsearch, to connect with the world and with herself, finding her own identity, through finding her name. She succeeds in both:

She had been inside herself in a way she had never thought possible; listening to her body as a whole, a magnificent, healthy whole. And she had done more: reliving memories of her childhood she had forgotten ... days of communication between herself now and herself of many thens... and now she was herself and more. The complete one.<sup>27</sup>

But, significantly, being complete is not about being alone or self-sufficient. “They were connected: the world, her body, her face. Perhaps she should not be asking who she was but, rather, of what she was a part.”<sup>28</sup> When she lets the people around her and the world they live in become real to her, she becomes herself. As with the biological-mental experience of conception, this becoming herself through becoming part of Jeep is as much literal as figurative. She has thought that she is forever a stranger, that the planet “could not digest her if it tried. Like cellulose in the gut of a carnivore, she could not be assimilated. Alien.”<sup>29</sup> When the virus enters her cells, she reacts in a similar manner, trying to reject it as something alien to her:

[her body] was no longer entirely hers. The virus lived in it now, in every pore, every cell, every blood vessel and organ. It slid, cold and in control, through her brain. If she recovered, she would never be sure what dreams and memories were her own, and which were alien. ... ‘In me,’ she gasped. ‘Unclean.’<sup>30</sup>

Marghe experiences the virus as not only threatening her biological distinctness and unity, but also her mental or spiritual individuality. Thenike responds that her body is “changing, just as it does every time you get sick and another little piece of something comes to live inside you. ... Is this unclean? No, this is life. All life connects.”<sup>31</sup> Becoming fully herself means immersing herself in the world, accepting the world in her, the virus in her cells, but also Thenike in her mind. It means accepting that the borders between self and others are porous; they are membranes that make biological as well as mental exchange possible. This understanding of human life as not only inescapably embedded in the more-than-human

world, but also as permeable, evokes Stacy Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" which "underlines the extent to which the substance of the human is ultimately inseparable from 'the environment.'"<sup>32</sup>

Wanting to explore herself in more depth, Marghe needs to link with Thenike, since she knows she cannot go into such a deep trance on her own. The result – the conception of soestre – has been discussed above. The combined expression of this connectedness and the combined potential result is the creation of new life. Her newly discovered name is Marghe Amun and, as her dead mother tells her, while giving her an ammonite that sinks into her palm and becomes one with her, the ammonite is named after Amun "the ram-headed god of Thebes:" "His name, Amun, means 'complete one.' He acquired the power of fertility formerly invested in Min, the ancient Egyptian god of reproduction."<sup>33</sup> Accepting her new complete self means accepting her own reproductive power – making a baby is simultaneously becoming herself and making home. When she is reunited with one of the other newcomers to Jeep again, this woman fearfully notes that Marghe is different. Marghe thinks about this difference: "There was no way to explain how it felt. How it was to be able to remember in a way she would have thought impossible a year ago; how it felt to only have three fingers on her left hand, to have nearly died. How it felt to have another life growing inside her, to have a partner. A home."<sup>34</sup> Here, bodily harm, near death experiences, a changed connection with the past, having close ties with someone else and being pregnant all come together in the change that is her new complete self, her homecoming. Another company woman who has 'gone native' tells Marghe about the hope that if Marghe can get pregnant she might be able to as well: "Not that I'm sure I want to have a child, you know? We've enough to deal with, with Jink's two. But it would be nice to have the choice. It would make me feel as though I belong."<sup>35</sup> What we see here is not a traditional family ideal where a woman is believed to need a baby to be complete. Rather, reproduction is part and parcel of the intimate belonging in past and present that makes up the world; simultaneously, it is also always a choice.

Family, as has been noted already, is not constituted by procreative units, as this would make no sense in a world of parthenogenesis. But who you share a tent (among some people) or a lodge (among others) with matters. Family units may be flexible, but they are important, partly, I would argue, because of the refusal of clearcut distinctions between mind and body, genes and culture, or time and place. We use the metaphor of a family tree to describe the connections and forms of relatedness constituted by

genes, or blood, and we typically look to the people that make up this tree for identity and meaning – attempting to explain our individuality through theirs. Kinship on Jeep is partly constituted by choice and the family trees, as Marghe observes early, are the places in which families exist, rather than expressions of something inherent in families: “She imagined a family group selecting a tree, bending it, pruning it judiciously as babies were born, girls grew, and old women died. Did the lodge retain its integrity when the tree died?”<sup>36</sup> Marghe later learns that these trees live for hundreds of years, but also that the formation and reformation of these lodges, of these families is constantly ongoing. Webs of kinship that are expressed through (and lived in) the biological reality of growing, changing, and dying trees, rather than through the family tree as a metaphor conferring stable individual identities, highlight interconnectedness, mutual becoming and the fundamentally immersed nature of human life. Reproduction — making babies — is predicated on biological realities such as DNA, but these realities are not carriers of stable truths; rather, they are highly adaptable vehicles of communication, exchange, and change. Belonging — making home — involves an immersion that is predicated on accepting that this process allows the world to change you while you also change it. In other words, both belonging and reproduction involve recognizing the always already relational reality of all life.

## Coda

Early in this text, I touched on the question of the novel’s utopianism, suggesting that, ironically, *Ammonite’s* insistence on women as fully human, including traits such as aggression or violence that are generally considered far from utopian in fact constitutes its main claim to utopianism. Marghe’s early struggles with the simultaneous alienness and familiarity of the world and the people she meets neatly summarizes the potential utopianism of the novel.

A wirrel shrieked. Marghe went very still. This was not Earth; this was Jeep, a planet of alien species, a place where the human template of dual sexes had been torn to shreds and thrown away. This was something new. She knew these people had evolved cultures resting on bases very different from those of any Earth people; she did not know whether that made these women human or something entirely Other.<sup>37</sup> (53)

Being free of this template has indeed rendered women human in *Ammonite*. In fact, one could argue, in ceasing to function as man's Other their humanity finally becomes recognizable, as sexual, reproducing, fully human selves, through their very alienness. In reading *Ammonite*, we can, as Pearson suggests, find "our own humanity" in the "figure of the alien"<sup>38</sup> (73). What Marghe's journey teaches us, resonating with the theoretical work of material feminism, is that this involves embracing change as a result of emotional and bodily immersion, recognizing that being human has always involved existing in and negotiating complex webs of interacting and intraacting matter and meaning.

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- <sup>1</sup> Keith M. Booker and Anne-Marie Thomas. *The Science Fiction Handbook*. John Wiley & Sons, 2009, p. 151.
- <sup>2</sup> From a critical or scholarly perspective, I find *Ammonite* worthwhile for many reasons, some of which have just been mentioned. I was thus somewhat surprised to realize that while Griffith herself is not a marginal figure in sf, almost all the critical attention she has received has focused on her second novel, *Slow River*. *Ammonite* is rarely dealt with at any length, which is the reason for the lack of scholarly ‘conversation partners’ in the sections of this text that deal most closely with the novel.
- <sup>3</sup> Fredric Jameson. “World-Reduction in Le Guin: The Emergence of Utopian Narrative.” In *Archaeologies of the Future: The Desire Called Utopia and Other Science Fictions*. Fredric Jameson (ed), pp. 267–280. New York: Verso, 2005, p. 271.
- <sup>4</sup> It should be remembered that there are numerous all-female fictional worlds constructed to be anything but feminist or make clear anti-feminist points. The overview provided by Victor Grech, Clare Thake-Vasallo, and Ivan Callus in “Single-gendered Worlds in Science Fiction: Better for Whom?” *VECTOR* #269, shows this, while also demonstrating quite well and probably inadvertently how provocative all-female worlds remain.
- <sup>5</sup> Kelley Eskridge and Nicola Griffith. “War Machine, Time Machine.” *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*. Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon (eds), 39–50. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, p. 44.
- <sup>6</sup> Wendy Gay Pearson. “Toward a Queer Genealogy of Science Fiction.” *Queer Universes: Sexualities in Science Fiction*. Wendy Gay Pearson, Veronica Hollinger, and Joan Gordon (eds), 72–100. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008, pp. 72–73.
- <sup>7</sup> Kelley Eskridge and Nicola Griffith, “War Machine, Time Machine.” p. 43.
- <sup>8</sup> Nicola Griffith. “Nicola Griffith talks about writing *Ammonite*.” *Ammonite*. Nicola Griffith, pp. 275–276. Del Rey, 2006 (1992).
- <sup>9</sup> Suzy McKee Charnas. “A Woman Appeared.” *Future Females: A Critical Anthology*. Marleen Barr (ed), 103–108. Bowling Green State University Popular Press, 1981, pp. 106–107.
- <sup>10</sup> See, for example, Stacy Alaimo and Susan Hekman (eds). *Material Feminisms*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2008; Stacy Alaimo. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010; Karen Barad. *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2007; Jane Bennett. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2010.
- <sup>11</sup> Jane Bennett. “Vibrant Matter.” *Posthuman Glossary*. Rosi Braidotti and Maria Hlavajova (eds), 447–448. London and New York: Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, p. 447.
- <sup>12</sup> Nicola Griffith. *Ammonite*. Del Rey, 2006 (1992), p. 107.
- <sup>13</sup> The 1990s, when *Ammonite* was written, was of course the decade of cloning, with Dolly the sheep and the excited and horrified reactions that followed. However, parthenogenesis is an array of biologically distinct processes (even though the result of these can be called clones or half-clones) and, importantly in this context, the two phenomena also carry different cultural meanings. While examination of how these meanings constitute each other would be rewarding, such an analysis is beyond the scope of this chapter.
- <sup>14</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 107.
- <sup>15</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 125.

- <sup>16</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 65.
- <sup>17</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 248.
- <sup>18</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 249.
- <sup>19</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 248.
- <sup>20</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 118.
- <sup>21</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 227.
- <sup>22</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 244.
- <sup>23</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 125.
- <sup>24</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 201.
- <sup>25</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 200.
- <sup>26</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 201.
- <sup>27</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 240.
- <sup>28</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 198.
- <sup>29</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 179.
- <sup>30</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 232.
- <sup>31</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 232.
- <sup>32</sup> Stacy Alaimo. *Bodily Natures: Science, Environment, and the Material Self*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2010, p. 2.
- <sup>33</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 240.
- <sup>34</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 370.
- <sup>35</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 361.
- <sup>36</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 54.
- <sup>37</sup> Griffith, *Ammonite*, p. 53.
- <sup>38</sup> Pearson, "Toward a Queer Genealogy of Science Fiction." p. 73.

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