Posthuman Perspectives: Identity, Environmentalism, and Biology in Atwood's *MaddAddam* Trilogy

by Javier Álvarez

Abstract

This paper offers an in-depth exploration of posthumanism through Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam trilogy – Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013). These dystopian works provide a critique of biotechnology and ecology, offering a powerful rethinking of human identity in an era marked by technological transformation, ecological collapse, and uncertainty. Atwood breaks away from traditional anthropocentric frameworks and articulates a posthumanist vision that demands a revision of our relationship with nature, science, and other life forms. Her trilogy challenges the centrality of the human and promotes a more entangled, relational, and ecologically grounded view of existence. This study examines how *MaddAddam* uses posthumanism to explore the fluidity of identity, the ethical implications of biotechnological design, and the necessity of multispecies interdependence. In Atwood's universe, humans, animals, and synthetic beings form a complex web of interconnection that destabilizes the boundaries between organism and machine, nature and culture. It is argued that Atwood does not portray the human as a fixed or privileged category, but as a condition in constant becoming – shaped by biology, technology, memory, and evolving cultural narratives. By situating the human within broader ecological and material systems, *MaddAddam* invites readers to reconsider the frameworks that guide our treatment of life and its artificial extensions. Ultimately, this paper contends that Atwood's trilogy envisions a posthuman condition grounded not in technological mastery but in vulnerability, care, and relationality – one that promotes a more inclusive, and ethically responsive understanding of life in all its hybrid and evolving forms.

Keywords: Posthumanism, Biotechnological transformation, Human identity, Environment, Technology

Introduction

Speculative fiction has emerged as a privileged field for exploring the ethical, environmental, and technological tensions shaping contempo-

rary existence. Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* trilogy – *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2009), and *MaddAddam* (2013) – situates itself at the forefront of this inquiry. Set in a near-future dystopia ravaged by ecological collapse, biotechnological experimentation, and systemic inequality, the trilogy interrogates the anthropocentric foundations of modernity and proposes a reconceptualization of agency and identity in posthuman terms. As Herbrechter (2013) argues, posthumanism critically interrogates the category of the human as it has been constructed within Western thought, especially in relation to emerging technologies, non-human life forms, and environmental crises. Atwood's novels offer a reflection on the dangers of instrumental reason and technocapitalism when unbound by ethical restraint. The omnipresence of biotechnology, manifested through genetically engineered species, synthetic organisms, and patented life forms, functions as a material condition shaping social relations, ecological systems, and even the metaphysical status of life itself. Within this context, posthumanism appears as a necessity for understanding a world in which the boundaries between the natural and the artificial are dissolving. A symbol of this dissolution appears in *Oryx and Crake*, when Snowman reflects on the engineered harmony of the Crakers: "At first he couldn't believe them, they were so beautiful. Black, yellow, white, brown, all available skin colours. Each individual was exquisite" (Atwood, 2003, p. 232). The question exposes not only Snowman's shock with their engineered simplicity but also the fragility of the humanist assumptions that once structured normative identity. The Crakers – humanoid beings genetically designed by Crake to inhabit a post-human Earth – embody this collapse of stable categories. Created to be free of violence, sexual jealousy, disease, and hierarchy, they raise fundamental questions about the nature of humanity: What does it mean to be human in an age when our defining features – rationality, mortality, memory – can be edited? Are these modifications evidence of ethical progress, or do they signal the erosion of those complexities that make ethical life possible?

Methodologically, the present paper combines a posthumanist theoretical framework with a close reading of selected passages from Atwood's trilogy. This dual approach allows for an interpretation attentive both to the conceptual challenges raised by posthumanist thought and to the textual strategies that Atwood uses to dramatize them. This article therefore explores the posthumanist dimensions of Atwood's trilogy, focusing on how it destabilizes traditional notions of human identity, cri-

tiques anthropocentric ethics, and foregrounds interdependence between species, technologies, and ecosystems. Drawing on the theoretical frameworks of N. Katherine Hayles, Rosi Braidotti, and Donna Haraway, it argues that *MaddAddam* envisions a form of posthuman ethics grounded in relationality, ecological humility, and the recognition of shared vulnerability. Instead of advocating for a transhumanist overcoming of the body, Atwood's narrative suggests the possibility of a posthuman condition that is both biologically altered and ethically conscious.

Posthumanism and the Decentering of the Human

Posthumanism appears as the response to the limitations of classical humanism in the face of planetary crisis, technological saturation, and ontological fluidity. It critiques the Enlightenment notion of the human as a rational, autonomous subject standing apart from and above the non-human world. As Cary Wolfe clarifies in *What Is Posthumanism?* (2010), "posthumanism in my sense isn't posthuman at all – in the sense of being 'after' the human. It's humanism that's the problem, not the human *per se*" (2010, p. xv). Posthumanist thought emphasizes interconnectedness, embodied cognition, and the co-constitution of human and non-human agents within dynamic ecological and technological systems, envisioning the displacement of humanity as the exclusive center of ethical and epistemological frameworks. In *How We Became Posthuman* (1999), Katherine Hayles challenges the traditional view of cognition as an internal, disembodied process, arguing that "conscious agency has never been 'in control'; in fact, it has always been a fiction to enable the continuing illusion of control" (1999, p. 288). Subjectivity, she proposes, emerges from distributed cognitive systems involving brain, body, environment, and technological extensions. This reconfiguration finds an echo in Atwood's portrayal of the Crakers, whose consciousness – though limited by design – exhibits a kind of environmental attunement alien to the instrumental rationality of their human creators. When Snowman observes how the Crakers coexist with the natural world, he explains that

> Hierarchy could not exist among them, because they lacked the neural complexes that would have created it. Since they were neither hunters nor agriculturalists hungry for land, there was no territoriality: the king

> of- the-castle hard-wiring that had plagued humanity had, in them, been unwired. They ate nothing but leaves and grass and roots and a berry or two; thus their foods were plentiful and always available. Their sexuality was not a constant torment to them, not a cloud of turbulent hormones: they came into heat at regular intervals, as did most mammals other than man. In fact, as there would never be anything for these people to inherit, there would be no family trees, no marriages, and no divorces. They were perfectly adjusted to their habitat, so they would never have to create houses or tools or weapons, or, for that matter, clothing (Atwood, 2003, p. 234).

The remark encapsulates a tension central to posthumanism: humans are no longer the paradigmatic *locus* of perception or meaning. Hayles's vision of technologically mediated subjectivity resonates with the hybrid beings populating Atwood's world. From gene-spliced animals to semi-autonomous biotech, the trilogy literalizes the dissolution of ontological borders between organism and machine, nature and culture. Nevertheless, Atwood does not celebrate these hybridities uncritically. The uneasy existence of creatures like the wolvogs or the liobams shows that hybridity does not entail liberation; it can also intensify vulnerability or violence, constituting a condition that demands ethical and political interpretation.

Rosi Braidotti's *The Posthuman* (2013) complements Hayles's techno-materialist approach with an ontologically affirmative and ethical version of posthumanism. For Braidotti, the posthuman subject is marked by multiplicity, relationality, and becoming. "The posthuman condition urges us to think critically and creatively about who and what we are actually in the process of becoming" (2013, p. 12), she states. This emphasis aligns with Atwood's portrayal of identity as mutable and contingent. Characters such as Toby or Ren are assemblages of memory, trauma, biology, and adaptation. Similarly, the Crakers develop culturally through storytelling, ritual, and the contact zones they share with humans. As Glover (2009) argues in her ecological reading of *Oryx and Crake*, the beings engineered by Crake inevitably generate dynamics that exceed the boundaries of their intended design, revealing the limits of human control over biotechnological life. Braidotti's call for an "affirmative ethics" (2019) grounded in zoe – the impersonal, vital force shared by all beings – echoes Esposito's critique in *Third Person* (2012) of biopolitics' exclusionary tendencies.

This ethics rejects hierarchies based on species membership or cognitive privilege and instead affirms a transversal community of beings bound by vulnerability and vitality. Atwood dramatizes this ethos through the God's Gardeners, whose rituals integrate humans, animals, and plants into a single web of reverence and responsibility. Their prayers, addressed to figures such as Saint Rachel Carson and Saint Dian Fossey, enact a multispecies ethics that anticipates the collapse of human exceptionalism. These scenes show that ethical imagination can be cultivated with practice instead of decree.

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* (1985) offers a final critical lens by dismantling the dualisms that structure Western metaphysics (mind/body, nature/culture, human/machine) and by proposing the cyborg as an alternative relational ontology. The cyborg is not merely a technological hybrid; it is a figure "resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity" (Haraway, 1991, p. 9). In *MaddAddam*, this cyborgian condition manifests both literally and metaphorically. Crake's mastery of genetic design approaches a kind of machinic creativity, while characters like Toby navigate a survival landscape in which boundaries between the biological and the technological have become fluid. Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* (2016) elaborates an ethic of "making kin" that replaces genealogical and anthropocentric bonds with multispecies alliances. This vision resonates with the relational bonds that slowly emerge between the Crakers and their human caretakers – bonds based on shared need, storytelling, and vulnerability.

Biotechnology and the Reconfiguration of the Human

Biotechnology constitutes the material and ideological foundation of Atwood's fictional universe. From the corporate monopolization of genetic research to the creation of new life forms, *MaddAddam* offers a critique of the promises and perils of bioengineering. As Jasanoff (2015) argues, biotechnology develops within "sociotechnical imaginaries" – visions of desirable futures shaped by institutional priorities, economic forces, and cultural fantasies. Atwood's world embodies such imaginaries, exposing their internal contradictions and ethical blind spots. The Crakers, engineered by Crake to eliminate what he perceives as the defects of Homo sapiens – violence, religious belief, sexual jealousy – embody an ideal of

biological innocence that rests on subtraction. However, this engineered innocence reveals its limits quickly. Even Snowman, initially skeptical of their potential, is surprised by their curiosity (Atwood, 2003). Their spontaneous development of rituals, songs, and myths – despite being designed as a culture-free species – illustrates the persistence of symbolic thought even in beings tailored to lack it. Yet this innocence is itself the result of violent erasure: of memory, culture, imagination. Snowman, who serves as their reluctant caretaker, observes this tension with unease. As he notes, "Crake thought he'd cut them off from culture, but they're creating one anyway" (Atwood, 2003, p. 361). As Northover (2016) argues, the Crakers' development exceeds the parameters of Crake's utilitarian design, revealing culture as an emergent property of relational existence. The ethical dilemmas posed by the Crakers are amplified by the presence of other genetically modified organisms, such as the pigoons – transgenic pigs designed to grow human organs. Originally conceived as instrumental life forms, the pigoons rapidly develop their own modes of intelligence and collective strategy. Atwood's choice of verbs – deliberative, intentional – creates an interpretive tension: is this projection, or evidence of genuine non-human agency? Atwood blurs the line between human and posthuman perception, using shifting focalization to invite readers to reconsider the boundaries of consciousness. This aligns with Canavan's broader claim that "the *MaddAddam* trilogy can be read as an allegorical call for a radical change in our social relations and a warning against anti-ecological lifestyles" (2012, p. 158). The pigoons' eventual negotiation with humans demonstrates that agency cannot be contained within the structures that create it. Once brought into existence, life pursues its own trajectories. This loss of control is both narrative drama and philosophical provocation: if humans possess the power to create life, do they also bear responsibility for its autonomy, suffering, and future? And if so, according to what criteria? Such questions reverberate with Karen Barad's concept of "agential cuts" in *Meeting the Universe Halfway* (2007) arguing that agency emerges through material-discursive intra-actions. Whitney Shark (2016) expands on this, noting that "there are constant exchanges and transformations happening; forces shift, electrons jump, particles are entangled with particles in other spaces without any currently measurable link or force through space." In Atwood's work, genetically engineered beings are sites where agency crystallizes unpredictably, exposing the impossibility of total mastery.

This critique intersects with contemporary debates on enhancement technologies. Bioethicists Françoise Baylis and Jason Scott Robert argue in "The Inevitability of Genetic Enhancement Technologies" (2004) that genetic enhancement is embedded within economic and political structures that reproduce inequality. They warn that such technologies risk establishing forms of biological meritocracy in which value becomes tied to genetically programmed traits. Atwood fictionalizes these concerns. Corporations such as HelthWyzer market diseases and their cures simultaneously, while the Paradice Project – far from offering a humanitarian solution – becomes a vehicle for global erasure. These narrative elements reflect the logic that Baylis and Robert identify: enhancement pursued without ethical scrutiny becomes a mechanism for consolidating power. Kaushik Sunder Rajan's notion of biocapital (2006) emphasizes how genetic information becomes commodified under neoliberal regimes. Atwood's portrayal of corporate labs and "patentable life" materializes this dynamic. Life is engineered and, at the same time, owned by markets.

The trilogy also destabilizes the very category of the "natural." In a world where most organisms bear traces of modification, purity becomes a fiction. Atwood exposes this contradiction by showing nature as hybrid, resilient, and resistant. This vision is shared by Haraway's critique of purity discourses (2016) and Braidotti's call for an ethics capable of embracing hybridity and transversal relations (2013). The liobams, wolvogs, and other hybrid beings are new ecological realities that render anthropocentric hierarchies obsolete, suggesting that biotechnology is not inherently dystopian. Its consequences depend on the ethical frameworks and power structures that guide its application. The Crakers are not failures; they are incomplete. Their evolution depends both on their genetic design and their capacity to form bonds, learn narratives, and respond to others. Even their myths – improvised, growing, sometimes misinterpreted – signal that culture emerges from relation rather than design.

Nature, Collapse, and the Limits of Control

If biotechnology functions in *MaddAddam* as a tool of transformation and power, nature operates as both the substrate of manipulation and the site of return. The trilogy presents a world on the brink of ecological collapse: a landscape degraded by extractive capitalism, synthetic pollution,

and the hubristic belief in human supremacy. This represents a reminder that the antagonists of the narrative are the worldview that enabled the devastation. Latour (2017) insists that the modern notion of nature as passive scenery is a fabrication; Atwood's fiction embodies this critique by rendering nature as dynamic, resistant, and charged with agency. From the opening scenes of *Oryx and Crake*, formerly familiar ecosystems appear destabilized and estranged, populated by hybrid animals, invasive species, and erratic climate patterns. In *The Year of the Flood*, the degradation is refracted through the God's Gardeners. Their prayers blend spiritual ritual with ecological pedagogy. Thus, the novels suggest that ethical imagination can be cultivated both intellectually and through daily ritual and embodied practice.

However, even the Gardeners are caught in the contradictions of their world. Their survival requires recourse to the very technologies they critique: hydroponics, genetic knowledge, improvised surveillance evasion. Their position thus reveals one of Atwood's central insights: there is no pure standpoint outside technocapitalism. The trilogy portrays ecological ethics as negotiation, performed within infrastructures already shaped by crisis. No figure in *MaddAddam* – Gardener, scientist, or survivor – remains unimplicated. Instead, the narrative exposes the braided entanglement of human and non-human, resistant and complicit actors in an unstable ecological system. This collapse is also conceptual. Jason W. Moore's critique of capitalist modernity in "The Rise of Cheap Nature" (2016), illuminates how Atwood destabilizes the fantasy that nature can be mastered through innovation. Engineered organisms do not remain confined to human purposes. They escape, evolve, and strike back, unsettling any claim to mastery. *MaddAddam* exemplifies this reversal, when Toby sees the liobams circling the camp, she recognizes their movement as a choreography not meant for human eyes (Atwood, 2013). The line suggests that human perception no longer frames the limits of meaning or agency. This dynamic is shared by Chakrabarty's (2009) paradox of the Anthropocene: humans have become geological agents capable of transforming the planet, yet incapable of managing the consequences. Atwood dramatizes this paradox by presenting a post-apocalyptic ecology where hybrid creatures and altered environments continue to reshape the world long after the human population has collapsed. Nature becomes a shifting assemblage that refuses both nostalgia and domination.

Haraway's call to "stay with the trouble" (2016, p. 1) becomes spe-

cially relevant. The characters cannot restore a lost Eden; instead, they must inhabit an altered world with patience, improvisation, and attentiveness. Nature in *MaddAddam* is a record of human violence and a site of emergent possibility. The Crakers themselves illustrate this double inheritance. They are posthuman beings and, simultaneously, post-environmental: they eat leaves, purr to heal, and lack territorial instincts, reflecting a low-impact ecological ethic, one grounded in interdependence, but they cannot live apart from the remnants of human world-making. Their myths, vocabulary, and modes of survival are shaped by Snowman, Toby, and the stories offered to them. Their condition is therefore neither return nor escape, but interdependence. This co-dependency marks that the only viable future lies in learning to inhabit nature differently.

Posthuman Ethics and Relationality

A central contribution of Atwood's trilogy lies in its articulation of a posthuman ethics: a mode of ethical reasoning grounded in situated, embodied, and relational forms of response-ability. Unlike traditional ethical frameworks based on abstract principles or juridical rules, the ethics envisioned in *MaddAddam* foregrounds affect, interdependence, and the capacity to be affected. Toby exemplifies this shift. Over the course of the trilogy she transforms from survivalist to caretaker, from solitary observer to mediator between worlds. Her relationship with the Crakers is one of translation and co-learning. When she answers their questions with improvised narratives, she participates in the emergence of a shared symbolic order. Her storytelling does not impose culture; it co-creates it. Haraway's notion of "making kin," captures this process: kinship emerges from shared vulnerability and collaborative world-building. The Crakers themselves evolve into ethical subjects through their encounters with others. They do not initially fit classical definitions of moral agency. Nonetheless, they develop affective capacities that exceed their programming. Their mourning for Snowman is rendered with quiet poignancy; when they ask Toby why he no longer moves (Atwood, 2013), their confusion conveys a dawning awareness of finitude.

With these interactions, the Crakers develop what might be called an incipient moral imagination. They ask questions about fairness, death, and deception; experiment with song and ritual; and adopt new practices

in response to events they do not fully comprehend. In doing so, they reveal that moral agency arises wherever beings encounter one another with openness and curiosity. This mirrors Braidotti's "affirmative ethics," grounded in shared vulnerability and the generative force of zoe. As she writes, "an ethics of sustainability must rest on a deep understanding of our interdependence with other species and the planet" (2013, p. 194). The God's Gardeners offer a complementary mode of posthuman ethics. Their practices – vegetarian diets, rooftop gardens, nonviolent resistance – constitute a form of everyday ethical labor that refuses anthropocentrism. Their hymns honor animal lives in a register typically reserved for saints and martyrs, functioning as ecological pedagogy, fostering attentiveness and care – a dynamic that is present in posthumanist calls for embodied, multispecies models of learning (Haraway, 2016; Braidotti, 2013; Alaimo, 2016).

Atwood complicates the ethical landscape by introducing forms of life that lack consent. The Crakers, pigoons, and other engineered beings raise questions about what humans owe to the beings they create. When the pigoons negotiate collaboration with humans in *MaddAddam*, it becomes clear that questions of justice and recognition extend beyond species boundaries. Their intelligence, described by Toby, forces the characters, and the reader, to confront the ethical stakes of shared survival. Can humans claim stewardship? Do creators owe reparations? The trilogy suggests that ethical action is less about pre-formulated rules and more about responsiveness: listening, recalibrating, and attending to the needs and agencies of others. Alaimo's concept of "trans-corporeality" (2016) illuminates this dynamic. Bodies, human and non-human, exist in constant material exchange with one another and with their environments. Ethical life, in this framework, emerges from acknowledging these entanglements. *MaddAddam* envisions ethics as a practice of relational openness. Toby's shifting role, the Crakers' emergent culture, and the Gardeners' rituals all exemplify systems ethical life grounded in coexistence and not in domination.

Conclusion: Rethinking Humanity, Rethinking the Future

The *MaddAddam* trilogy offers a speculative landscape that reconsiders our ecological, technological, and ethical futures, challenging the fan-

tasies of mastery and exceptionalism that underpin capitalist modernity. Atwood asks what it means to embrace a form of life that is entangled, vulnerable, and accountable to the beings with whom we share the world. Characters such as Toby, Ren, and Snowman reveal that subjectivity is shaped by biology, memory, environment, and technology in ways that defy neat boundaries. The Crakers expose the ambiguity of engineered perfection: their innocence is a starting point for ethical becoming. When they gather around Snowman's motionless body and ask why he does not rise, the moment encapsulates the tension between design and experience. Their confusion is not a failure of programming; it marks the beginning of moral imagination. Atwood reconsiders whether suffering, memory, and contradiction might in fact be essential to ethical life. The Crakers' emergent grief, the pigoons' negotiated alliances, and the Gardeners' rituals all point toward forms of care irreducible to genetic design or technological optimization. In this sense, Atwood's posthumanism resists both transhumanist fantasies of enhancement and nihilistic visions of collapse.

The trilogy further expands the scope of moral consideration beyond the human sphere. In a world populated by artificial species, hybrid ecosystems, and shifting ontologies, responsibility becomes a distributed practice. Ethical life cannot rely on the old hierarchies. As the characters navigate post-apocalyptic landscapes – negotiating with pigoons, tending to gardens, telling stories to the Crakers – they enact the kind of multispecies responsibility theorized by Haraway, Braidotti, and Alaimo. These scenes embody ethics as attentiveness to the needs of others, especially when those others challenge familiar categories. At the end, no definitive vision of the future emerges. *MaddAddam* cultivates a space for imagining alternative modes of coexistence. These possibilities are neither utopian nor dystopian; they are situated, provisional, and deeply relational. Atwood suggests that the future will not be decided by the sophistication of our technologies alone but by the quality of the relationships we forge. Storytelling itself becomes a form of survival, transmission, and world-making: a practice through which beings who are not alike nevertheless find grounds for mutual recognition. In conclusion, the trilogy proposes that living ethically in a posthuman age requires abandoning the illusion of autonomy and embracing the complexities of coexistence. Atwood's work reminds us that the future will be shaped not only by technological innovation or ecological resilience but by our willingness to cultivate new ways of relation within a world no longer made in our image.

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