

# HUMAN AFTER ALL? NEO- TRANSHUMANISM AND THE POST-ANTHROPOCENE DEBATE IN MARGARET ATWOOD'S MADDADDAM TRILOGY

HUMANO AFINAL DE CONTAS? O NEO-TRANSHUMANISMO E O POS-  
ANTROPOCENO UM DEBATE DA TRILOGIA: MADDADDAM, DE MARGARET  
ATWOOD

Eduardo Marks de Marques<sup>88</sup>

**ABSTRACT:** Usually read as an example of contemporary dystopian (or speculative) fiction, Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy is, also, a good example of the complex debates involving the tensions of posthuman/transhuman philosophies and those of the contemporary notion of the Anthropocene. The following article aims at discussing how Atwood's post-apocalyptic novels can be, in fact, understood as an attempt to undermine—and, also, problematise—what the posthuman projects of technological capitalism intend and how it can be possible (if at all) to develop an understanding of a posthuman Anthropocene through the creation of the Crakers, bioengineered hominids created to repopulate the planet after the pandemic known as The Waterless Flood.

**KEYWORDS:** dystopian fiction; posthumanism; Anthropocene.

**RESUMO:** Geralmente lida como um exemplo de ficção (especulativa) distópica contemporânea, a trilogia MaddAddam, de Margaret Atwood, é também um bom exemplo dos debates complexos envolvendo as tensões das filosofias pós-humana e transumana e daquelas acerca da noção contemporânea de Antropoceno. O presente artigo almeja discutir como os romances pós-apocalípticos de Atwood podem, na verdade, ser entendidos como uma tentativa de minar—e, também, de problematizar—o que pretendem os projetos pós-humanos do capitalismo tecnológico e como pode ser possível (se é que pode) desenvolver um entendimento de um Antropoceno pós-humano através da criação dos Crakers, hominídeos geneticamente desenvolvidos para repovoar o planeta após a pandemia denominada Dilúvio Seco.

**PALAVRAS-CHAVE:** ficção distópica; pós-humanismo; Antropoceno.

<sup>88</sup> Doutor em Australian Literature and Cultural History pela The University of Queensland - Austrália. Professor Associado I da Universidade Federal de Pelotas - Brasil.

One of the main impacts of the rise of posthuman and transhumanist trends of thought is related to the very essence of humanity. The abandonment of purely evolutionary elements, such as the size of our brains and crania, and the presence of opposable thumbs, allows for the re-entry of the search to a human essence—the soul, the consciousness—on the philosophical stage. Ideas (and ideals) such as the constant amelioration of life through our involvement with ever-developing technology—to the extent of reaching immortality, if not of the body, of the mind—generate a series of scientific and ethical debates. On the other hand, though, the impact human existence has upon the planet which, to scholars such as Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer, is in the core of the Anthropocene era, that begins in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (FERRANDO, 2016, p.162), and the interconnections between post-/transhumanism and ecology (from its core original meaning of *oikos*, home) become problematic. Is it possible to trigger technological development—the basis of late technological capitalism—and lower the impact such development has on the planet? In other words, is it possible to carry on the post-/transhuman project without addressing the issues brought about by the Anthropocene?

Such questions are in the centre of Canadian writer Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam trilogy: *Oryx and Crake* (2003), *The Year of the Flood* (2010), and *MaddAddam* (2013). Set in an unmarked future, in an unknown nation (though one that resembles the United States), the trilogy creates a post-apocalyptic world where a handful of human survivors coexist with humanoid creatures known as Crakers, who had been bioengineered by Glenn (also known as Crake) as part of his project to extinguish humanity and, thus, save the planet. While the first two novels narrate mostly the same set of events, through flashbacks of their narrators, the final instalment of the trilogy focuses on the interactions between Crakers and humans. This article will discuss how Atwood's post-/transhuman project developed in the trilogy ironically debunks the core of ide ideas (and ideals) mentioned above, how

the ecological concerns discussed in the novels ironically address our understanding of the Anthropocene, and how the two issues cannot be separated.

When *Oryx and Crake* opens, readers are faced with that who seems to be the only human survivor on the planet, Jimmy (also known as Snowman), whose experiences and memories form the core of the novel. Through Jimmy, we learn that the pre-apocalyptic world was run by major technological corporations in city-states known as Compounds. This world, set on the principles of late technological capitalism, creates a divide between inhabitants of the Compounds, who have some sort of scientific abilities and help develop consumer products, and those of the Pleeblands, poor areas outside the Compounds, that function as unregulated spaces, but also spaces of freedom. Jimmy recalls his friendship with Glenn, a scientifically brilliant individual but whose social skills make him somewhat antisocial.

As a side project to his work for one of the Compounds, Glenn develops his ParaDice Project, that involves the bioengineering of humanoids, the Crakers, whose DNA is mostly human, though with elements that enhance the animal, purely biological aspects of humanity and devoid of all those elements which Crake believes to be responsible for the decadence of humanity. Crakers have a very short life expectancy, are vegetarian, mingle in relatively small groups, and the females' bodies change colour to indicate readiness to mate:

[s]ince it's only the blue tissue and the pheromones released by it that stimulate the males, there's no more unrequited love these days, no more thwarted lust; no more shadow between the desire and the act. Courtship begins at the first whiff, the first faint blush of azure, with the males presenting flowers to the females – just as male penguins present round stones. At the same time, they indulge in musical outbursts, like songbirds. Their penises turn bright blue to match the blue abdomens of the females and they do a sort of blue-dick dance number, erect members waving to and fro in unison . . . . From amongst the floral tributes the female chooses four flowers, and the sexual ardour of the unsuccessful candidates dissipates immediately, with no hard feelings left. Then, when the blue of her abdomen has reached its deepest shade, the female and her quartet find a secluded spot and go at it until the woman becomes pregnant and her blue colouring fades. And that is that.

No more *No means yes*, anyway, thinks Snowman. No more prostitution, no sexual abuse of children, no haggling over the price, no pimps, no sex slaves. No more rape. (ATWOOD, 2003, p.165)

The elements of human decline, according to Crake, are all cultural, and symbolised by what he calls the “G-spot in the brain”, which should be eliminated. By calling God “a cluster of neurons” (157), Crake maintains that his post-human (in its most superficial meanings) project is actually devolutionary, if we consider post-humanism a move towards evolution through technology.

Joel Garreau states that the ultimate goal of posthumanism is to enhance human beings physically, intellectually, and emotionally, as well as to increase dramatically our lifespan and eliminate disease and suffering (WOLFE, 2009, p.xii). The Crakers can be considered humans by their genome, but their posthuman status is questionable in the least. In this regard, Max More is clear when he states that

Perpetual progress is a strong statement of the transhumanist commitment to seek “more intelligence, wisdom, and effectiveness, an open-ended lifespan, and the removal of political, cultural, biological, and psychological limits to continuing development. Perpetually overcoming constraints on our progress and possibilities as individuals, as organizations, and as a species. Growing in healthy directions without bound.” The individual element of this is expressed in the principle of self-transformation, which means “affirming continual ethical, intellectual, and physical self-improvement, through critical and creative thinking, perpetual learning, personal responsibility, proactivity, and experimentation. Using technology – in the widest sense to seek physiological and neurological augmentation along with emotional and psychological refinement.” Both of these principles clearly express the implementation of transhumanism as being a continual process and *not* about seeking a state of perfection. (MORE, 2013, p.5)

Crake’s project is not one of perpetual progress to humankind but, rather, one of its rebooting. Actually, reading *Oryx and Crake*, it is possible to affirm that it was the life in the Compounds, before the extinction of almost all humankind that represented a real transhuman existence. The Compounds are in fact technological capitalist enclaves secluded from the dirty reality of life, as seen in one of Jimmy’s memories:

Long ago, in the days of knights and dragons, the kings and dukes had lived in castles, with high walls and drawbridges and slots on the

ramparts so you could pour hot pitch on your enemies, said Jimmy’s father, and the Compounds were the same idea. Castles were for keeping you and your buddies nice and safe inside, and for keeping everybody else outside.

“So are we the kings and dukes?” asked Jimmy.

“Oh, absolutely,” said his father, laughing. (ATWOOD, 2003, p.28)

This is a direct hit on each and every transhumanist project that relies entirely (or primarily) on technology: it will definitely not benefit all humans; rather, only (or mostly) those who can afford the contact with such technological advances will be able to survive in a transhuman world. And, here, we reach an interesting conundrum: transhumans/posthumans will eventually be the standard of humanity. Taking into account such project as an arm of consumer-based technological capitalism, it is not unfair to affirm that only the minimally wealthy will transition to this new category. But Crake’s posthuman project aims at eliminating humans and replacing them with the peaceful, herbivore Crakers. Ironically, thus, it is fair to say that “the Crakers are . . . posthuman by being pre-human if, according to Crake, culture is what makes us human” (MARKS DE MARQUES, 2015a, p.139).

The ultimate irony is that, despite all efforts in ridding humans of all cultural characteristics, the Crakers still carry an innate curiosity about themselves and, most importantly, about Jimmy, who can give them answers about their own origins. In their contact with a pre-extinction human, the Crakers develop oral language and, after that, are presented with a cosmogony and a mythology, both based upon Jimmy’s experiences with Crake, their creator, and Oryx, a woman who had been involved with both friends. In this cosmogony, Jimmy deifies Oryx and Crake by giving them both specific roles in the creation of the world:

The Children of Oryx, the Children of Crake. He’d had to think of something. Get your story straight, keep it simple, don’t falter: this used to be the expert advice given by lawyers to criminals in the dock. *Crake made the bones of the Children of Crake out of the coral on the beach, and then he made their flesh out of a mango. But the Children of Oryx hatched out of an egg, a giant egg laid by Oryx herself. Actually she laid two eggs: one full of animals and birds and fish, and the other one full of words. But the egg full of words hatched first, and the Children of Crake had already been created by then, and they’d eaten up all the*

*words because they were hungry, and so there were no words left over when the second egg hatched out. And that is why the animals can't talk.* (ATWOOD, 2003, p.96)

Language and myth become the Crakers' entry into the realm of culture and, thus, into that of humans. Eduardo Marks de Marques, in his article "Children of Oryx, Children of Crake, Children of Men: Redefining the Post-Transhuman in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy" (2015), explains that:

Jimmy creates the Crakers' myths of origin and acts as their prophet (and as Oryx and Crake's apostle) mainly for his survival in this post-apocalyptic (or neo-prelapsarian) world. This means that Jimmy allows the Crakers' entry into the symbolic world of culture and, thus, a return to humanity (or humanism), the very traces of which Crake tried to erase in his creation. Language is, thus, both restorative and creative, as it creates the Crakers' myths of origin and, by doing that, restores their human position. (MARKS DE MARQUES, 2015a, p.140)

Narrative and mythmaking are also part of the second instalment of the trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*, which operates as a parallel retelling of the events of the first novel rather than its sequel. In the novel, the focus is on an eco-religious group called God's Gardeners, who had been preaching the end of the world, the so-called Waterless Flood, for many years prior to the actual decimation of humankind carried on by Crake. A small group of survivors eventually join Jimmy and the Crakers and aid him in the expansion of their mythology. In the third novel, *MaddAddam* two of the surviving God's Gardener women, Ren and Toby, take turns as mythmakers and apostles and, more importantly, as agents of the restoration of the previous order.

In *MaddAddam*, Atwood's ironic twist on the posthuman/transhuman ideas and ideals becomes even deeper. The final instalment of the trilogy introduces two new and important elements to the narrative. The first is the creation of a hybrid Craker-human species, bred from sexual intercourse between some male Crakers

and two humans, Ren and Amanda. As the Crakers smell that the two women are ovulating, they interpret that as the females' willingness to mate and, thus, perform their sex ritual with them (ATWOOD, 2013, p.13). Ren, who witnesses the episode, unable to prevent it, cannot understand it as something beyond her human cultural limits: can such an act be interpreted as rape if the Crakers are simply acting out their animal instincts as their species is programmed to do? Also, is the definition of rape cultural, regardless of the savagery of the act? Or is it dependent on such a savagery?

But perhaps the most important element is the Crakers' development of writing and the tools of storytelling. Toby becomes very attached to a young Craker, whom she calls Blackbeard, who is so interested in seeing her write her journal that she starts teaching him to write.

“What are you making, Oh Toby” It's little Blackbeard: she didn't hear him come in. “What are those lines?

“Come over here,” she says. “I won't bite you. Look. I'm doing writing: that is what these lines are. I'll show you.

She runs through the basics, This is paper, it is made from trees. . . .

“Now,” she says, “you have to draw the letters. Each letter means a sound. And when you put the letters together they make words. And the words stay where you've put them on paper, and then other people can see them on the paper and hear the words.

Blackbeard looks at her, quinting with puzzlement and disbelief. “Oh, Toby, but it can't talk,” he says. “I see the marks you have put there. But it is not saying anything.”

“You need to be the voice of the writing,” she says. “When you read it. Reading is when you turn these marks back into sounds. Look, I will write your name,”

She tears a page carefully from the back of the notebook, prints on it: BLACKBEARD. Then she sounds out each letter for him. “See:” she says. “It means you. Your name.” She puts the pen in his hand, curls his fingers around it, guides the hand and the pen: the letter B.

“This is how your name begins,” she says. “B. Like bees. It's the same sound.” Why is she telling him this? What use will he ever have for it?

“That is not me,” says Blackbeard, frowning. “It is not bees either. It is only some marks.”

Take this paper to Ren,” says Toby, smiling. “Ask her to read it, then come back and tell me if she says your name. . . .

Blackbeard slips into the room again. He's carrying the sheet of paper, holding it in front of him like a hot shield. His face is radiant.

“It did, Oh Toby,” he says. “It said my name! It told my name to Ren!”

“There,” she says. “That is writing.”

Blackbeard nods: now he's grasping the possibilities. (ATWOOD, 2013, p.202-203)

The possibilities Ren alludes to are related not only to storytelling but, mainly, to the agency of their own history and historiography. Blackbeard, by the end of the novel, becomes the first Craker historian, as we read his chronicles of the final events in the narrative. In fact, the last few pages are written by the young Craker himself in a movement that shows that the Crakers no longer need outsiders as mythmakers (and, also, no longer need myths), in a clear movement towards evolution.

But what does evolution mean in this context? The Crakers, as bioengineered creatures, can be seen as posthuman but, once they are stripped of the cultural elements that, according to Crake, are the essence of humanity, they can be seen as pre-human. Also, they cannot interact with technology as there is none in their world, and their short lifespan is in the polar opposite of the ideal eternity sought after by transhumanism. Atwood's transhuman project is, also (and at the same time) post-human and pre-human. The Crakers are one big paradox, as is the whole universe developed by the Canadian

It is not only in the Crakers that we can see the paradoxes between "pre" and "post". The MaddAddam trilogy can be read as both pre-apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic fiction not simply because of its structure of flashbacks. If we interpret apocalypse as "end of the world", the destruction of the "human" world being the centre, we can easily accept Atwood's trilogy as apocalyptic; however, given the project of destroying the world to rebuild it under a more natural (i.e. biological, organic) rule of law, the novels acquire a more genetic tone, something visible in only a few of such narratives. The beginning is the end is the beginning. From Revelations to Genesis.

Atwood's environmental concerns are well-known and they are directly addressed in the trilogy. Crake's project of human extinction is, ultimately, against late technological capitalism and the inequalities it creates. In this sense, the apocalyptic/genetic transition between worlds directly addresses the anxieties of the



Anthropocene. As an initial working definition, Tobias Menely and Margaret Ronda define the term as “the moment at which expanding global capitalism, with its increasingly destructive side effects of pollution, deforestation, and immiseration, reaches a threshold of self-destruction, but also of self-deception, as the accelerating conversion of all natural entities into forms of human capital becomes more and more patently in denial of ecological realities and limits” (in Clark 2). From this perspective, the Anthropocene is a direct result of industrial capitalism and its impact on the planet’s ecosystems, especially because “there is increasing awareness that the concepts and tools of economics do not simply measure economies but perform them, constituting and shaping them profoundly” (PALSSON *et al*, 2013, p.10).

The trilogy, usually read as an example of a contemporary trend of dystopian fiction—one that Dunja M. Mohr calls transgressive utopian dystopias (MOHR, 2007, p.5), Eduardo Marks de Marques refers to as third-turn dystopias (MARKS DE MARQUES, 2015b, p.19), and that Atwood herself calls *ustopia* (ATWOOD, 2011, p.66)—that questions the very foundations of traditional, modern dystopias, which focus mostly on the heavy control the state has on individuals and their struggle to fight it from within. Bringing the ideas around the Anthropocene into the equation, one immediate though valid conclusion is that the era in question can be seen as a living example of dystopia. A second conclusion that can be reached is that the Anthropocene is (and, perhaps, has always been, since its inception) posthuman. Posthumanity is a direct result of technological capitalism in its many historical forms. The effects of the system on human life and those of this new, changed life, upon the planet establish the connections between capitalism, technology, transhuman desire, and the Anthropocene. How can, though, the *anthropoi* of the present-day era be *posthuman*?

In the second novel of the MaddAddam trilogy, *The Year of the Flood*, the God’s Gardeners are one of many eco-religious groups whose cosmogony, mythology, and dogmas revolve around the establishment of new forms of relationship between humans and nature. The novel presents, for instance, the names of many 20<sup>th</sup> century environmentalists as saints (most notably, perhaps, to our

Brazilian context, is that of Saint Chico Mendes, the martyr). The high priests and priestesses are called Adams and Eves, respectively, alluding not only to the original *anthropoi* but, mainly, as their role for tending of their habitat, fauna and flora. However, such forms of relationship are not historically new, but they revisit New Age philosophies from the pre-apocalyptic world. The God's Gardeners, thus, attempt a "pre-posthuman" existence in the Anthropocene. It is important to mention that such a way of living cannot rely on written words. The body of dogmas the Gardeners live by is completely oral. As Ren discusses in the beginning of the novel:

*Beware of words. Be careful what you write. Leave no trails.*

This is what the Gardeners taught us, when I was a child among them. They told us to depend on memory, because nothing written down could be relied on. The Spirit travels from mouth to mouth, not from thing to thing: books could be burnt, paper crumble away, computers could be destroyed. Only the Spirit lives forever, and the Spirit isn't a thing. As for writing, it was dangerous, said the Adams and the Eves, because your enemies could trace you through it, and hunt you down, and use your words to condemn you. (ATWOOD, 2009, p.6)

More than just for the fear of religious persecution, writing is seen as a skill that allows humanity to enter a different level on the evolutionary stage. Oral tradition is connected to a pre-posthuman existence whereas the acquisition of writing by the Crakers allow them to become (post)human.

The Waterless Flood—the actual process of decimation of humanity led on by Crake—means, thus, the end of the Anthropocene once it destroys (almost) all trace of human life and culture on the planet, forcing the remaining humans to adapt to an almost prelapsarian lifestyle. Post-apocalypse is, thus, pre-Anthropocene. The problem is that the Anthropocene is far more complex than what the aforementioned working definition suggests. Timothy Clark reminds us that:

[t]he Anthropocene blurs and even scrambles some crucial categories by which people have made sense of the world and their lives. It puts in crisis the lines between culture and nature, fact and value, and between the human and the geological or meteorological. As a bewildering and often destructive contamination of human aims and natural causality, the Anthropocene manifests itself in innumerable possible hairline cracks in

the familiar life-world, at the local and personal scale of each individual life. Something planetary is breaking through, entailing a politicization of what may once have seemed insignificant, as familiar day-to-day practices incite an engaged ‘green’ political awareness. (CLARK, 2015, p.9)

If one of the main elements of the era is the constant questioning of whatever was familiar once, binary oppositions no longer operate under the same values that have defined cultures. All transhuman desires suddenly become questionable—particularly that of immortality—if they mean the eventual decline of the natural, biological planetary order. The Crakers’ short lifespan, in the polar opposite of that desire, would indicate that the convergence of posthumanity and the Anthropocene needs to reassess the ideas and ideals of both. Actually, it indicates that the real Anthropocene, the time where the lines between polar opposites is really blurred and scrambled, is not the pre-Flood world but, rather, the post-Flood one, as the practices of both Crakers and surviving humans are permeated by the very “green” political awareness Clark sees as paramount to the period.

Francesca Ferrando, drawing extensively from Giorgio Agamben’s distinction between *bios* (human life, connected to *logos*) and *zoē* (general idea of life), defends that “[i]t is important to contextualize the notion of “life” and the privilege given to *bios*, instead of *zoē*, to deconstruct the socio-cultural onto-epistemological assumptions which gave rise to the era of the Anthropocene. Such a deconstruction highlights the inextricable connection between the Anthropocene and Anthropocentrism” (FERRANDO, 2016, p.164). Thus, in this light, post-humanism gains new colours:

As a post-anthropocentric approach, post-humanism stresses the urgency for humans to become aware of pertaining to *zoē* and being part of an ecosystem which, when damaged, negatively affects the human condition as well. A point which is of crucial importance and that shall be highly remarked in this context is: there is no Anthropocene without anthropocentrism. The Anthropocene per se is not the problem, but it is one of the consequences of an anthropocentric *Weltanschauung*, based on an autonomous view of the human as a self-defying agent. (FERRANDO, 2016, p.165)

This is particularly interesting to discuss the Crakers. Throughout the trilogy, their existence transitions from *zoe* to *bios*, but given their natural connection to fauna and flora, they become the very post-humans whom Ferrando calls for a deeper awareness of their ecosystem. The Crakers' entry into the symbolic order represented by writing makes them not human, but post-human and, as such, allows for the creation of this post-Anthropocene awareness that needs to help define post-humanity. In short: the Crakers, made from human DNA, devoid of their human cultural characteristics, in the end—and because of their contact with “real” humans—become post-human and, in doing so, reorganize the Anthropocene by escaping it. Post-*anthropoi* call for a post-Anthropocene.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- ATWOOD, Margaret. *Oryx and Crake*. New York: Anchor Books, 2003.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *The Year of the Flood*. New York: Anchor Books, 2009.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *In Other Worlds: SF and the Human Imagination*. London: Virago, 2011.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *MaddAddam*. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.
- BOUSON, J. Brooks. "It's Game Over Forever": Atwood's Satiric Vision of a Bioengineered Posthuman Future in *Oryx and Crake*. In: BLOOM, Harold (Ed.). *Bloom's Modern Critical Views: Margaret Atwood*. New York: Bloom's Literary Criticism, 2009. p. 93-110.
- CLARK, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- FERRANDO, Francesca. "The Party of the Anthropocene: Post-humanism, Environmentalism and the Post-anthropocentric Paradigm Shift". *Relations*, 4.2, 2016, 159-73
- MARKS DE MARQUES, Eduardo. "“God is a cluster of neurons’: Neo-posthumanism, theocide, theogony and anti-myths of origin in Margaret Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*”. *Gragoatá*, 35, 2013, 155-69.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Children of Oryx, Children of Crake, Children of Men: Redefining the Post/Transhuman in Margaret Atwood’s *ustopian* Maddaddam Trilogy”. *Aletria*, 25, 3, 2015, 133-46.

\_\_\_\_\_. “Da Centralidade Política à Centralidade do Corpo Transumano: Movimentos da Terceira Virada Distópica na Literatura”. *Anuário de Literatura* 19.1, 2005, 29-48.

MOHR, Dunja M. “Transgressive Utopian Dystopias: The Postmodern Reappearance of Utopia in the Disguise of Dystopia”. *Zeitschrift für Anglistik und Amerikanistik (ZAA)* , 55.1, 207, 5-24.

MORE, Max. The Philosophy of Transhumanism. In: *The Transhumanist Reader*. West Sussex: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013.

PALSSON, Gilsa *et al.* “Reconceptualizing the ‘Anthropos’ in the Anthropocene: Integrating the Social Sciences and Humanities in Global Environmental Change Research”. *Environmental Science & Policy*, 28, 2013, 3-13

WOLFE, Cary. *What is Posthumanism?* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009.

Recebido em 15/06/2017.

Aceito em 26/09/2017.