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Mothering, Masking Up, and Sarah Blake's *Clean Air*: A Maternal Ecocritical Reading

During the last two-plus years, COVID-19 has exposed the fissures in the framework of how societies treat mothers. The pandemic has highlighted issues of motherhood that were already present but artfully disguised. This paper aims to analyze those challenges in the context of a newly published cli-fi thriller novel. Clean Air, by Sara Blake, is a matrifocal novel that tells the story of a mother who survives a climate catastrophe, in which the pollen from trees and plants overtakes the earth. The human beings who survive this event cannot go outdoors without special masks, mirroring our experience during the first months of the pandemic. In this project, I explore how critical issues related to mothering are amplified in the contexts of major social upheavals: pandemics, wars, or in the case of this novel, a major climate crisis. The intersection of ecocriticism and maternal theory provides a valuable lens to analyze maternal anxiety, maternal ambivalence, work-life balance, maternal guilt, grieving daughterhood, and imperfect motherhood, which are all present in the descriptions of this alternate reality. All of these motherhood issues are in the undercurrent of the maternal experience portrayed in this novel. However, I argue that the novel goes further than addressing the problems inherent in how we treat mothers under these circumstances. It provides helpful advice on moving forwards, mothering on your own terms, and choosing happiness, suggesting a path towards accepting ourselves as imperfect mothers and imperfect selves.

Introduction

In a newspaper article from *The Guardian*, titled "Guilt and Fury: How Covid Brought Mothers to the Breaking Point," Natasha Walter writes: "What's going on is that before the pandemic, we were papering over the cracks of a still unequal society." During the last two-plus years, COVID-19 exposed fissures in the framework of how societies treat mothers. This article analyzes

those challenges in the context of a newly published cli-fi, or climate-fiction thriller, *Clean Air* by Sarah Blake. *Clean Air* is a matrifocal novel that tells the story of Izabel, a mother who survives a climate catastrophe, in which pollen from trees and plants overtakes the earth. The human beings who survive this event cannot go outdoors without masks, mirroring our experience during the first months of the pandemic.

This project explores how critical issues related to mothering are amplified in the contexts of major social upheavals: pandemics, wars, or in the case of this novel, a major climate apocalypse. The intersection of ecocriticism and maternal theory provides a valuable lens to analyze maternal ambivalence, maternal anxiety, work-life balance, maternal guilt, grieving daughterhood, and imperfect motherhood, which are all present in descriptions of this alternate environmental reality. The guilt and fury Natasha Walter describes in her article are in the undercurrent of the maternal experience portrayed in this novel. However, I argue that the novel goes further than addressing the problems inherent in how we treat mothers under these circumstances. It provides helpful advice on moving forwards, mothering on your own terms, and choosing happiness, suggesting a path towards accepting ourselves as imperfect mothers and humans.

Theoretical Lens

I would like to begin by examining the definition and importance of Blake's work as a matrifocal novel. Matrifocal literature, as defined by Elizabeth Podnieks, are narratives that put mothering at their centre through point of view (first person or limited third person) (176). By focussing on mothers, these authors elevate the importance of studying the maternal perspective and emphasize it as a subject worthy of attention. They also tend to explore the tensions between traditional representations of "good" or "bad" mothers in order to present more authentic representations of mothering. In her article "Matrifocal Voices in Literature," Podnieks points out that it is easier to find examples of daughter-centric works rather than matrifocal ones. Although the main character, Izabel, is simultaneously a grieving daughter and a mother to four-year-old Cami, Blake manages to maintain a balance that can present both aspects of the main character's identity without one role overpowering the other. She does this by presenting flashbacks of Izabel's childhood, her relationship with her mother, and her mother's passing, interpolated with scenes of Izabel's current acts of mothering and carework with her daughter.

Podnieks also discusses how matrifocal literature performs the action of "unmasking motherhood," as described by Susan Maushart. According to Maushart: "The mask of motherhood is what keeps women silent about what they feel and suspicious about what they know. It divides mother from

daughter, sister from sister, friend from friend" (461). Maushart demonstrates that by concealing the realities of mothering, we continue the chain of binding ourselves to the conditions of patriarchal motherhood. In order to "unmask motherhood," we must be vocal about the realities of what it means to be responsible for another human life. We must tear off our disguises, stop performing, and be authentic about how we describe our experiences of mothering. Matrifocal novels, like this one, have the power to break down the divisions that Maushart describes. They can fill the silences by dedicating time and attention to the realities of mothering.

It is also significant that this novel is a work of matrifocal climate-change science fiction. Whereas ecocriticism is concerned with humanity's relationship with the earth and nature, ecofeminism adds the intersection of the treatment of women and the treatment of our planet to the discussion. We can examine parallels between how patriarchal society treats women and how we treat Mother Earth—mining and extracting what we can use rather than dedicating our lives to finding ways to care for, replenish, and improve the space we inhabit. Using these theories as lenses for our analysis of *Clean Air* will aid us in understanding the connections between maternal theory and concern for our environment. How is our treatment of mothers related to climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic? How is the mistreatment of resources reflected in all three major issues?

COVID-19 and *Clean Air*

I would like to explore the parallels between the COVID-19 pandemic and what is called, "the Turning" in this novel. *Clean Air* takes place in the year 2032. Ten years prior, a major climate event took place in which the trees began to overproduce pollen, and this killed off more than half of the human beings on the planet. It was an unexpected turn of events, not the rising sea levels or forest fires that had been feared, but another unanticipated result of humanity's inaction to reverse climate change. In *Landscapes of Writing in Chicano Literature*, Imelda Martín-Junquera describes the "ecofeminist desire to bring a change to the archaic and patriarchal vision of nature as a passive entity and to transform it into a living entity that breathes, feels and suffers—an attempt to give agency to the landscape and enter into communication with it" (loc 29). Blake seems to answer this call in the novel by giving consciousness to the trees that have taken over the earth. One of these trees goes so far as to communicate with Izabel's family through her daughter Cami. This aspect of science-fiction or perhaps magical realism allows Izabel to converse with the trees that have destroyed half of humanity, to reflect on their motive, and to see that they have their own consciousness and their own doubts about what they have done. Izabel shares some of their disappointment in humanity,

although she cannot forgive the trees for their actions. With the COVID-19 pandemic, people also questioned whether humanity was to blame for what was happening. Certainly, many of our reactions to the events taking place around the world could have been improved.

The initial descriptions in the novel are reminiscent of the first few months of the COVID-19 pandemic, when people were unsure whether it was safe to go outside and whether the coronavirus disease could be transmitted just by passing one another on the sidewalk. In Spain, where I currently live, children were not allowed out of their houses from early March 2020 until April 26, more than a month later. Even then, they were only allowed a short walk in their neighbourhood during certain hours (Hunter). Playgrounds were forbidden. For those first six weeks, people living in apartment buildings had to get fresh air and vitamin D by sitting next to an open window at certain times of the day. Friendships were formed with neighbours in the balconies across the street who would sit by the window at the same time of day. Neighbours would wave to one another while banging pots and pans in the evenings to thank essential workers. Windows and balconies were our only mode of in-person human connection outside of our immediate families or housemates.

In the novel, people must stay in their plastic domes and pass through a decontamination space before putting on masks to step outside for a matter of seconds. In this case, it is the outdoors and fecund nature that are the danger and will stop you from breathing. Similar to the way the coronavirus attacks our lungs, the pollen will kill humans in a short space of time. Izabel observes her daughter "masking up," in a similar fashion to how we have seen our own children get accustomed to wearing masks in public spaces: "Izabel watched Cami pull her mask up, over her mouth, without any prompting. Child of this world, she knew what to do" (34). Izabel's daughter is a product of these times, and Izabel's mother was one of the first to die right before the Turning. The terms used to describe her mother's death sound eerily similar to the early phases of our own pandemic and how we spoke about the elderly and the infirm who died in the first few months: "Her mother in the at-risk population. Her mother, early-susceptible. Her mother, sometimes called one of the Canaries" (27). Sadly, many young parents of the COVID-19 generation can relate to the double trauma of losing a parent in the pandemic and birthing a child under highly stressful circumstances in an unfamiliar world.

Even the decision to have children takes on similar parallels in the novel. Following the COVID-19 pandemic, birth rates dropped drastically (Morse). In an uncertain future, not knowing how this virus would affect infants, people were not willing to take chances. Izabel's generation goes through a similar state. There are some infants and some teenagers but no children in between. The Turning had killed off the youngest and the oldest. When Izabel

and her husband Kaito decide to have a child together, Izabel describes that she had "countless conversations with Kaito, weighing the pros and cons, considering what was hope and what was foolishness" (31). One can imagine that any parent who has had a child during the last three years can relate to those words. Not knowing how the virus would affect infants, not knowing how long it would take to have a vaccine for children under two years old, and knowing that pregnant women are high risk have all undoubtedly been recent topics of concern for most parents.

Another parallel between the pandemic and the Turning is the increase in screen use (McClain). As we became confined to our homes, those who were privileged enough to have Wi-Fi and technology began to look to the internet for information, solace, a means of communication with loved ones, a way to exercise, to attend school, and do their work. In my own case, I have hosted or attended birthday parties, a bachelorette party, a wedding, done push-ups, Zumba, and burpees all through a laptop. And, of course, academics share our research projects via online conferences like the one that inspired this journal. Izabel also turns to her tablet for almost everything: to find out that Cami has arrived safely at school, to read the news, to entertain her daughter, and to look up information. However, Izabel primarily uses her tablet to watch videos of the past, old TV shows, and old news reports. It is as if she is trying to immerse herself virtually in the time before the Turning in order to disconnect from the current reality and perhaps to process it as well.

Maternal Ambivalence and Maternal Anxiety

Nevertheless, immersing herself in reruns of *Bridezilla* or *Property Brothers* cannot remove Izabel from many of the mundane aspects of mothering. She must still put her tablet down to prepare a snack or wipe a bottom. Both the COVID-19 pandemic and the Turning highlighted certain issues within mothering that were always and already there. Furthermore, not being able to leave the house amplified these tensions. In the first scene of the novel, we see an example of one of these issues: maternal ambivalence. Izabel is getting Cami ready for school, going through the morning routine of snack and backpack preparation, when the narrator, who is third-person omniscient, reveals Izabel's thought process: "Kaito would be stepping out of the bedroom soon. If she timed it right, the three of them would be in the kitchen together as they got ready for the day. Not that she didn't want to be alone with Cami, only that she preferred not to be" (3). Izabel goes on to carefully prepare Cami's breakfast and bring a bottle of warm milk to her bed. She wakes her up lovingly, and they share a morning snuggle.

These first two pages set the stage for the novel's exploration of maternal ambivalence. Margo Lowy, psychotherapist, and author of *Maternal Ambivalence:*

Encounters with Ambivalence and Love posits that mothers having hateful or negative feelings towards their children is a taboo that needs to be normalized and examined. Lowy writes that although feelings of love and hate are both a natural part of mothering, negative feelings are silenced in society. She argues that exploring these dark feelings that come and go can be fruitful and helpful towards better mothering and an improved definition of what encompasses maternity. In other words, acknowledging negative thoughts as part of mothering is both healthy and necessary. This novel seems to commit to a similar perspective on how we define mothering. By presenting the reader with descriptions of maternal ambivalence, like the one above, Blake is validating our feelings as imperfect but caring mothers. This is a nourishing moment for the reader, who may relate to these conflicting feelings and observe that Izabel is a loving mother even though she is not a perfect one.

Similarly, in *The Monster Within: The Hidden Side of Motherhood*, Barbara Almond warns that sometimes mothers internalize their feelings of maternal ambivalence. On the exterior, these mothers may appear to be functioning properly: balancing work and home life, taking care of their children's physical and emotional needs, and making things work. However, on the inside, these mothers may feel increasingly frustrated with their lives and their children. By presenting examples of maternal ambivalence in fictional mother characters, authors like Blake are allowing readers to reflect on these tensions that exist within motherhood and see other examples of mothers who are struggling to meet the impossible expectations of motherhood. As readers, we are able to observe and empathize with Izabel's thought processes and see that she experiences the same kinds of tensions that most mothers feel. This opens the door to self-reflection and the chance for mothers to feel that they are not alone.

Maternal anxiety is a second and related issue that Blake handles in interesting ways in her novel. Perinatal and postpartum mood disorders are also unspoken taboos that need to become part of our everyday lexicon. In *Ordinary Insanity: Fear and the Silent Crisis of Motherhood in America*, Sarah Menkedick explores how maternal anxiety starts with biological changes that are a natural part of pregnancy and birth. However, Menkedick argues that these biological changes are exacerbated by the treatment of mothers during pregnancy and the lack of support for mothers postpartum—all of which are fomenting the epidemic of maternal anxiety that we see today. Izabel's apprehension can be observed in moments when she watches Cami run through the pollen in order to enter an automated car and be driven to school. The author writes: "As tired as she was of nearly every moment of her life, some parts still filled her with fear. Cami getting to a car was one of them" (8). Izabel's already present anxiety, in moments like this one, is exacerbated by the threat of a serial killer who begins tearing holes into families' domes as

they sleep at night. After ten years of humanity coming together in harmony to survive, this is the first case of major crime in their area, and it throws Izabel's emotional life off balance, and her anxiety level multiplies.

Unsurprisingly, the rate of maternal anxiety and depression increased with the COVID-19 pandemic (Geren et al.). Moreover, this increase puts pregnant women at risk of posttraumatic stress disorder. This reaction can be seen in parallel to the feelings of anxiety and stress that Izabel describes when her daughter goes outdoors in the pollen-infested atmosphere. When we feel our children are in danger, the levels of cortisol rise inside our bodies. Moreover, these intense moments of stress take their toll on our bodies both in the short and long term.

Izabel's maternal anxiety is connected to a sense of guilt that she carries. She is at a crossroads between grieving daughterhood and maternal guilt for her imperfections. When she remembers her mother's death, she feels that she has failed her: "Lots of people told her that she hadn't failed her mother at all. That she rushed her to the hospital and they did everything they could do for her for days, and she died like almost everyone died. But Izabel took the blame where she could" (73). Izabel feels guilty for her mother's death, guilty for not having a job, and guilty for not being a perfect mother. She often escapes to what are called privacy pods at the mall because if she stays home, she feels ashamed of not having a career:

> And when Kaito came out of his office for lunch or for a break, she felt like he was critical of how she used her time, even though he didn't say it, even though he insisted he didn't think about her like that. But she was critical of herself in that way. Even if she cleaned everything, got all the laundry done, responded to emails, ordered the groceries, scheduled appointments. Even then, she wondered what she was doing inside her perfect life. (10)

The graphic artist, Emma, explores this tension in her book *The Mental Load: A Feminist Comic*. For example, in the chapter titled "You Should've Asked," Emma toys with the idea that men often expect their partners to ask them to do chores and to point out to them exactly what needs to be done. Assuming that the women in a household must decide and manage household chores is placing an extra mental load on women that is not only underappreciated but also taken completely for granted. Emma encourages men to recognize the mental load and to be proactive in knowing things about their own children, such as "where to buy their clothes, what to feed them, when they need their next vaccination," and so on (18). Izabel feels guilty for not working outside the home, and this is compounded by the fact that she does not realize that the mental load that she carries is, as Emma points out, "already a full-time job" (7). Once the weight of this mental load is recognized, men and women will

be able to revalue these tasks and acknowledge their importance.

However, Izabel is not at this stage yet. Instead, she feels ashamed for not working outside the home and inadequate when she compares herself to other parents. When Izabel drops Cami off at school after the second murder, she questions her decision during the car ride on her way to the mall. She reflects on how there were fewer children at school than usual and wonders if the other parents are being more cautious, "smarter," and more "prepared." Izabel thinks: "She hadn't considered Cami not going to school. If she had, she would have kept her home. Like a good mother. But now it was too late. Cami was already there" (50). The concept of the "good mother," as described by Shari Thurer, is one of the "myths of motherhood" (331). Thurer writes: "A sentimentalized image of the perfect mother casts a long, guilt-inducing shadow over real mothers' lives. Actual days on Planet Earth include few, if any, perfect moments, perfect children, perfectly cared for" (331). Still, mothers tend to hold themselves accountable for their imperfections despite the impossibility of perfection. Faced with this feeling of wrongness within her, Izabel becomes obsessed with the killer in her town. Alone in the privacy pods at the mall, she begins to draft letters to him, trying to process and understand what is going through his mind. Even though she hates him, she still identifies with him for being unhappy in this new post-climate-apocalypse, pollen-infested world. She associates the darkness within her with that of the killer, even going so far as to include him in her sexual fantasies.

Another topic that Blake examines in her novel is the tension between traditional expectations regarding motherhood and sexuality. In the words of Shari Thurer in *The Myths of Motherhood*: "Sex and motherhood have not mixed well since the demise of the goddess religions, when men began to split women into madonnas or whores in every sphere. Presumably, a good mother extinguishes her libido with conception or else expels it along with her placenta in childbirth" (338). Blake toys with this notion by presenting us with a mother who is sexually attracted to her husband and to other men, even though she is troubled by the fact that one of these men is the killer. Izabel feels ashamed of the fantasies that she has about the killer. However, she also recognizes, in the letters to the killer and to her daughter, that what she feels drawn to is really the guilt surrounding death. She compares the killer's actions to when doctors lose a patient and when a child has to make a medical decision about an aging parent. Izabel concludes that: "We are all going to be held accountable for some amount of death at some point in our lives" (74). Death, guilt, and sex all intertwine in this character's psyche.

Izabel's letters to the killer are interspersed with letters to her daughter. She writes to her daughter as if she wants to prepare her for that darkness within us all—that sense of being imperfect, flawed, or an imposter. As Izabel tries to understand herself in those letters, she also tries to teach her daughter. Most

letters are ultimately shredded and disposed of, those drafted to the killer in particular, but a few of the letters to Cami make it into her purse, where they are kept for the future. These letters can be seen as an example of feminist mothering. Andrea O'Reilly and Fiona Joy Green both emphasize the importance of bringing "feminist theory and practice to their everyday motherwork" (Green 43). By trying to teach her daughter about the challenges she has faced both as a woman and as a mother, she is preparing Cami to make her own decisions as she matures.

Moving Forwards: New Pathways

The novel prepares both Cami and the reader for an increasingly normalized understanding of maternal ambivalence, maternal anxiety, maternal guilt, grieving daughterhood, and imperfect motherhood, all within the context of a climate apocalypse, whose parallels with the current pandemic are vivid and similar. However, the novel takes the process a step further. In addition to exploring these issues within mothering that are heightened by the context of a major world event, the novel proposes ways of moving forwards and promoting change, much in the same vein as the "Learning from the Pandemic: Possibilities and Challenges for Mothers and Families" conference topic and journal issue asked us to reflect on what we have learned from the pandemic in terms of mothering. I would like to emphasize two main takeaways from *Clean Air* that we can apply to motherhood studies. First, the novel's main characters are all women of colour of varied backgrounds. Izabel is a Hispanic American of Uruguayan and Jewish descent. Her second daughter, whom she adopts midway through the novel, Jana, is a young Muslim woman. Her "mom friend" and lawyer, Andy, is a Black woman she meets at the playground and identifies with because they both tend to say what is on their minds rather than what is expected of them. Izabel and Cami's psychologist, Opa, has a name that identifies her as probably Native American of the Choctaw Nation ("The Sounds of Choctaw"). And Inspector Paz's name identifies her as Hispanic, like Izabel. Just as it is essential to find matrifocal voices in literature, it is a step forwards when we hear the voices of women who stand at varied intersections in terms of race and background (Collins).

The second main lesson that we can apply to the COVID-19 pandemic occurs after Izabel helps the police arrest the killer and draw a confession out of him. Inspector Paz is so impressed by Izabel's bravery and dogged determination that she offers her a job as a shadow or apprentice in her profession. Izabel has not worked outside of the home since Cami was born, but she realizes that this job offer would make her happy. When she tries to explain her choice to work to Cami, her daughter does not understand why she needs to have a job. As one would explain to a child, clearly and concisely,

Izabel sums up her choice in words that we can all apply to our own lives: "It's important for people to be the most happy they can be. And for them to keep asking themselves what would make them the most happy" (299).

Conclusion

In conclusion, *Clean Air* teaches us that to be the "most happy" we can be postpandemic, we must acknowledge and hold space for maternal anxiety, maternal ambivalence, maternal guilt, and imperfections within definitions of mothering. We should learn from other strong women how to move forwards, and we should keep looking for happiness despite the world's and our own imperfections. By acknowledging and analyzing the connections between the way we treat mothers and the way we treat our environment, we can move towards a more respectful and caring way of life.

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