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**An investigation into puppetry as sympoiesis in relation to Marta Cuscunà's work with reference to Staying with the Trouble by Donna Haraway.**

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I hereby confirm that I am the sole author of the written work here enclosed and that I have compiled it in my own words.

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Lea Marmo, 21/04/2024

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## ILLUSTRATIONS

**Table 1, Table 2.1** *Comparison of poietic systems characteristics*. Table by Dempster M.B., 1998. 7

## INTRODUCTION

Field notes from: *La Semplicità Ingannata (Deceived Simplicity)* by Marta Cuscunà, seen live on the 24<sup>th</sup> of February 2024, Pieve di Cento (BO).

So, the words directed at the ‘Clarisse’ by the Patriarch Ludovico were heard: << [...] Therefore we exhort and warn each and every one of you, by virtue of the Sacred Obedience, to return to being docile and humble sheep for your fathers. This way, news of your deeds will be lost, Clarisse, and you will fade in the dim light of the cloister. Now lower your heads... Lower your heads>>. And of this affair, nothing else appears (Cuscunà, 2019b, p. 116).

The lights go dark and the theatre erupts. As the house lights come back on, a group of middle-aged women is shouting praise. Marta Cuscunà reappears on stage. She bows once, twice, three times. She leaves and she comes back, the audience eager to see more of her. Then, she executes the traditional gesture of the performer who has received enough praise: the acknowledgement of the artists behind the controls, of the collaborators, the makers-with. After pointing with one hand at the opposite end of the theatre, she turns to her left and motions to her Clarisse. Her puppets, her dolls, her co-stars, her collaborators. The other performers (Cuscunà, 2024b).

This scene from one of Cuscunà’s latest performances is a helpful visual example of the kind of collaboration and co-creation enacted by human and non-human performers, which will be explored in this dissertation.

Three key concepts are significant for this study: hybrid, symbiosis and sympoiesis. After defining the three terms in Chapter One, an overview of Marta Cuscunà’s work will be the focus of Chapter Two, providing the contextual basis for Chapter Three, a discussion of the show *Earthbound*, directly inspired by the book *Staying with the Trouble* by Donna Haraway.

## CHAPTER ONE - DEFINITIONS

### HYBRID

The first term which needs to be defined is *hybrid*. Despite the various applications of the term in areas such as engineering and political sciences, the connotation which matters in this discussion is its biological meaning: “In its late ancient definition, the hybrid [...] is the offspring that is generated [...] as the product of beings that are considered to be distinctive species” (Neis, 2023).

The concept of hybridity is relevant in this discussion around the idea of a collective making, as the creation of a hybrid is the definition of creating-with something ‘other’. It should be noted that ‘hybridity’ has also appeared in Theatre Studies, especially in relation to intercultural theatre (Hutchison, 2010). The focus here, however, isn't around multi-cultural encounters, so much as multi-species ones. Therefore, the scientific definition of the term serves the purposes of this study better.

Creating offspring with something other, on a genetic level, has interesting philosophical ramifications, not to mention the possibility of the hybrids not necessarily being able to reproduce. This impacts the nature and the possible ways in which a hybrid creature creates kin, and can be referred to Donna Haraway’s slogan of making kin instead of children (Haraway, 2016).

In fact, in imagining a future populated by Communities of Compost, Donna Haraway introduces the idea of creating human-animal hybrids. These would be the Children of Compost, born to families who have rejected the idea of the traditional heteronormative family structure, and who are mindful of parents’ reproductive rights. The parent who would bear the child also would get to decide which endangered animal the child should be genetically linked with. This creates new human/animal hybrids, who bridge the gap between human and non-human, in an attempt to create that ‘humusity’ Haraway described earlier in her book (Haraway, 2016, 134-168).

The term hybrid, and the concept of hybridity are however not well suited for this discussion. The hybrid is an individual made of the conjunction of different elements, be they biological or cultural. Where it may be a useful tool to discuss the nuanced nature of puppets, or the relationship between a performer and the character they play, the discussion here requires the scope of investigation to be larger. If the focus goes beyond the individual, and one begins to consider the interpersonal, the kin-making, and the collaboration between different organisms, it becomes apparent that the concept of hybridity is too restrictive.

## **SYMBIOSIS**

A term which can help broaden the focus is *symbiosis*. Merriam-Webster defines symbiosis as the living in close association of separate, dissimilar beings (Merriam-Webster, 2024). Scientifically speaking, there are four types of symbiosis: mutualism, commensalism, parasitism, and competition. In this case, the first two are the most interlinked with Haraway's writing and Cuscunà's work.

Mutualism indicates a relationship between organisms of different species which are beneficial for both, while in cases of commensalism, only one creature is benefitting from the relationship, but no harm comes to the other (National Geographic Society, 2022).

The use of the word symbiosis to talk about puppetry and theatre studies can be appropriate. In fact, one could posit that a puppeteer and their puppets are in a symbiotic relationship, where one couldn't exist without the other. No puppet will animate itself without the motions of the puppeteer, even if those motions are remote controlled, as in examples explored in Chapter Two; and no puppeteer may be called such without the use of puppets. The etymology of the word, however, shows why the notion of symbiosis is not apt to discuss the kind of relationship between Cuscunà and her puppets, or Donna Haraway's *Children of Compost*. Symbiosis derives from the Greek verb *symbiōun*, which means "to live with, to live together" (Merriam-Webster, 2024). As idyllic an image as it may seem, puppets and puppeteers living together in harmony, *Children of Compost* existing peacefully with

Nature, there is a definite lack of action. And without action how can there be theatre? How can one create kin? How may one tell stories?

The focus needs to shift once again from the coexistence of multiple individuals to the act of collective creation, of making-with together. In short, to sympoiesis.

## SYMPOIESIS

M. Beth Dempster first used the term *sympoiesis* in 1998 for “collectively-producing systems that do not have self-defined spatial or temporal boundaries” (Dempster, 1998, cited in Haraway, 2016, 61).

In simpler terms: sympoiesis is working together. It is the opposite of *autopoiesis*, from the Ancient Greek *autos* (self) and *poieo* (to make, to create), meaning something that creates itself, that is completely self-sufficient. The suffix *syn/sym* means together, so sympoiesis is making together: “the prefix *Syn*, [...] means ‘with someone else’. This somebody else can be you, so ‘to know with yourself, or within yourself’ or ‘to know with somebody else’” (Kokkali, 2015).

Dempster also provides in her thesis a useful chart detailing the differences between sympoietic and autopoietic systems:

**Table 2.1 Comparison of poietic system characteristics**

AUTOPOIETIC SYSTEMS	SYMPOIETIC SYSTEMS
<b>Defining Characteristics</b>	
self-produced boundaries	lacking boundaries
organizationally closed	organizationally ajar
external structural coupling	internal and external structural coupling
<b>Characteristic Tendencies</b>	
autonomous units	complex, amorphous entities
central control	distributed control
'packaged,' same information	distributed, different information
reproduction by copy	amorphous reproduction
evolution between systems	evolution within system
growth/development oriented	evolutionary orientation
homeostatic balance	balance by dynamic tension
steady state	potentially dramatic, surprising change
finite temporal trajectories	potentially infinite temporal trajectories
predictable	unpredictable
<b>Examples</b>	
cells, organisms	ecosystems, cultural systems

*Table 1: table of comparison between auto- and sym-poietic systems (Dempster, 1998)*



The belief expressed by the use of the term sympoiesis is that it is possible to live in a world where humans (or Haraway's *anthropoi*) are not the 'main characters' of the story of the world. They exist in relation to many 'somebody else'-s, the non-human inhabitants of our planet. This belief comes in direct opposition to a more commonly known world view, which puts at the forefront the damage that humans have caused to the environment. This conception of humanity's impact is called the Anthropocene. The term was first used by ecologist Eugene Stroemer in the early 1980s (Haraway, 2016, 44) to describe the new geological era the planet has entered; an era beyond the previous interglacial Holocene, in which the forces of nature were the ones affecting change.

Human activities have become so pervasive and profound that they rival the great forces of Nature and are pushing the Earth into planetary *terra incognita*. The Earth is rapidly moving into a less biologically diverse, less forested, much warmer, and probably wetter and stormier state (Steffen et al, 2007, 614).

The choice to focus on the human-made damages, though, isn't as all-pervasive and universal as it may seem. Yes, the impact of plantations, colonisation, and industrialisation has certainly created more change in our world than anything that came before it (Haraway, 2016). But another point of view on the current era is possible. In Haraway's writing, Chtulucene is a much more apt term to define our times. From the Greek words *Chthon*, of the earth/sea, and *kainos*, new, recent (Olivetti Media Communications, 2015), this is a time of composting. Humans aren't searching for a form of grander meaning, believing their intellect separates them from every other non-human; they are humus. They are of and from the earth and inhabit it along with every other living thing. Humans are just critters, and together can affect change, they can care (Haraway, 2016, 30-57). In using the word 'critter' to describe creatures of the Earth, Haraway amplifies the message of unity among all beings, removing the intellectual superiority of humans, resolving all living things to small creatures, digging, writhing, coexisting in a collective humus. There are no humans and animals, only critter-filled humus.

In Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble* the entire third chapter is dedicated to examples of sympoiesis, instances in which art, politics, social activism, and critters are all interwoven in a complex tapestry of meaning and relationality. The examples given by Haraway concern coral reefs, mining operations on Native-American soil, videogames about Inuit storytelling, and conservation efforts in Madagascar (Haraway, 2016, 76-98). Despite all these examples being very different, though the first and the second are connected by the use of fibre arts, they all entail people and critters overcoming great divides to improve their situations, becoming involved in each other's lives, and together working toward regeneration of their habitats. Talking about the world, Terra, with sympoiesis in mind, the conversation is no longer centred around humans and humanities, but rather around humus and 'humusities'.

So, is sympoiesis a better word to use in the discussion of puppetry? Considering that sympoietic is anything that is interwoven, that makes-with, thinks-with, and acts-with other 'terrans', humus or critters, it is possible to see a connection. In the creation of dolls and puppets, of fetishes<sup>1</sup> meant to represent other critters, both human and non-human, one can see the convergence of different forms of creation. It is a making-with which is usually confined to a stage and a narrative dimension, but it is a co-creation between puppet and performer, nonetheless. It is also an action of co-creation which involves an audience, so the relationship is three-fold: the puppet/puppeteer, the performer/audience, and the puppet/audience. The performers can be both human and non-human.

Puppetry has in the past been "seen as something primarily for children" or "taken for a lower order of theatre" (Gross, 2012, 6). Despite this common and perhaps misguided conception of puppetry, it finds its roots in ancient history, throughout many epochs and places (Allegri & Bambozzi, 2012).

Throughout space and time, humans and non-humans have come in contact and intertwined in

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<sup>1</sup> The word 'fetish' here is used to signify an object onto which a religious or spiritual significance is projected (Comba & Resnik, n.d.). An inanimate object is infused with a symbolic meaning, and, in some way, it is animated.

interesting and unexpected ways and for many different reasons in the form of puppetry. Through this connection, this collective story-making action, “the hand becomes for the puppet an ensouling thing, a source of new life” (Gross, 2012, 51-52). In this way, puppetry is a great form of sympoietic SF<sup>2</sup> making.

This is the framework in which the analysis of Cuscunà’s work is going to be discussed, in connection with the opening vignette, which underlies the making-with of the art of puppetry. A making-with which includes the audience, as well as the human/non-human performers.

The conclusion of this chapter returns once again to Haraway’s words, specifically to those philosophical ramifications first raised in discussing the term hybrid. Despite the words hybrid and symbiosis not being useful in discussing Cuscunà’s theatre practice, it is important to consider them deeply interlinked to sympoietic creation. To create together, one must be able to exist together, in ways mutually beneficial. And in creating with ‘others’, one will transform, creating hybrids and maybe becoming one themselves. So philosophical questions around the Children of Compost, and their sympoietic, symbiotic, hybrid existences arise.

Haraway’s human/animal hybrids -which she calls ‘syms’- face hardships in having to relate to non-hybridised humans -or ‘non-syms’ (Haraway, 2016, 153). In welcoming genes other than humans, have they forsaken their own humanity? Are they something entirely different and new, rather than a mix of their two separate origins? Was it right of their parents to make them into the ‘ambassadors’ for endangered animal species before they could ever consent? Is it wrong to give new generations a purpose and an active role in shaping their world and their futures before they are even born?

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<sup>2</sup> With SF Haraway means “science fiction, speculative feminism, science fantasy, speculative fabulation, science fact, and also, string figures” (Haraway, 2016, 10).

These are all questions left unanswered in Haraway's exploration of a possible sympoietic, humus-filled, chthonic future, but their presence in the reader's mind is exactly what sparks creativity and innovation. It is these questions and the understanding that the problems and solutions posed by Haraway aren't in any way absolute, that pushes forth Haraway's own request to her readers to "change parts of the story and take them elsewhere, enlarge, object, flesh out, and reimagine the lifeways of the [Syms]" (Haraway, 2016, 144).

It is invitations like this one, to re-invent, re-shape, and freely adapt pre-existing material that sparks inspiration and propels artists into making-with. Stories build upon stories.

It matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with [...]. It matters what stories make worlds, and what worlds make stories (Haraway, 2016, 12).

## CHAPTER TWO - MARTA CUSCUNÀ

Marta Cuscunà is an Italian artist, born in Monfalcone, a small working-class town in the Italian region of Friuli-Venezia-Giulia, renowned for the number of deaths due to asbestos poisoning.

### **It's Beautiful To Live Free!**

It is impossible to talk about her art without talking about feminism. From her very first production - *It's Beautiful to Live Free!* - she found herself handling the theme of Feminist Resistance. Resistance here refers specifically to the phenomenon of Partisan Resistance to Nazi-fascism during the Second World War. The role of women during this time has often been overlooked or downplayed to just 'carrying messages'. The truth of the matter is that these women did much more than that. They actively put their lives at risk, they fought, and they suffered from their Resistance just as their male counterparts did (Tobagi, 2022).

In her first show *It's Beautiful to Live Free! A Project of Civil Theatre for an Actress, 5 Puppets and a Doll* (2009), Cuscunà tackles exactly this issue, by following the story of Ondina Peteani, a girl who joined the Resistance and fought with the Partisans in the mountains of Carso. In this first show, Cuscunà experiments with the co-presence of actress and hand puppets, alternating between impersonating the role of Ondina herself, or creating scenes depicting multiple characters by using both hand puppets –which refer to Italy's traditional hand puppet shows- and by creating a doll meant to represent Ondina's malnourished body during her time in Auschwitz (Cuscunà, n.d.).

The performer acts both as Ondina, miming actions such as getting on and off a bicycle, as well as narrating events from an external perspective, much like the narrator in a book. She also occasionally changes vocal range and technique to quickly switch between characters, a technique she also uses when manoeuvring puppets (Cuscunà, n.d.a).

When using the hand-puppets, Cuscunà hides behind a piece of scenography, and moves the puppets above it, as is usually done in traditional Italian hand-puppet shows (Allegri and Bambozzi, 2012).

Following that tradition, the puppets also speak dialect, in direct opposition to other moments of the show, which are performed in Italian. The moments of hand-puppetry, which follow Ondina's search for the traitor Blechi alongside her squadron, also make use of audience interaction. There are instances in which the Ondina hand-puppet speaks directly to the audience, involving them in the action - for example by telling them to be quiet as she hides from Blechi (Cuscunà, n.d.a).

The doll is used to recount Ondina's imprisonment in Auschwitz. Here the puppet has a fully articulated body and is moved by two latex-gloved hands. The puppet is also affixed to the back wall of a model prison cell, making it self-standing, so that Cuscunà's hands can accomplish multiple tasks. By covering her hands with latex gloves, which extend for the length of her entire arms and are also affixed to the same back wall as the puppet, she can make them an active part of the scene. This way the depiction of the brutal process of assimilation into the camp is conveyed by the hands of the puppeteer, which become almost a character in and of themselves. The way they interact with the doll body, brutally ripping off her dress, as well as the puppet's limp arms and legs, convey the horrible reality of the process of internment the prisoners of Auschwitz had to go through (Cuscunà, n.d.a).

She states that after creating this show, she thought she was "done with feminism" and was ready to move on to a different topic (FDZ Fabbrica dello Zucchero, 2020). Despite this, she later found herself devising a second show, once again focusing on feminism and female Resistance to the patriarchy.

### **Deceived Simplicity**

The second show takes place in the XVI Century, in Udine. Once again Cuscunà takes inspiration from real events and re-imagines them for the stage. The title *Deceived Simplicity: Satire for an Actress and Female Puppets about the Luxury of Being Women* already says a lot about the main themes of the show.

The plot follows the nuns at the convent *Santa Chiara* in Udine, and their own special kind of Resistance (Cuscunà, n.d.b). The *Clarisse* nuns managed to

... [transform] the convent in[to] a place of anti-establishment activity, freedom of thoughts, desecration of religious dogmas and male culture. They fought with a cultural fervour unconceivable for the female universe at that time. (Cuscunà, n.d.b).

As with the previous show, the dramatic action is moved forth with a combination of the actress embodying different characters, as well as puppets taking centre stage. The nuns themselves are represented through puppetry as a sort of chorus, which, perched on a stand, so they once again are self-standing, seem almost akin to a group of birds.

Despite the title of the show there is one more puppet being used. It represents a member of the Inquisition, the Vicar Francesco Barbaro, who interrogates the *Clarisse* during the trial, in the attempt to make them stop their desecration and disruption of the patriarchal norm.

Cuscunà herself explains that the aim of the show, based on writing by Italian author Arcangela Tarabotti, was to share these examples of women who made incredible steps to gain independence, as well as highlight the living situations and the struggles they had to face. The crux of the *Clarisse*'s plight is that they were all forced into monastery life. Women at the time had in fact no choice on whether or not they were to marry, or whom they were allowed to marry. Worst of all, if their families, most likely their fathers, were not able to marry them off to someone, they were made to be nuns. This was also Arcangela Tarabotti's fate. Despite this, she managed to write and, perhaps most incredibly, be published from within her convent (Teatro Miela, 2014).

What Marta Cuscunà wants to achieve with this show is to draw a parallel between the situation of these young women, forced to become nuns, and to live under the rule of the Inquisition and the Catholic Church, as well as the patriarchy; and the modern-day challenges faced by women (Teatro Miela, 2014).

While the two may seem quite different, the similarities become all too clear even in reading the introduction to Arcangela Tarabotti's book *Semplicità Ingannata (Deceived Simplicity)*. Even in a book published in 1654 one can witness a feminist, or proto-feminist, thinker having to explain that not all men are evil, that she doesn't hate all men (Tarabotti, 1654), and many other staples one can read on any Twitter argument nowadays.

### **Sorry, Boys**

The third show in Cuscunà's portfolio is called *Sorry, Boys*, and it is inspired by real events which took place in Gloucester, Massachusetts in 2008. In the "small fishing village outside Boston" (Gloucester18, 2011) a rumour started spreading at the local high school. The rumour talked about a pregnancy pact involving some of the 18 students that found themselves pregnant that year. That number was 4 times higher than the average, and it seems as if not all the pregnancies were accidental (Cuscunà, n.d.c). Apparently, the words 'pregnancy pact' were printed in a Times Magazine article, and from there the news story erupted (Gloucester18, 2011), with journalists coming from all over the world to get in touch with the girls and their families (Cuscunà, n.d.c).

Cuscunà was fascinated by the idea of this pregnancy pact, especially considering the staggeringly high levels of male violence on the women of Gloucester, and the male-led marches to stand up to the violence, which happened around the same time (Cuscunà, n.d.c). She, then, posits that "the conjunction of the agreement between the 18 girls and the march of the men is not a coincidence [...] and is related to the model of manhood that the society imposes to men" (Cuscunà, n.d.c).

The pregnancy pact mentioned before included not just the pregnancies themselves, but the girls who agreed to take part in it were also aiming to create a safe community in which to raise their children together, "a female commune which excluded adults and the young fathers" (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020).



The thing that drew Cuscunà's curiosity specifically was the account of the only girl who publicly admitted that she tried to have a child on purpose after witnessing the murder of a woman close to her at the hands of a man (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020). Her desire to create a safe new world to protect herself from the violence she had witnessed (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020) can also be linked to Donna Haraway's key concept of making kin (Haraway, 2016). Where on the one hand Haraway asks her readers to "make kin, not babies" (Haraway, 2016, 139), on the other hand the Gloucester girls attempted to band together and create connections and community outside their familial ties.

In the making of the show, Cuscunà decided to work with silicone, creating eerily realistic moulds of heads, which she then mounted on wooden surfaces, much like hunting trophies. The severed heads belong to the boys, on one side, and the adults involved in the events, on the other side of the stage. "They all hang up as hunting trophies, all nailed to the wall by a story that found them unprepared" (Cuscunà, n.d.c). These severed heads are the first "animatronic creatures" (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020) created by Paola Villani and her team, who started collaborating with Cuscunà on this very project. This is also, one could infer, the first show where Cuscunà's choice to be the only human performer on stage became a real issue. The number of puppets which need to be animated is in fact higher than in her previous shows. Therefore, the use of animatronics was employed not only to create a more realistic feel to the severed heads, but also to circumvent the fact that mouths needed to move one right after the other, regardless of their placement on stage. In order to solve the issue, Paola Villani resorted to creating rigs made from pedals or bicycle brakes (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020), so that Cuscunà could operate multiple puppets from one single location.

*Sorry, Boys* is the last show in the trilogy on female resistances (FDZ Fabbrica Dello Zuccherò, 2020) and is followed by a distinctly different show: *The Elegy of The Fall* (2018).

## The Elegy of the Fall

Unlike her previous shows, *The Elegy of the Fall* (2018) is not based on real events, but instead on the myths of Fanes, which are part of the Ladin tradition. The Ladins are “a small ethnic minority [...] who live in the central valleys of the Dolomites [in the Italian Alps]” (Cuscunà, n.d.d).

The themes tackled by the myths, and consequently by the show, are closer to what one could call environmentalism. The setting of the story is a seemingly endless war, waged by a foreign king against the people of Fanes, who dwell underground (Cuscunà, n.d.d). As the survivors –who are all children- wait for the war to end, the audience is told of the horrors of the battlefield by a group of crows. These are once again animatronics created by Villani and meant to be operated by Cuscunà alone (Cuscunà, n.d.d).

Another important theme is the passage from a matriarchal system of power to a patriarchal monarchy. Here Queens are associated with peace and prosperity while the King brings only death and destruction. On the other hand, children are the only hope for the future: they are the only “survivors who are entrusted with the rebirth of the entire lost people” (Cuscunà, n.d.d).

The children are portrayed as white figures hiding under mouse masks, huddled together under the mountains as they wait for their time to come. Interestingly they are both attached to Cuscunà’s feet, so that in their crouching on the ground, one of the two puppets can make use of Cuscunà’s own leg and arm as if they were their own. This was a first example of a human/non-human, puppet/puppeteer hybrid in Cuscunà’s practice.

In the myth of Fanes there is a reference to the passage from a time in which humans were in touch with Nature, and were part of it, to a time in which they focused on extracting goods from the earth (Cuscunà, n.d.d).

This is a useful link to one of the latest shows by Cuscunà, and the one which most connects with the concept of sympoiesis: *Earthbound*.

## CHAPTER THREE - EARTHBOUND

*Earthbound* (2021) takes free inspiration from Donna Haraway's 2016 book *Staying with the Trouble*. The main topic of discussion in the show is no longer feminist resistances, as had been the case in the past: the focus here is broadened. Following the environmental concerns explored in the *Elegy of the Fall*, Cuscunà visits the world of inter-species feminism portrayed by Donna Haraway.

### Scenography and Plot

Practically speaking, the show follows the stories of the Camilles. The Camilles are part of the Communities of Compost mentioned in Chapter One. In mixing their genomes with those of endangered animals, they have evolved, grown beyond what we consider humanity, and, to salvage what little of the world remains, they have become one with the environment. The dichotomy between Man and Nature (Lowenhaupt Tsing, 2015) is no more.

The Camilles, in Cuscunà's interpretation of Haraway's text, are part of a commune of human-animal hybrids. They care for the environment, or what little of it is left, and they have gone beyond the concept of nuclear family. Even their reproduction is no longer dictated by the meeting of two partners. Making children is a collective decision, one made very carefully, and over long intervals of time. Overpopulation remains, it seems, an issue. Every individual born from the Camilles, who have very little interest in differentiating between sexes, is called Camille and will pose as a bridge between human and non-human.

The community relies, in the show, on an Artificial Intelligence named Gaia, after the Greek name for Earth. Gaia's role is to anticipate the Camilles' needs and facilitate their process of habitat restoration, and reproduction.

The issue of reproduction is present throughout the show, from the initial excitement over the news that the community is going to have a new baby, to the difficulties conceiving. The three Camilles present on stage – a seal hybrid, a bat hybrid, and an armadillo hybrid - have been chosen to bring

new life into the world. Unfortunately, the hybridization process has rendered conception more difficult. As Seal-Camille dreams about bringing life into the world, Gaia also starts dreaming of multiplying. After all, her aim is to make life easier for the community, and if they can't conceive, why shouldn't she help?

The situation with the three hybrids is not resolved, one doesn't find out if they eventually manage to bring new life into the world, or if their utopia is doomed to extinction. The last moments of the show depict Gaia waking up the very first Camille – Camille 1, a human-butterfly hybrid- from deep sleep, to prepare her for the fast-approaching migration. Camille 1 is too tired, though, to bear to move somewhere new, and begs Gaia to let her go. Her time has come.

The last scene of the show sees Gaia 'dancing' with the last standing tree, in an incredibly human expression of yearning to connect.

Unlike previous shows, and especially the feminist resistance trilogy, this is where the use of animatronics is really taken to the next level in both complexity and design. The collaboration with the *Oldskull FX* team in Lisbon allowed for the production to have much bigger and much more complex animatronic structures, granting a wider range of movement from the puppets at a greater distance from the puppeteer (Fabbrica Dello Zucchero FDZ, 2020). Where in the *Elegy of the Fall* one started to see the use of longer bicycle brakes in the structure of the crow puppets, here Cuscunà is able to move three separate animatronics from one single place.

Once again, Cuscunà herself plays a character, the AI Gaia, as well as animating the 'animatronic creatures' (Cuscunà, 2024). As Gaia, she glides across the stage on a mono-wheel scooter, which she uses to interact with the small tree on the right side of the stage. By gripping the trunk with one hand, Gaia spins around it while gathering data and slowly starts to relate personally to the plant's loneliness.

On the other side of the stage is what one could describe as a pod. A structure one could imagine being used to simulate human habitats on the Moon or Mars. The pod is mounted onto a spinning structure, which allows its different sides to face the audience at different times. Two of these have openings, allowing the public to peer inside. In one of these reside the three young Camilles. Seal-Camille on a slab on the far left, Armadillo-Camille hunched down on the floor in between the other two, and Bat-Camille hanging upside down from a beam at the top right. Cuscunà's place in this installation is behind Seal-Camille, where she can move the creature's torso, as well as animate the other animatronics through a control panel. Her presence isn't obscured, though, as it was in the *Elegy of the Fall*, where she operated the crows, and the mouse-children in the dark. Here, because Gaia interacts with the Camilles, a blue light shines on her face each time one of the hybrids calls out her name. Their relationship is eerily reminiscent of current humans' relationship with an artificial assistant such as Siri or Alexa.

So, while one can clearly see the puppeteer in one corner, one sees Bat-Camille flap her wings on the complete opposite side of the pod.

These 'group' scenes are interspersed with scenes between Gaia and the tree, which never audibly speaks, and scenes in which Gaia communicates with the broader AI network. She is only one iteration of a much broader system, just as the three Camilles are only a fraction of the broader community. In these shorter interludes, Cuscunà exits the pod, the only one who ever does so, and boards her futuristic unicycle. The impression is that the world outside the pod is hard, if not impossible, to directly interact with. One can't just walk outside, one must glide. The only interactable element is the surviving plant, though Gaia's reports suggest this won't be the case for long.

On the other side of the pod, once it has spun around and the three young Camilles have gone out of sight, is where Camille 1 lies. This is not an animatronic creature, like the others, but a silicone

puppet lying on its side on a slab like the one Seal-Camille is on. Cuscunà animates the puppet by standing behind it and manoeuvring its head. This movement makes the puppet move one of its arms as well, since Camille 1 is resting with her head on her hands. The scene's atmosphere isn't broken by the puppet and puppeteer interacting with each other. On the contrary it is made all the stronger when Gaia gently touches Camille 1 on the shoulder, comfortingly. One is almost led to believe the silicone skin is reacting to the touch.

### **Puppet/Actor Relationship**

This is the culmination of the relationship between puppet and puppeteer that Cuscunà started establishing in her very first show. Where in the past there was always a separation between the two, in *Earthbound* the lines are starting to get more and more blurred when it comes to characterisation, technical complexity, and dramaturgical choices in sharing the performance space with the puppets. The previous feminist trilogy was in fact characterised by the presence of Cuscunà herself as narrator and main character of the show, with some interludes of puppetry. This was the case especially for *It's Beautiful to Live Free!* and *Deceived Simplicity*. In *Sorry, Boys*, one first starts to see Cuscunà taking a step back, literally and figuratively, and letting the severed heads do most of the talking. She does step out in the end, to address the audience directly: something the heads never do in the show (Cuscunà, 2019b). In *Elegy of the Fall*, she is no longer visible at all. Which brings the question: why is she back as Gaia in *Earthbound*?

Here she is no longer a narrator, a presence halfway between the narrative and the 'real' world, a translator of "gashes on realised utopias, even for just a moment" (Cuscunà, 2024a). In the story of the Camilles she takes the role of active participant, subservient to the characters, but in an innovative way. The subservience is in the characterisation of Gaia, not in the dramaturgy of the piece itself. Far are the days of hiding the puppeteer behind a screen, keeping them barely visible (Allegri and Bambozzi, 2012), so the illusion of puppetry isn't broken.

It is also worth noting that in depicting the relationship between Camille 1 and Gaia, Cuscunà has effectively created a believable illusion, which allows one to become fully convinced of Camille 1's 'reality' and Gaia's 'fakeness'. Where in 'real life' Cuscunà is the human and Camille 1 is a puppet, the illusion of visual theatre convinces one of the opposite. Of course, Camille 1 is a real living, breathing creature. After all, one can perceive every wrinkle, every weak shudder, every deep sigh. And of course, Gaia isn't real. She is machinery, a network of artificial intelligence, who has simply started to do her job of caring-for and caring-about a little too well.

Despite the perceived realness of the animatronic creatures, the characters they represent still seem entirely separate from the audience, both in terms of attitude to the surrounding world, and to their Community. The human hybrids, or Syms, as Haraway calls them, have a distinctly alien feeling and look to them. They themselves look out into the audience, see they are being watched, and judge the humans sitting in front of them, believing to be unheard: "There is a membrane between them and us. They can't hear us!" (Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, 2021). They do so just as much as the audience judges them. And both parties find the other strange, unsettling. The only human on stage depicts the only artificial being in the show: Gaia. Animatronic creatures, built out of wires and silicone, worry about their language being offensive to animals:

BAT-CAMILLE: You're putting the cart before the horse.

SEAL-CAMILLE: [Gasp] Camille! [...] I understand you're unsettled -we all are- but do NOT use such discriminatory language!

BAT-CAMILLE: What do you mean?

ARMADILLO-CAMILLE: "Putting the cart before the horse" is discriminatory toward their species.

BAT-CAMILLE: Oh, for Goodness' sake it's a turn of phrase!

SEAL-CAMILLE: Yes, but it's ANTHROPOCENTRIC! (Emilia Romagna Teatro  
Fondazione, 2021)

## Language

In Haraway's telling of the Camilles' stories, she decides to use the pronoun 'per' to indicate the fact that the Camilles exist outside of the gender binary (Haraway, 2016). The choice is interesting, considering that at the time of writing, the use of 'they/them' as a third person neutral pronoun was already a common practice.

In the Italian language, however, there is no grammatical structure allowing there to be a neutral gender. Everything -objects included- is either masculine or feminine. This, of course, generates many issues any time one tries to escape this strict binary. There are simply no words with which to express a neutral gender. The conventional rules of grammar also suggest the use of masculine as the collective 'neutral' gender<sup>3</sup>. No doubt this is the result of a culture in which women and people outside the male gender spectrum were left on the outskirts of many areas of society. A read on the subject of how to appropriately talk about and to people who identify as non-binary in Italian is Paolo D'Achille's *Un Asterisco Sul Genere (An Asterisk on Gender)* (2021). The article was published on the Accademia della Crusca<sup>4</sup> website in 2021 as an answer to the many questions the academy received regarding the issue of gender neutrality in Italian. The response is illuminating, but what emerges is that the correct way of addressing multitudes is by using the masculine plural (D'Achille, 2021). Whether this is a remnant of a sexist practice or not, is not discussed in the article,

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<sup>3</sup> This phenomenon is called 'generic masculine' (Bazzanella, 2010)'.

<sup>4</sup> Accademia della Crusca is one of the most important points of reference with regards to the study of the Italian language. It was founded between 1582-3 by Giovan Battista Deti, Anton Francesco Grazzini, Bernardo Canigiani, Bernardo Zanchini, Bastiano de' Rossi, and Lionardo Salviati with the goal of codifying and 'polishing' the Italian language (Accademia della Crusca, 2011). To this day Accademia della Crusca is regarded as an authority in evaluating the correctness of phrases of common use, as well as determining new evolutions of the language.



and opinions vary in such regard. Regardless, it remains a subject of heated debate, as it hardly feels like an inclusive choice of language. Unfortunately, though, despite concerns and attempts at ‘fixing’ the problem, the grammatical structure of the language does not allow for an easy solution (D’Achille, 2021). In written language, some have resorted to using ‘\*’ or ‘ə’ to circumvent having to choose to make a word masculine or feminine<sup>5</sup>. The limitation of this ‘quick fix’ -on top of the fact that it does not work in every case -like in words where masculine and feminine equivalents differ in more than just the last letter- is that it can hardly work when read aloud. It is unthinkable that one could just leave a word incomplete, that’s just not how the language works.

So, this context is significant, and must be kept in mind when looking at Cuscunà’s choice in words when discussing the Camilles. Her choice to use feminine pronouns for all characters - even Armadillo-Camille, who is the sperm donor for the conception of a new Camille- is telling and purposeful. In past productions she had based her work on material written originally in Italian, or which had no real issue of translation. Despite the myths of Fanes and the stories of the Gloucester 18 not being originally in Italian, they don’t pose such immediate issues as the Camilles Stories. Instead, having to work with characters detached from her own culture and society’s understanding of gender, requires thought. Were she writing a script, she could have possibly resorted to one of the solutions proposed above, but being her show a spoken medium, a choice needed to be made. And, as expected, her choice was a decidedly feminist one. The choice of using a ‘generic feminine’ has already been used to highlight gender stereotypes and sexism<sup>6</sup>, so Cuscunà’s choice follows in the footsteps of those who encourage people to think about the language they use.

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<sup>5</sup> For example, if one were to say “we are tired” -which in English has no connotation of gender-, one could say “siamo stanchi” -where the ending in -i signifies masculine-, “siamo stanche” -where -e signifies feminine-, or “siamo stanch\*/siamo stanchə” to avoid picking one way or the other.

<sup>6</sup> The conversation on these matters continues to this day: on March 28th 2024 the University of Trento made headlines by announcing that on official regulation documents, all people will be referred to using the feminine (Castigliani, 2024).

It also falls in line with the kind of reasoning around language and culture that Haraway encourages in her writing. One should not accept things as they are simply because that's how they've always been. So even with language, even when there isn't a clear solution in sight, one should do as Haraway suggests and "stay with the trouble" (Haraway, 2016). The cultural specificity added by Cuscunà to the Camilles Stories doesn't stop at issues of language, though.

### **Cultural Specificity**

As mentioned before, at the very beginning of the Camilles Stories, Haraway encourages to change the story, to adapt it. Despite this encouragement one may very well remain surprised at how different Cuscunà's version of the tale is, when compared to the original source material. Now, it should be said that in adapting anything, one is going to find differences, and this is caused even by simply changing the medium through which the story is being told. A book cannot tell stories in the same way a movie does, and this goes for all forms of storytelling. So of course, Cuscunà's story has shortened the time of action in which the events take place. It would be difficult to depict five different generations (Haraway, 2016, 144-168) in one hour of show, though not impossible. The other main difference, that also speaks of cultural specificity, is the shift in focus of the whole piece. Where Haraway's stories are tales of adapting, of an attempt to change the relationship between humans, non-humans, and their planet (Haraway, 2016, 144-168), Cuscunà's is mostly a story about parenthood. About the very human -but also very animal- desire to reproduce. Cuscunà herself stated in a 2024 interview that her objective in creating *Earthbound* was to take Haraway's slogan "Make Kin, Not Babies" (Haraway, 2016, 139) and imagine what the troubles and obstacles these future human-hybrids would find in trying to limit human overpopulation. She also stated that the idea of staying with that particular trouble by depicting Seal-Camille's yearning for pregnancy may be connected to Cuscunà's own life experience, never having had children herself (Cuscunà, 2024a). This is where one may find once again that cultural specificity within Cuscunà's work. It may very well be that if it were someone from a completely different cultural context adapting Haraway's

work, there would be less focus on the hardship of having or not having children. In many places in Italy, though, it is still commonly expected for a woman to have children, and if one doesn't have any beyond a certain age, it may still raise eyebrows.

Cuscunà's focus on reproduction may also be influenced by age. In fact, it is likely that someone much younger, who has yet to think of whether or not they want to settle down and have a family, could interpret the text much differently. One could very well see Haraway's stories as coming-of-age tales, or focus on Camille 1's difficulties fitting in with other non-sym children (Haraway, 2016, 144-152). Returning once again to the unanswered questions of Chapter One, one may take into consideration the matter of consent as a frame for an adaptation. Because the only way Haraway suggests that hybridisation could work is by working on the child's genes in utero (Haraway, 2016, 146), there is no way for the child itself to consent to being born different. To have a purpose thrust upon it.

A non-white, non-European artist may focus on Haraway's message of decolonisation, and proceed by working with the relationship between the Camilles and the Mazahua populations of Mexico.

Among the many different interpretations, Cuscunà decided to go with one which questions what is almost an assumption on Haraway's part: that "mak[ing] kin and not babies" would be an easy feat for the Children of Compost. In truth she doesn't explicitly state that it would be *easy*. She simply glides over the hardship and brings focus to the successes (Haraway, 2016, 138). In Cuscunà's re-telling the emphasis is on how hard 'making kin' is. Part of this difficulty is showcased by the fact that only four members of the Community are ever shown on stage. One of them -Camille 1- is entirely alone, with the exception of Gaia. One never hears from the rest of the Community of Compost, if not through messages read by Gaia. And she seems abandoned as well, only ever speaking with the rest of her network in moments of solitude. Even in those moments of connection with the broader community -what should be their 'kin'- there is an overwhelming sense of

disconnect. They are together, and alone at the same time. No one quite understands Seal-Camille's excitement at the idea of carrying a child, and her frustration and anxiety over her inability to remain pregnant. The only one who could understand is Gaia, but because of her role within the Community, because she is not a member, she is not organic, her understanding and her own yearning for reproduction are deemed an anomaly. Or something to be dismissed entirely. The humans they can see outside their pod are alien, different. Maybe even primitive. "They still think of themselves as individuals!" (Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, 2021). And yet on stage are members of a Community, isolated. Lonely. Desperate for reproduction, meaning, connection.

The only connection which depicts closeness, the only true 'kinship' is that of Camille 1 and Gaia. Closeness, which is conveyed through soft touches, expressions of affection. Camille 1 is the only one who lets Gaia speak, who has actual conversations with her, instead of limiting their interactions to demands and dull responses (Emilia Romagna Teatro Fondazione, 2021). And that is the one connection Gaia will have to let go of. What remains in the end is to dance with the last tree, to move on, and to hope to connect again, and again.

## CONCLUSIONS

Overall, *Earthbound* is Cuscunà's attempt at raising difficult questions, without the pretence of knowing what the answers are, and whether or not they can be reached (Cuscunà, 2024a).

In her first three shows, she wanted to show three instances of failed feminist utopias from the past. In order to do this, she used techniques and tools of visual theatre, and started to play with the relationship between human and puppet actors. In the first trilogy, though, the two remain quite separate, though the process and her personal relationship with the puppets is indicative of a collective creative effort'. Despite what one may assume from seeing Cuscunà's work on stage without engaging with the creative process, the shows require the assembly and collaboration of a well-coordinated team. It is not one single performer, accompanied by dolls and puppets, but rather the collective effort of a community of creatives. On stage their roles of puppet and puppeteer may be distinct from one another, with the shows moving from moments of monologue by Cuscunà, and moments where the puppets are pushing the plot forward. The work behind the shows, though, is still very much the work of a team of human and non-human critters.

In *Elegy Of The Fall*, the role of narrator begins to disappear, with Cuscunà relying on the puppets to tell their own stories. Crows are narrators now; the story is created sympoietically and symbiotically by puppets and puppeteer. One could not exist without the others and vice versa.

*Earthbound* is the fullest escalation of this trajectory. The point is reached where puppeteer and animatronic creature share the stage as characters, they are all fully part of the narrative universe. And unlike ventriloquist shows, in which the 'dummy' has to sit on the ventriloquist's lap, and in which the division between human and non-human characters is still very much alive, in *Earthbound* there are no human or non-human characters. Everyone is a hybrid, a symbiont, a humus. This show brings to the stage animatronic creatures of incredible complexity, which help maintain the 'magic'

of puppetry alive, even when the puppeteer is fully visible on stage, and is playing a character herself.

Using Donna Haraway's theories as a conceptual framework, one can start to see connections between human and non-human. It is no surprise that a visual theatre artist such as Cuscunà would be inspired by her writing. In a sense, one could posit that Cuscunà's work was already heading in a common direction to Haraway: towards a broader spectrum of feminism. A feminism which is intersectional in its inclusion of human and non-human life-forms. Thanks to the conjunction of these two frameworks, one can find a synthesis between Cuscunà's puppetry and Haraway's book, which resolves itself in a new understanding of puppetry. Puppetry as a collaboration between human and non-human performers, as well as an occasion for connection with an audience. Puppetry as a sympoietic, communal, action. From afar it is hard to tell the difference between flesh and silicone, wires and veins, humans and non-humans. From afar, the hybridisation, the symbiosis, the common creation that is sympoiesis is complete. From afar everything on and off stage is humus.

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