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Sarah France

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## **“THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER”: DISRUPTING PHALLOCENTRISM IN THE POST-APOCALYPTIC SPACE OF RUSSELL HOBAN’S *RIDDLEY WALKER* (1980)**

Sarah France

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Metaphorical references to the nuclear have, since the inception of nuclear power, been overtly sexualised and gendered. In her study of nuclear technology’s “emphatically male discourse,” Carol Cohn lists just some of the euphemisms used in relation to nuclear technology, including “erector launchers, thrust-to-weight ratios, soft lay downs [and] deep penetration” (18). Allusions to victory in nuclear warfare are frequently constructed as a form of sexual dominance: nuclear accomplishment correlates with sexual prowess, and failure is tied to impotence. In 1998, for example, Bal Thackeray, chief of the Hindu government in Mumbai, responded to India’s declaration of nuclear weapon proficiency by stating: “we have to prove we are not eunuchs” (*Indian Today*, n.p.). Literary and media representations of the bomb also depict its phallic nature, perhaps most famously and explicitly portrayed in the satirical *Dr Strangelove* (1964): the climactic final scene sees Major T. J. Kong straddle the momentarily impotent bomb in order to ensure it releases and hits its mark, riding it down to its target.

This sexualised symbolic nuclear discourse continues today, as political and nuclear tensions reflect the dangers of the potentially-literal toxic masculinity evidenced in contemporary politics: Helen Caldicott’s concept of “missile envy” (287) can be identified in the tweet United States President Donald Trump directed to North Korean leader Kim Jong-Un in 2018, boasting about his button being “much bigger and more powerful than his.”<sup>1</sup> This domineering branch of masculinity can be understood as hegemonic masculinity, a phrase used to define the construction of masculinity which permeates Western culture, prioritising strength, violence, and dominance as desirable masculine traits. In “An Iron Man: The Body and Some Contradictions of Hegemonic Masculinity” (1990), Russell Connell argues that this form of masculinity has become “culturally exalted,” therefore “[stabilizing] a structure of dominance and oppression in the gender order as a whole” (94). Nuclear warfare is seemingly linked with patriarchal and exploitative constructions of gender and sexuality: the passive Mother Earth is penetrated by the overtly phallic and masculine atomic bomb.

It is no surprise that certain post-nuclear apocalyptic fictions explore concepts of gender and sexuality, as post-apocalyptic landscapes provide a space in which to explore alternate discourses outside the realm of patriarchally-encoded language. Often used as a way to interrogate and critique current concerns, fictional representations of the post-apocalypse frequently correlate

with moments of cultural trauma and precarity, manifesting anxieties relating to global disaster and subsequent societal breakdown. Nuclear fears of the Cold War in particular led to a dramatic increase in apocalyptic anxiety, as the reality of an apocalyptic end became increasingly more palpable on a global scale. This amplified anxiety resulted in an extensive outpouring of Post-Apocalyptic fictions which expressed the profound threat of nuclear holocaust through various imaginings of decrepit worlds following devastation, such as those seen in Walter M. Miller Jr's *A Canticle for Leibowitz* (1959) and David Brin's *The Postman* (1985). The paranoia established in this period differed to anxieties experienced during non-nuclear wars: advances in nuclear weaponry meant that potential casualties spanned the entire globe, and included culture, ideologies, and metaphysical concepts perceived to be immune to destruction. The unique threat of nuclear extinction is its capacity to destroy not only individual human lives, but the concept of humanity and society itself, and so it undermines society's status as stable and unchangeable. Fears of nuclear holocaust are shaped alongside the fear which emerges with the realisation that our seemingly stable society and its corresponding ideological beliefs are, in fact, unstable. This is often articulated through a breakdown in language, as it is predominantly through language that we communicate meaning and knowledge itself.

Given all of this, it is notable that poststructuralism, as a theoretical movement, gained traction during this era of nuclear paranoia. Poststructuralism questions the accepted belief that meaning in the language of Western culture is determinably fixed, moving away from structuralist claims that language is a consistently defined structure based on a foundational centre. In "No Apocalypse, Not Now (Full Speed Ahead, Seven Missiles, Seven Missives)" (1984), Jacques Derrida argues that "deconstructionism [...] belongs to the nuclear age" (23): this relates in part to nuclear holocaust's ability to highlight the instability of language; its "fantastically textual" nature lies in its existence in the imaginary, as once it happens, it is likely to destroy all who could comprehend it (23). The concept of society, and consequently language, being unable to survive nuclear holocaust therefore recalls poststructuralist theories of language being impermanent and unstable.

But much of the work of feminist poststructuralists explored a desire for this levelling of culture, due to the exploitative hierarchal structures of Western society. Theorists such as Hélène Cixous continued Derrida's criticism of language, particularly the privileging of dichotomous linguistic and cultural structures that create hierarchies and negate women within patriarchal society. Cixous wrote extensively on phallogocentric language, encouraging a challenging of restrictive binaries: in "Sorties: Out and Out: Attacks/Ways Out/Forays" (1975), Cixous proposed a questioning of phallogocentric language so as to "threaten the stability of the masculine structure that passed itself off as eternal-natural," proposing a reimagining of the systems of language that take themselves to be implicit and irreplaceable (65). By implying that there are alternatives, the instability of this structure is revealed. Theorising what would occur if this structure falls away results in what Vivian Patraka describes as "binary terror" (166). This is the fear that pertains to the unravelling of our phallogocentric language: a fear that what we perceive as a structurally sound system is in fact arbitrary, unstable, and open to destruction – one that is incited by nuclear holocaust.

Anxieties regarding fears of deconstruction pervade much of the Post-Apocalyptic fiction of this era: in particular, Russell Hoban's novel *Riddley Walker* (1980) is emblematic of this collective fear of societal and structural breakdown. The novel follows protagonist Riddley Walker through the derelict wasteland of his world, set years after Eusa (a mythical figure symbolising pre-holocaust society, and which combines *Europe* and *USA*) created nuclear technology, subsequently inciting nuclear holocaust (Hoban 20). The apocalyptic event devastated the world, changing society irrevocably. Pre-apocalyptic language morphed into a new dialect that Hoban names 'Riddleyspeak,' a phonetic patois consisting of split words, double meanings and a surplus of wordplay. The novel is written entirely in this language, and a number of critics have noted the poststructuralist nature of 'Riddleyspeak' and its related anxieties.<sup>2</sup> Created in the epoch of both nuclear paranoia and extensive poststructuralist development, Hoban's fictional representation of the decay of language reflects the collective concerns of the period: that language and society are susceptible to breakdown. This novel evinces the threats of nuclear warfare through its post-apocalyptic landscape and deconstructed linguistic structure. It explores the dangers of reverting to this destructive society, and Riddley's journey through the text represents a literal and metaphorical escape from the phallogocentric culture that is threatening to return to the same destructive cycle. This post-apocalyptic landscape reflects not only the anxieties relating to the Cold War, but the frustration directed towards the destructive structures of Western culture, which encourages the domination of anything configured as 'other.'

The text is clearly a product of its era, yet as these marginalising structures persist, so too does the relevance of Riddley's journey. Additional anxieties have joined the nuclear at the forefront of the cultural consciousness: most notably, the threat of environmental catastrophe. In "Climate Criticism and Nuclear Criticism" (2019), Daniel Cordle argues that "nuclear texts are not a historical curiosity of the Cold War," but in fact share the same representation of planetary vulnerability that is seen in much climate-change fiction. As such, they argue that "literature from that period continues to speak to us [...] offering foci and approaches that can also help to illuminate climate fiction" (Cordle 289). The climate crisis incites an existential terror similar to that posed by nuclear annihilation; the two are closely related in the enormity of their global threat. A growing body of critical work encourages a consideration of the environmental imaginary alongside the nuclear imaginary, examining, as Srinivas Aravamudan posits in "The Catachronism of Climate Change" (2013), how "climate change [continues] the same nuclear logic of planetary obliteration, except slightly more slowly" (8). Both nuclear devastation and absolute environmental catastrophe are incomprehensible and equally "textual," resulting in the same "remainderless destruction" of humanity and those who might remember it (Derrida 23-24). Furthermore, the masculinist hostility and desire to dominate perceived in nuclear vocabulary can also be observed in attitudes towards the environment. Ecofeminists such as Ynestra King have identified that the domination of nature mirrors the patriarchal domination of the feminine: as King writes in "The Ecology of Feminism and the Feminism of Ecology" (1989), "the hatred of women and the hatred of nature are intimately connected and mutually reinforcing" (18). This hierarchical understanding has formed the basis for oppressive cultural and linguistic structures that organise the Western world. It undergirds a system of duality that is constructed on the premise of controlling women, nature, and all considered 'other,' and has the propensity for mass destruction. In "The Metaphors of Radiation: Or, why a beautiful

woman is like a nuclear power plant," Jane Caputi argues that this patriarchal tradition is capable of "causing ecological crises and producing the conditions for nuclear annihilation," as is hypothesised in Hoban's novel (434).

In order to avoid a similar apocalyptic event, it appears essential to criticise these strict models of duality and encourage their replacement. As Caputi suggests:

[i]n order to halt the wasting of the Earth, we now desperately need new and transformative words, symbols and metaphors for female potency, cosmic power, the mysteries of life and death, the being of nature, the sacredness of the Earth, and indeed of nuclear power itself. (434-5)

*Riddley Walker* expresses a frustration with patriarchally destructive structures, yet also uses its post-apocalyptic space to open up room for an alternative. If Post-Apocalyptic fictions offer a space in which to critique societal failings, here those failings are the destructive phallogocentric structures of society which threaten human extinction. Through an exploration of the novel's interactions with gender, sexuality, and maternity, we can more directly examine its critiques of the patriarchal culture that led to the repudiation of women and nature, the development of nuclear technology, and the destruction of Riddley's pre-apocalyptic world. Both the destructive sexuality present in metaphorical nuclear discourse and the masculinist desire to dominate nature emerge in Hoban's post-nuclear landscape. The similarities between Riddley's world and our own reflect the anxieties incited by the patriarchal order, and the notion of humanity's destructive circularity reflects the phallic structures of power that allow nuclear devastation. Certain articulations of gender and sexuality within the text act to undermine the hierarchical constructs of society; abject figures such as the phallic woman and the castrated man expose the fragility of identity categories and hierarchies of Western culture. Despite the text's recurring motifs of maternity and reproduction, the concept of biological procreation is not positioned as a source of redemption, as it often is in apocalyptic imaginings. In fact, most attempts at reproduction result in death.<sup>3</sup> *Riddley Walker* thus denies the reproductive futurism that is often privileged in speculative fiction and which has been critiqued most famously in Lee Edelman's *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004): the figure of the child acts as a signifier for posterity, but only for heteronormative and patriarchal constructions of the future (26-28). This form of reproductive futurism provides no possible alternatives, and as Rebekah Sheldon argues in *The Child to Come: Life after the Human Catastrophe* (2016), it "strips the future of everything but repetition," risking a return to dangerous hierarchical structures (33). Hoban's text instead destabilises the idea of a nuclear family through abject figures and examines the potential of a *framework* of the maternal figure that threatens destabilisation and suggests an alternative, rather than heteronormative and potentially essentialist futurist assumptions relating to reproduction. The novel's use of the symbolic female body and the configuration of the maternal as the site of an alternate creativity can be usefully read through Julia Kristeva's theory of the pre-linguistic Semiotic stage and the maternal body's association with the period prior to Symbolic thinking. Ultimately, it can be situated as a positive space through which language and societal structures can be reimagined in the aftermath of a nuclear holocaust.

### Post-Apocalyptic Abjection and Gender Disturbance

Despite the apocalyptic devastation experienced, many of the structures of the novel's pre-apocalyptic society remain. By critiquing the destructive nature of the society that assisted in the path to apocalypse, Hoban's post-nuclear world interrogates a hegemonic masculinity that is prevalent in both the novel's pre-apocalyptic society and our own. Riddley's society is ruled by a patriarchal government known as the Mincery and Riddley is expected to succeed his father and take on the role of 'connexion man.' Yet Riddley questions the Mincery's rule and the structures of his community, running away and escaping his restrictive society and the destructive concepts being enforced. In retaining the patriarchal structures of pre-apocalyptic society, Hoban's text is able to critique them and emphasise their destructive nature, as well as the danger of returning to further disaster. This destructive circularity is evidenced in Goodparley's insistence on rediscovering the '1 Littl 1': gunpowder. His success threatens the re-emergence of violence and destruction through explosives and the underlying greater threat: that the knowledge of the '1 Littl 1' will lead to the knowledge of its counterpart the '1 Big 1,' which refers to the nuclear explosion that destroyed the world.

Yet the assumed nature of these patriarchal gender systems is threatened by the presence of abject figures that destabilise the seemingly unshakable laws of patriarchy. Kristeva's theory of abjection outlined in *Powers of Horror* (1981) defines the horror felt on realising that what is perceived to be stable is in fact unstable: the breaking of an unbreakable border, a threatening of the structured laws governing society, that which Kristeva argues "disturbs identities, systems and orders" (4). The disturbance of the supposedly unbreakable order of language incites feelings of abjection, as does the threat of nuclear apocalypse and its capacity not only to disturb, but to completely disintegrate the borders and laws on which society is built. Also used in terms of the body, Kristeva gives examples of abjection in seeing bodily fluids, which expose the fragility of the boundaries of our bodies and incite a realisation of our own decay and eventual death. Considering nuclear holocaust might produce the same feeling of abjection that arises when looking at a corpse: a realisation not only of our own mortality, but of the potential mortality of our system of being. The ever-present, inescapable terror of nuclear warfare disturbs the accepted social order, refusing to respect the rules of language and society as inherent.

The presence of abject figures within Hoban's text exist to threaten hierarchical binary structures, manifesting a threat to the cultural paradigms which resulted in nuclear devastation. The abject is "the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite," either positioned on the liminal space between two opposing states or alternating between them, refusing stable definition and thus disrupting order (Kristeva 11). Figures of non-determined gender can embody this state between two binary categories, challenging normative understandings of gender and destructive hierarchical thinking. The maternal body has also been positioned as abject due to its shifting form over the course of pregnancy and the ambiguity of the border between mother and child. The act of childbirth embodies further states of ambiguity as a state between life and before-life, which effects a disintegration between the boundaries of self/other. Monstrous articulations of reproductive women disrupt phallogocentrism through their abject nature. Maternity is also a reminder of our

individual mortality: maternal generative power reminds humanity of its birth, and subsequently of its inevitable death. In this sense, apocalyptic nuclear anxiety shares the same fear incited by anxiety over the abject, generative, maternal figure: each incites a similar sense of destabilisation. Just as the bomb disrupted the seemingly stable construction of language pre-Riddley, so too do representations of the maternal and reproductive body disturb attempts to return to the destructive system of language and being. The disruption of language construction evidenced in Riddleyspeak is doubly represented in the disruption of normative sexuality and gender in the figures with Riddley's world.

The various modes of abjection in this novel act as disruptive forces; yet they are also potentially transformative. Although the abject is a point of horror, it also possesses a sense of desire and attraction. In *Monster Theory: Reading Culture* (1996), Jeffrey Jerome Cohen explains how monsters are configured as sources of difference and liminality, but the monster also attracts: "the same creatures who terrify and interdict can evoke potent escapist fantasies," demonstrating the desire felt towards the freedom that non-categorisation represents (17). This concept relates to the draw of the apocalypse itself, which Derrida understood as our innate desire to experience annihilation: "Who can swear that our unconscious is not expecting this? dreaming of it, desiring it?" (23). Clearly, society does not desire the devastation nuclear holocaust would create, but only the capacity such a catastrophe has to level the structures of phallogentrism that risk the path back to destruction.

### **Abject Auntys and Castrating Dogs**

Two of the central abject figures of the novel are the phallic woman and the castrated man. Both expose the fragility of gender norms and, in doing so, threaten the wider destructive cultural laws. The most threatening abject woman in the novel is the mythic figure of Aunty, who defies both the binary of gender and the binary of life and death. Aunty is a phallic woman who brings about death through sex, with "[s]toan boans and iron tits and teef be twean her legs plus she has a iron willy for the ladys it gets red hot. When your time comes you have to do the juicy with her like it or not" (90-91). Made of stone and iron, which are markedly infertile materials, for Aunty sex leads to death, not life. It is the antithesis of fertility: a source of life weaponised with teeth between her legs to sever the chance for biological reproduction. Sex and death are thus tied together through Aunty, mirroring the destructive phallogentric culture of sexualised nuclear discourse that led to the destruction of pre-apocalyptic society. The first mention of Aunty is Lorna's warning of the dangers of the work at Widders Dump. The workers are digging for iron and retrieve "some girt big rottin iron thing": machines that they could melt down to create further machines of destruction (8). The act of digging relates to a metaphorical excavation of the previous world. Lorna describes it as being "connectit to a shovel and a leaver poal and digging up Bad Time" so that the physical work of excavation marks a return to the destructive circularity that risks recreating the apocalypse (24). Lorna states that "Brooder Walker dug [Aunty] up and she come down on top of him," evidencing his compliance in bringing back the technology that could incite apocalypse, and which has led to Aunty's return (24). Aunty comes as a symbol of vengeance to destroy efforts to return to the society which fuelled its own destruction, opposing the forces which attempt to further corrupt Riddley's world.

Aunty's method of destruction for men incites castration fear: a fear of literal and metaphorical emasculation, which here also presents a wider symbol for the destruction of phallogocentric society. As castrator, Aunty is bringer of both literal and symbolic death. More specifically she functions as the *vagina dentata*: the vagina with teeth that Antony Alpers argues in *Maori Myths and Tribal Legends* (1964) "appears as an inverse manifestation of the generative, life-giving powers of woman," threatening both the symbol for patriarchal order, and the continuation of life itself (67). Sex with Aunty thus results in castration, an act which also appears elsewhere in the novel: Durster Potter, for example, has "his froat and his pryvits toar out," and is described as being left "dead with his cock and balls toar off and his head near toar off his neck" (67-68). This repeated theme of castration attempts to neutralise phallic authority, presenting an impotence which foreshadows the final impotence in the face of apocalypse. Sex with Aunty thus mirrors the sexualised discourse of nuclear technology, which similarly results in an 'ultimate' castration: the inability to procreate and ensure the continuation of humanity. Castration is most notably demonstrated in the splitting of Addom (atom) which resulted in nuclear apocalypse: "[t]he Right syd uv him had the nek & hed the Left syd uv him had his cok & bauls" (34). Split in two, Addom's head and genitals are separated. The part of Addom, of Eusa's society, which reflects destructive gendered constructs, is removed from the head. The brain is physically separated from the genitals, which were traditionally used to define gender, in a manoeuvre that suggests a potential for the 'head,' or the subject, to act without being defined in terms of gender or sexuality.

The recurrence of cannibalistic acts is an additional source of abjection in the novel, particularly as it is the parental figures who eat their children. Cannibalism incites particular feelings of abjection and is described by Russell West in "Abject Cannibalism" (2007) as an "intersection between nature and culture, between body and society, at the point where the one blends into the other," breaking both the border between the person eating and the body being eaten, and the border of societal law (235). The cannibalistic acts of parents in the novel create monstrous and abject families, undermining heteronormative familial structures and mocking the concept of the nuclear family, and as such refusing the privileging of reproductive futurism. In the myth of the 'Hart of the Wud,' the man and woman callously cook and eat their child in exchange for fire. The violent puppet Mr. Punch repeatedly attempts to eat his baby, finally succeeding in killing both his wife Pooty and his baby and putting them in the frying pan to eat. As his family cooks, another puppet, Jack Ketch, arrives and rather offhandedly notes that he "thot [he] heard a woman frying," to which Punch demands Jack "eat [his] oan wife" and "fynd [his] oan babby" (136). This normalisation of a grotesque encounter suggests that this world is one in which frying and cannibalising your family are typical incidents, resulting in a corrupted presentation of parenthood that refuses any model in which the child is privileged as a symbol of posterity. These families become abject and monstrous, consuming the child instead of caring for them, and in this way call to mind Kristeva's connection between the acts of consumption and speech. Kristeva writes that "oral activity, which produces the linguistic signifier, coincides with the linguistic signifier" (41); she references a case involving a young girl with a phobia of being eaten by a dog, whose phobia grew correspondingly larger as she developed her knowledge of language. The terror surrounding loss of language (and subsequently of society) in the novel is thus communicated through acts of cannibalism, which emerge as a



panicked subconscious response that involves taking real objects into oneself through the part of the body that forms spoken words.

### Post-Apocalyptic *Écriture Féminine*

The abject fear incited by nuclear apocalypse is complicated by the opportunity it gives for re-creation, for a re-figuring of the landscapes of culture and language after they have been violently levelled by the bomb. The destruction of language provides opportunity for it to be rewritten without the restrictions of phallogentrism. Cixous suggested a way out of phallogentric language through *l'écriture féminine*: literally, 'writing of the female.' Cixous argues that language formed through the female provides possibility in its lack of restrictions: "her language does not contain, it carries; it does not hold back, it makes possible" (889). The potential in *l'écriture féminine* threatens phallogentrism: "Such is the strength of women that, sweeping away syntax, breaking that famous thread (just a tiny little thread, they say) which acts for men as a surrogate umbilical cord [...] women will go right up to the impossible" (886). *L'écriture féminine* thus presents a realisation of the impossible: the disintegration of restrictive phallogentric language, leaving space for a new language formed through the bodies of women, and allowing them to shed the language and the codes of gender that have for so long positioned them as lesser. The alignment of meaning, language, and knowledge with the symbolic representations of women and the maternal within *Riddley Walker* can be read as a turn towards non-phallogentric language: akin to *l'écriture féminine*, it "will always surpass the discourse that regulates the phallogentric system," as it is non-hierarchical and so lacks the derogative dichotomy of classical linguistic structure (883).

In addition to its abjection, the maternal body is associated with the production of knowledge, in part because of its correlation with procreativity, but also for its connection with the bodily economy of exchange between mother and child in the pre-linguistic stage that precedes the symbolic. Kristeva used the term "thetic phase" in "Revolution in Poetic Language" (1987) to describe the "threshold between two heterogeneous realms: the semiotic and the symbolic," a point where "dependence on the mother is severed and transformed into a symbolic relation to an other" (102). This is the point where the restraints of culture and society are assigned, as we move from the pre-linguistic stage (the semiotic) to one ordered by language and hierarchy (the symbolic). To form a writing through the maternal is, in this way, to return to a point before the thetic stage, rejecting the chains of phallogentric language. This semiotic exchange has the capacity to disrupt the symbolic; as such, writing through maternal figures provides an opportunity to write outside of the symbolic. Maternity has been used previously in connection with artistic creation; the trope of the pregnant poetic can be seen in other areas of literature, aligning a creation of language within the brain with creation of life in a womb. The idea of growing a child within the womb breaks the boundaries of self and other, thus threatening the binary. In "A New Type of Intellectual: The Dissident" (1987), Kristeva proposes that "maternity as such can [...] lift fixations, and circulates passion between life and death, self and other, culture and nature" (298). Maternity is aligned with positive creation, unrestricted by the binaries poststructuralism criticises. Although "defining a feminine practice of writing is impossible," the maternal body can be used symbolically

as a space to examine this reimagining of language, undermining restrictive binaries and threatening the dichotomous system through its abject embodiment (Cixous 92).

### **Tels an Connexions: The Pre-linguistic Maternal Body**

The potential of the abject maternal image therefore aligns with the potential of the destruction of dominant gender systems through nuclear holocaust, creating a space for this alternative to phallogocentric writing and structures of oppression. The symbolic female and maternal body is presented as a framework through which to conceptualise an alternative to patriarchal constructions. Knowledge formation in Riddley's world is implicitly tied to sexuality, procreation, and maternity. Riddley's initial interaction with 'telling' in the novel is with Lorna, a 'tel woman' who has the capacity to interpret signs and meanings. The masculine counterpart to the 'tel woman' is the role taken on by Riddley's father: that of the connexion man, a title passed down to Riddley on his father's death, mirroring the patriarchal privileging of continuation through male bloodlines. His society retains prejudiced concepts of masculinity and femininity, particularly when it comes to 'connexions' and 'tels' – Reckman Bessup claims that "what I connect it shows I aint no tel woman nor I don't know nothing about blips nor syns" (13). 'Telling' is seen as women's work, out of the realm of Fister Bishop's world of hunting, and is not as privileged a role as that of the 'connexion man.' Riddley however develops a relationship with Lorna and it is only when Riddley incorporates Lorna's teachings that he is able to attempt his first 'tel,' as his initial attempts repeatedly fail. In fact, it is following a sexual encounter with Lorna that Riddley begins his journey towards being able to 'tel.' Riddley's experience with 'telling' is often related to sexuality, and his movement towards becoming a connexion man is seen as reaching sexual maturity and adulthood. Reckman Bessop warns Riddley: "now your dads gone youwl be connexion man [...] you bes start putting things to gether for your self you aint a kid no more" (14). No longer a child, Riddley has reached a point of maturation and the responsibility of making 'connexions' now lies with him. Despite the presumed masculine role of the connexion man, Riddley's induction into the role relates to imagery of female maturation: Eusa's mark is painted on his stomach with Goodparley's blood and made permanent by carving it into his skin. This ritualistic spilling of blood to signify maturation is reminiscent of a first period. Riddley has reached a stage where he is expected to find meaning and make connexions, just as menstruation signifies an ability to make life. This act can also be read as penetration: the phallic knife penetrates his stomach, spilling blood in the tearing of his symbolic hymen and impregnating him with the ability to 'tel.' The cuts are "3 moufs on me and waiting to say some thing," so that his wounds become mouths through which he can vocalise his new knowledge (43).

However, Riddley's first attempts as a "connexion man" are unsuccessful: to Riddley, "the woal thing [of his Connexion] wer plain," and yet he is unable to articulate it (62). He fails at his first time, and "every 1 wer left hangin. Me and all" (63). His inability to perform is perceived as a humiliating impotence, mirroring the language used in relation to nuclear technology. The hierarchy of knowledge-gaining is demonstrated further as Fister tells Riddley to "leave the telling with the woman and connect with a mans doing" (65). Riddley ignores this phallogocentric ideology, leaving his home to find an alternative mode of being. It is not until later in the novel, when he reaches the

symbolic centre of Cambry, that he makes his first true 'tel.' Riddley's physical journey aligns with his mental journey, a move to an embodiment of the female, rejecting the binary structure that prevents his understanding of his own 'tels.' The following passage can be read as Riddley beginning to embrace female understanding:

my head begun to feal like it wer widening like circels on water  
 [...] The stranger it took me the mor I fealt at hoam with it. The  
 mor I fealt like lwd be long where ever it wer widening me to.  
 (120)

These circles relate to the empty centre of origin in language, to the empty space created through nuclear holocaust and to the negated female. Circles can represent the menstrual cycle, relating to the womb at the centre of the woman. Circles are non-hierarchical with no beginning, end, top, or bottom, no way in which superiority can be attributed as seen in the binary-driven nature of phallogocentric language. Widening on water, the circles have a fluidity that relates to the fluidity of language; however, wateriness is also characteristic of female bodies. In *Volatile Bodies: Toward a Corporeal Feminism* (1994), Elizabeth Grosz argues that the female body is constructed:

as a leaking, uncontrollable, seeping liquid; as formless flow;  
 as viscosity, entrapping, secreting; as lacking not so much or  
 simply the phallus but self-containment [...] a formlessness that  
 engulfs all form, a disorder that threatens all order. (203)

This vision of the female body relates to the deconstructive impulse to view language as a fluid, uncontained, unrestricted body, susceptible to spillage; as Paul Williams writes in "Poststructuralism and Nuclear Discourse" (2009) "meaning [is not] carried to the discerning reader without spilling a drop; rather, meanings continually slip away from attempts to pin them conclusively to the text" (249). Language flows, sensitive to slippage and spillage, constantly deferring meaning. Riddley's mind "widening like circels on water" can therefore be interpreted as a sign of his opening up to concepts of *l'écriture féminine*, which provide an alternative and non-hierarchical mode of communication.

The climax of the novel sees Riddley entering the epicentre of Cambry, moving beyond the influence of patriarchy. Riddley initially feels "the han of Power clampt on the back of [his] neck fealt the Big Old Father spread and take me" (159). He feels the power within him "strong with it and weak with it both," and experiences an overwhelming sexual desire directed towards the earth: "Not just my cock but all of me it wer like all of me wer cock and all the world a cunt and open to me" (159). Riddley in this moment is overwhelmed by the destructive nature of hegemonic masculinity and the desire to repudiate and dominate nature, a reminder of the patriarchal thinking which lead to this creation of 'Zero Groun.' Caputi argues that this acts as a reminder to Riddley, that "if [men] bow/boy to the Big Old Father/God, the payoff will be their ultimate assumption of that divine paternal privilege to dominate, rape, and destroy all others" (434). Yet Riddley "wernt man a nuff," he is unable to enact the masculine ideal, as his journey has progressed him beyond the belief that

this form of masculinity is desirable (159).

At this point the space appears to come alive and Riddley experiences a euphoric moment in which he is finally able to make his first accomplished 'tel.' Myths he previously transcribed were passed to him by others; this however, "aint no story tol to me nor it aint no dream. Its jus some thing come in to my head wylst I ben on my knees there in that stoan wood in the woom of her" (163). Riddley is only able to create new meaning when he is within the symbolic 'woom,' a reminder of a stage before structure, order, and language, aligning the creation of his story with the site of the maternal. Riddley's 'tel' contains copious imagery of life and creation coming out of the stone and how it might be destructive to phallogocentric thinking. The novel describes the stone men under the ground:

lying on the groun trying to talk only theres no soun theres  
grean vines and leaves growing out of their mouf [...] breking  
the stoan mans face a part. Back in to earf agen. Them stoans  
ben trying to talk only they never wil [...] Trying to be men only  
cant talk. (164)

The vines associated with life and new beginnings break apart the stone men who can no longer talk or survive above ground. The stone men represent patriarchal authority from pre-nuclear society: "it myt be Punchs face or it even myt be Eusas face" (165). Eusa is the combination of Europe and the USA, or the everyman – the 'you sir' – and the puppet Punch is representative of destructive masculinity. Punch abuses and eventually kills his family, mirroring how pre-Riddley society destroyed their world (65). Yet they also represent the patriarchal authorities within Riddley's own world: "It wer the face of my father what ben kilt ... It wer Belnot Phist [...] the Littl Shynin Man ... Yes it wer Goodparleys face moren any bodys may be" (165). Ultimately, the stone men represent phallogocentric thinking itself, as Hoban writes that "its jus only stoan men walking unner the groun like that. Women have some thing else" (164). Following nuclear annihilation, the empty space of Cambry is overwhelmed by the womanly mythic figure that can be seen as representative of *l'écriture féminine*, and the stone men of phallogocentrism can no longer sustain themselves. Phallogocentrism is thus destroyed to make way for a non-hierarchical form of thinking and speaking. Hoban criticises the male-dominated discourse of the patriarchal order through reference to reproduction: "A man myt get 100s of childer but the onlyes new life growing out of him wil be that dead mans vine at the end of his run" (170). Phallogocentric language has fallen, producing only the 'dead mans vine,' an image of phallic impotence representing the destruction of patriarchal structures. An alternative is provided in a language formed from the "1 with the woom [...] with the new life coming out of her," resulting in symbolic birth instead of impotence and death (170). Kristeva argues that "[r]eal female innovation [...] will only come about when maternity, female creation and the link between them are better understood," and Riddley is moving towards understanding this link, as opposed to pre-nuclear holocaust's devaluation of femininity, and abjection of the maternal body ("Dissident" 298). In the empty centre, cleared of phallogocentric restrictions after the nuclear blast, Riddley denies the hegemonic masculine ideal and better understands this link between maternity and creation,

observing the potential for a new understanding of structures, superior to the 'dead mans vine' of phallocentrism. Riddley feels "programmit different then from how [he] ben when [he] come in to Cambry" (166). He feels a change within himself: "some thing growing in me it wer like a grean sea surging in me it wer saying, LOSE IT. Saying LET GO. Saying THE ONLYES POWER IS NO POWER" (167). Fluidity returns, clearing Riddley's attachment to previous gender-based assumptions, urging him to let go of the destructive nature of dichotomous structures which prescribe power to one side of the binary and weakness to the other.

*Riddley Walker* works to critique the arbitrary nature of gender roles and destructive notions of masculinity that have resulted in the persistence of dominating patriarchal tendencies which risk inciting an apocalypse: a catastrophic event which seems increasingly likely in the contemporary moment, whether nuclear or environmental. Riddley's post-apocalyptic landscape articulates the dangers of allowing these tendencies to remain uncriticised, and speaks to the endurance of patriarchal structures which last even beyond apocalypse. As terrifying as apocalyptic imaginings may be, equally terrifying is the fear that humanity could experience such a trauma and still refuse to learn from it. In a world where this fear has been realised, Riddley's journey provides an exploration of an alternative, encouraging an abolition of gender systems and an affinity with nature, an empathy that is arguably lacking from pre-apocalyptic society. His experience positions him as a figure of potential, not restricted by his gender or his sexuality, and in this way Riddley comes to represent a futurity not founded on heteronormativity or any form of gender hierarchy, but on a freedom from structures of marginalisation, domination, and oppression.

## NOTES

1. @realDonaldTrump. "North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the "Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times." Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works." *Twitter*. 03 January 2018, 4.49 p.m., <[www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992](https://www.twitter.com/realDonaldTrump/status/948355557022420992)>.
2. For critical examinations of Riddleyspeak, see: Maynor and Patteson (1984), Dowling (1988) Mullen (2000), Porter (2000), and Gannon (2003).
3. For more recent criticism exploring the rejection of reproductive futurism in speculative fiction, see Bellamy (2018).

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**BIONOTE**

**Sarah France** is a PhD candidate in the School of English Literature, Language and Linguistics at Newcastle University, UK. Her research examines twenty-first century pre-extinction novels, mapping the complexities of anticipating, narrating, and mourning climate catastrophe and extinction. Other research interests include climate change fiction and ecological grief, apocalyptic-detective fiction, and explorations of gender in speculative fiction.