How to be hopeful in a dystopic present? rethinking future-oriented narratives in Aminatta Forna's happiness

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How to be Hopeful in a Dystopic Present? Rethinking Future-oriented Narratives in Aminatta Forna's *Happiness*

Samenvatting

Dit artikel gaat over affectieve, narratologische en ecologische netwerken in Aminatta Forna's roman *Happiness* uit 2018. In deze roman vraagt Forna ons om aandacht te besteden aan de planetaire relaties die spelen in de wereldstad Londen. Hoewel de roman in strikte zin niet dystopisch is, maakt hij door de temporaliteit van verhalen over geluk te heroverwegen duidelijk dat onze huidige situatie dat wel is. *Happiness* combineert verhalen, emoties en de stedelijke omgeving zowel thematisch als op structureel niveau, zodat de ruimtelijke en temporele verhaalaspecten tegelijkertijd de affectieve relaties en ecologische vraagstukken op de voorgrond plaatsen. Door deze aspecten van de roman te analyseren, vragen we ons af wat een heroverweging van toekomstgerichte verhalen over geluk en hoop ons kunnen bieden in de huidige planetaire crisis van klimaatverandering. In onze lezing zullen we inzichten uit *happiness studies* en narratologie combineren om schijnbaar verre maar onderling verbonden affectieve en ecologische logica's te analyseren in wat Lauren Berlant een "affectief heden" noemt.

Abstract

This article is concerned with affective, narratological, and environmental networks in Aminatta Forna's 2018 novel, *Happiness*. In this novel, Forna asks us to attend to the planetary relations at play in the global city of London. Although the novel is not dystopic in a strict sense, by rethinking the temporality of happiness narratives, it makes clear that our current situation is. *Happiness* combines narrative, emotions, and environments at both the thematic and structural level, such that spatial and temporal forms foreground affective relations and the ecological. It is by analysing these aspects of the novel that we ask what a rethinking of future-oriented narratives of happiness and hope may offer us in the current planetary crisis of climate change. In our reading we will combine insights from happiness studies and narratology to analyse seemingly distant but interconnected affective and ecological logics in what Lauren Berlant identifies an "affective present".

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HOW TO BE HOPEFUL IN A DYSTOPIC PRESENT? RETHINKING FUTURE-ORIENTED NARRATIVES IN AMINATTA FORNA'S HAPPINESS

Introduction[1]

In *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity* (2010) Vivasvan Soni argues that in the eighteenth century, a shift in the narrative construction of the idea of happiness took place.[2] The Solonian hermeneutic of happiness – in which happiness is a quality of a life that can only be attributed *after* the life ends and by means of a communal judgement – had cast a long shadow across history. In the eighteenth century, Soni argues, a different narrative rose to prominence and became the dominant narrative form underlying a set of discourses that came to constitute modernity: the trial narrative. In trial narratives, happiness is the (positive) outcome of a test, something which can be strived for, which suits the Enlightenment idea of manufacturability. Happiness is made deferrable or postponable, and happiness narratives become future-oriented, Soni states. In the Solonian sense, every action or event during a life contributes to the final judgement. The shift towards the trial narrative has led to a "political obsolescence" of the idea of happiness and to ignoring the (politics at play in the) present.

Multiple scholars have argued that in our society, the *promise* of happiness for all mankind, in which the trial narrative still dominates, has turned into a normative, individualist duty to be happy or to become happy.[3] This understanding of happiness as a personal 'problem', and the idea that people need experts and coaches for personal growth and flourishing, with happiness being the reward or the equivalence of 'growth', is evocative of Lauren Berlant's "cruel optimism". Under the individual, neoliberal guise of happiness, we attach to a sense of being that is always already compromised, a *cruel* attachment because the very (future) possibility it ignites makes it impossible to attain its promise. The relation to happiness as an individual problem and a future promise has consequences for our attention to other living beings on the planet. The question we want to address in this article is therefore: what may a rethinking of happiness narratives in fiction offer us in the current entanglement of postcolonial relations and natural life? To be hopeful in a dystopic situation of a planetary catastrophe is to rethink our attachments.

[1] We want to thank the reviewers and editors of the volume for their attentive reading and good suggestions.

[2] Vivasvan SONI, *Mourning Happiness: Narrative and the Politics of Modernity*, Ithaca, Cornell University Press, 2010.

[3] The history of this claim is discussed in Pascal BRUCKNER. *Perpetual Euphoria: On the Duty to be Happy*, Princeton, Princeton University Press, 2011, 42. See also: Laura HYMAN, *Happiness: Understandings, Narratives and Discourses*, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014; Ashley FRAWLEY, *Semiotics of Happiness: Rhetorical Beginnings of a Public Problem*, London, Bloomsbury Academic, 2015.

The first chapter of Aminatta Forna's *Happiness* opens as we follow a fox's gaze through London during a winter evening.[4] Later, we meet Jean and Attila at Waterloo Bridge: Attila is a Ghanaian psychiatrist specialised in post-traumatic stress disorder; Jean an American wildlife biologist working to protect London's urban fox population. The seemingly disparate paths of these characters cross, as do those of other human and non-human animals. *Happiness* has been much acclaimed for intertwining a postcolonial and ecocritical analysis of our globalised times, with the question of the titular concept, happiness. The novel brings our attention to the role of non-human life forms in an otherwise ideologically and physically dominated human environment: "The fox wended its way through the pedestrians, who for the most part paid it no heed, for they would not so easily be distracted from their fixity of purpose"[5]. Later, we are confronted with an image of the fox moving "against calves and knees" while humans maintain their skyline views. Forna's novel suggests human and non-human relations occupy a role in our thinking narratives of happiness; we situate these relations in the current planetary crisis of climate change, and look towards new understandings of happiness that rewrite the dominant Enlightenment narrative Soni identifies.

The first section of this article explores the ways in which spaces are framed in the global, urban city of London through the lens of the marginalised. Who is excluded/included from the main stage and how do we get to see that? Forna's novel introduces a shift in perspective that gives visibility to characters that tend to be overlooked, but should be looked after in order to take responsibility for a dystopic present. Animals hold gazes, wildlife frames spaces. Non-human life forms are active agents, as they constitute planetary relations with human actants. The second section addresses temporality and the relation to happiness and hope in our time. We will focus on the temporal structures of happiness narratives and the way they shape different attitudes towards the present and the future. In "Happy Objects", Sara Ahmed offers a critique of the classical definition of happiness as put forth in Aristotle's virtue ethics: everything is a means to be happy, such that happiness is end-oriented.[6] Lauren Berlant further argues happiness functions as a cruel attachment, given that it is a promise about the future that may disguise the cruelty of the now.[7] Narratives of happiness are structured against specific temporal parameters. In Forna's novel, the reader is confronted with a present saturated by (past and continuing) logics of globalisation and the immediacy of climate change, such that any sense of the future is contested. Although this novel may not be dystopic in a strict sense, by frustrating the temporality of the subjective human experience, it makes clear our current situation is. Therefore, how does *Happiness* help us reconsider our promises for the future and responsibilities in the present?

We do not devote extensive space to the connections between postcolonial studies and climate change, or justifications for thinking in planetary terms; this work has already been done by Spivak and Chakrabarty, but also Ursula K. Heise

[4] Aminatta FORNA, *Happiness*, London, Bloomsbury, 2018.

[5] FORNA, *Happiness*, 9.

[6] Sara AHMED, "Happy Objects", in Melissa GREGG and Gregory J. SEIGWORTH (eds.), *The Affect Theory Reader*, Durhma (NC), Duke University Press, 2010, 29-51, 33.

[7] Lauren BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2011, 28

and Elizabeth DeLoughrey, amongst others.[8] Mathew A. Taylor further evaluates the limits of "planetarity" as a solution that matches the scale of thought urged by Spivak and Chakrabarty.[9] It is our concern, however, to attend to the possibilities that thinking in planetary terms opens. It is also Forna's concern, as she intertwines many societal issues at once in *Happiness*: the connecting lives of humans in London, animal resilience to urban developments, and both the adaptability and (human) hindering of other non-human life forms thread *Happiness*. We will show what narrative strategies make these entanglements possible, and what alternate ideas about the human, specifically ideas about happiness, emerge from the narrative. Consecutively, we will focus on (1) space and shifts in perspective and (2) the temporal structures of happiness narratives and their consequences for taking responsibility in the present. In our concluding sections, we will draw these two dimensions of narrative together and demonstrate the ways they are telling of our own behaviour in the current dystopic times, and whether the novel leaves room for hope in the future.

Planetary relations in the city of London

Happiness describes ten days in the life of Jean Turane, a Massachusetts wildlife biologist who studies foxes and coyotes in the city of London. During the same ten days we also follow Attila Asare. Attila is a renowned psychiatrist who studies psychological damage caused by violence in war zones around the world. Jean and Attila bump into each other on Waterloo Bridge as Jean follows a fox and Attila enjoys a walk soon after his arrival from Accra, his hometown in Ghana. We follow them both from that collision – an extradiegetic narrator tells what each of them is going through and also shares their thoughts and experiences with us. There are flashbacks to crucial events in their former lives: Attila is a widower and Jean lives separated from her ex-husband, Ray, and son, Luke. Thus, in the storytelling, two storylines containing different events and characters run parallel. But those lives also become intertwined following the collision on the symbolic bridge. After Attila's niece is wrongfully arrested at an immigration check, her ten-year-old son, Tano, runs away. In his search for the missing boy, Attila gets help from Jean, who is used to searching for beings in the city. She has built up an extensive network of fox spotters: a whole host of people from different professions and cultural backgrounds, be they street-sweepers from Sierra Leone or Ghanaian doormen.

The search for Tano brings Attila into contact with a side of London he has yet to encounter. Jean introduces him to an interconnected network of service sector workers who are predominantly of West African descent. Through his connections with James, Komba, and Abdul, Attila is able to enlist the help of others in the search. The growth of this group is organic and breaks down the anonymous crowd into a diversity of people in terms of gender, profession, and background. *Happiness*

[8] See Ursula K. HEISE, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet: The Environmental Imagination of the Global*., Oxford, Oxford University Press, 2008; Elizabeth M. DELOUGHREY, *Allegories of the Anthropocene*, Durham (NC), Duke University Press, 2019.

[9] See Mathew A. TAYLOR. "At Land's End: Novel Spaces and the Limits of Planetarity" in: *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, vol. 49, no. 1, 2016, 115-138.

does not present a clear binary between white privileged individuals and immigrants. The focalization of Attila via an external narrator throughout the novel enables an external characterization as a black man in a mainly white upper-class environment of restaurants, hotels and theatres. He is a wealthy visitor. At the same time, through his focalization the reader gets to see Others that don't have access to these spaces, sometimes not even a home or a job. The focalization via Attila thus rather draws out a binary between the "we" who have not experienced trauma and the "they", the other, who have. The latter have derived "strength" from their experiences, while the former's inexperience leaves them "numb"[10]. On one occasion, when Attila looks across the Thames to the theatres and concert halls on the South Bank, it occurs to him that the actors representing traumatic experiences are unlikely to have encountered such suffering themselves, as part of the trauma-free "we" that he formulates:

> The actors would be preparing to perform emotions for those who had never felt those kinds of emotions in their lives and perhaps never would. Suffering had become a spectacle that served not to warn of the vagaries of misfortune but to remind the audience, sitting in warmth and comfort, of their own good fortune.[11]

The service workers Attila meets in the city of London are not allowed to be the actors on the main stage, they live backstage. The "untouched" allow them access to their environment, but they are only welcome as long as they remain invisible and don't remind the privileged of their privilege. This lays bare, and disrupts, a dominant narrative of happiness in which globalisation equals progress, equally for all people in a globalised space. In this dominant view, pursuing happiness takes the shape of an individual trial and privileges will feel as if they are a personal merit, a good that is within everyone's reach in future if they act according to the demands of the dominant actors. Yet those who are forced to remain backstage and serve the happiness of others don't have access to the time/space conditions that shape such a trial narrative of happiness in the first place.

The question — who actually belongs in the city, rightfully, and who decides this? — concerns other "Others" in *Happiness* as well. The people of London are worried about foxes encroaching on the city, in the places they consider their territory. Jean tags the foxes to document how they are coping, what they are looking for, how many there are. In her analyses, the emphasis is mainly on the beauty, inventiveness and cleverness of the animals. Their survival strategies show tremendous adaptability:

> I don't know what God's design was when he made coyote, when he gave them the ability to adapt [...] I only know that they're here now, so evidently, quite evidently, at some level they do belong. Better than you or me, you could say. They have adapted to what was already here, while

[10] FORNA, *Happiness*, 304, 232.
[11] *Ibid.*, 232.

> we had to change what we found to suit us. I could as easily argue that coyote belong everywhere they live.[12]

A comparison is made between the migrants and the animals: they are only allowed to live in the margins of the city. At the same time, they are also the ones who, used to surviving, possess better adaptation skills and resilience than the privileged inhabitants of London. Although comparisons like these form a point of contention discussed thoroughly on the intersection between animal studies and postcolonial studies, we follow Cole in his interpretation of the way Forna uses these comparisons strategically to stress how all living species coexist in a shared space.[13] *Happiness* questions the central, dominant position of humans in relation to animals. It does so in a number of ways that can be captured under the term "strategic anthropomorphism".[14] Anthropomorphism is strategic when it is used to undercut notions of superiority and to bring about ecological awareness. In *Happiness*, this is done firstly by emphasising shared characteristics of man and animal: people are attributed animal properties and behaviour, and animals are attributed human characteristics. Jean, for example, resembles the fox she prefers to study, Light Bright. She is agile, fit, independent and observant. Light Bright follows her instinct: she can build a territory herself and look for a mate. In fact, when Jean's marriage is over, she can do it again: from her own territory, in which she works as much as she wants, she can also look for a new partner.

A second way in which we visualise the connection between humans and animals is their proximity, not only in the city where their paths literally cross, but also in the presentation of their behaviour in the text. The existence of man and animal is intertwined in a way that Jean herself may not, but the reader can see. In our analysis, this strategic use of comparisons between the ones we tend to overlook in our society, and the animals, is also related to the temporality of happiness. The novel forces us to take a better look at all living species and relate to them in the present, instead of ensuring a safe future for ourselves. The only way to survive our dystopian present, the novel seems to tell us, is to re-evaluate and change interspecies relations, which can only be achieved if anthropocentrism is first decentred.

Reverse the Gaze

Happiness deals persistently with gazes, changes in perspective and the working or effect of exclusion that becomes visible as a result. A gaze also reflects the way individuals are socially related: "To gaze implies more than to look at – it signifies a psychological relationship of power, in which the gazer is superior to the object of

[12] *Ibid.*, 180.

[13] See Ernest Dominic COLE, "Decentering anthropocentrism: human-animal relations in Aminatta Forna's *Happiness*", in *Journal of the African Literature Association*, vol. 12, no. 3, 2018, 287-305, 287.

[14] COLE, *ibid.*, 287.

the gaze"[15]. Watching, observing, studying someone also means that you want to find out something about that other being. As scientists, Jean and Attila both contribute to such practices: Jean observes and tags the foxes, Attila makes psychiatric diagnoses. Although they both have an eye for groups that others do not care about, they also contribute to the fact that the marginalised others involved can be labelled as 'deviant', can be isolated or controlled, in both senses of the word: watched and dominated. And both struggle with that. The narrator sometimes even focalizes from a perspective beyond human scope:

> High above the townhouses and the cathedral of Southwark, the buildings of Guy's and St Thomas's Hospital, high above London Bridge Station where the railway lines converge like electricity wires through a junction box, a peregrine falcon rode the air. On the thirty-second floor of the building known as the Shard, businessmen, tourists and visitors from the provinces were enjoying early evening cocktails. Most of the clientele ignored the view across the city […] Instead they watched the activities of the barman […] They talked and reached for bar snacks, as though he were a television in the corner of the room.[16]

The focalizing falcon in this fragment emphasises the ordered character of the society that he literally and figuratively oversees. We can imagine the metaphor of a cable box, and never see it. The bird's perspective shows us how everything in society under him is connected. The gaze shows us several contrasts: the contrast between the bustle of the city and the sky above, the contrast between different modes of travel – people on the ground ride along paved paths in a converging pattern, the falcon "rides" freely through the sky; and the contrast between the view and the ignoring of it. The focalizing falcon has a view of the city and sees people, locked in a limited space, with an even more limited view, naturally, almost dociely focused on something that entertains them. The comparison with television underlines the city's unreal numbness: it is an alternative, mediated world.

Forna also forces us to look back, through the eyes of the Others who have limited agency. She makes explicit the reversal of the colonial gaze: the dominant view of Western people of the 'Other'. Looking back causes the same discomfort: the gaze of the dominated, which cannot be known and therefore cannot really be dominated, puts colonial relations in jeopardy. A Kenyan migrant tells Attila: "You see how the people here do not look at us, they will not meet your eye. [...] But it is not because we are black. No. It is because they are ashamed that now we have seen what they are".[17] Forna's oeuvre revolves around political violence and the relationship between private and collective memories. The place traumatic memories have in an individual's life and in society, she shows, is strongly determined by the stories that are told and the perspective from which they are told. In a keynote speech, Forna states: "We must take back our stories and reverse the

[15] Jonathan SCHROEDER, "Consuming Representation: A Visual Approach to Consumer Research", in Barbara Stern (ed.), *Representing Consumers: Voices, Views and Visions,* Oxfordshire, Routledge, 1988, 193-230, 208.

[16] FORNA, *Happiness*, 85.

[17] *Ibid.*, 70.

gaze"[18]. The tilt in perspective is important for a sense of self for those whose stories are not told: "The power of the story lies in the hands of the storyteller, to see oneself only ever reflected through the eyes of another is to view the self through a distorting lens, this is the shared experience of all those whose place in history has been marginalised".[19] By reversing the gaze, Forna shows that we need to look after each other, which, as we shall argue, means focus on the present instead of the future, and the world around us in our daily lives. Indeed, looking back to another being often happens literally in the novel. When Attila – again on a bridge, symbol for connection – encounters a fox, the narrator tells:

> The fox passed Attila by, carving a shallow arc around him, as if merely observing the rules of personal space. Attila walked on and then stopped and turned round. At the same time the fox, too, stopped and glanced back over its shoulder and seemed to regard him. Attila pushed his hands into the pockets of his coat. The fox held his gaze, unblinking, for a long moment, then turned around and trotted on.[20]

The post-humanist tactics of transcending the human perspective to that of a bird, together with these instances of 'looking back', make clear that a less self-evident dominant Western, human perspective is necessary to take responsibility for the well-being of other human and non-human beings, and of the planet. Donna Haraway writes of a "conquering gaze from nowhere [that] signifies the unmarked positions of Man and White".[21] Searching for a different sense of "objectivity", Haraway directs us to situated knowledges as those limited points of view that do not aim to transcend, and rather "allow us to become answerable for what we learn to see"[22]. Humans cannot simply "adopt" certain perspectives; *how* we see makes us responsible for *what* we see.

The temporal structuring of happiness and hope

Happiness begins with a tale of an end: the extinction of the last wolf in the United States, hunted in Greenhampton, Massachusetts, April 1834, by a wolfer. The hunt is systematic and professional, the outcome performative: the wolfer "paraded" Main Street dragging the corpse of the wolf, later strung up by the townspeople "until its eyes bulged and its tongue lolled, and they beat its body with poles".[23] The tale frames the rest of the novel as the reader asks how this story is relevant to the rest of the narrative. It follows the cyclical practice of wolf hunting, beginning in the spring snow, such that once the job is finished, the wolfer "would head west and wait for summer, until it was time to begin again".[24] As the reader follows this story

[18] Aminatta FORNA, "We must take back our stories and reverse the Gaze." *The Guardian*, 17 Feb. 2017, https://www.theguardian.com/books/2017/feb/17/aminatta-forna-take-back-stories-african-heritage. Accessed 28 July 2022.

[19] *Ibid.*

[20] FORNA, *Happiness*, 14.

[21] Donna HARAWAY, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective", in *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no. 3, 1988, 575-599, 581.

[22] HARAWAY, *ibid.*, 583.

[23] FORNA, *Happiness*, 7.

[24] *Ibid.*, 7.

vis-à-vis the contemporary narrative in London, its ongoing influence in the contemporary world is visible. The tale foregrounds a fixed script about human relations to the natural world. The question of what alternative scripts are needed in our dystopic times follows this section.

Throughout the first chapter of *Happiness*, the reader continues to follow a fox through the busy Waterloo Bridge, passing pedestrians and entering the National Theatre. The fox crosses the boundaries of territories that, from a human perspective, are forbidden. Across the bridge again, "past a cameraman taking a time-lapse image of the river, the fox, moving at a metronomic trot, wove a line through them all".[25] The storyline of this fox is one of the many that thread the novel. Significantly, it is through the fox's gaze that the reader first encounters London, as the question of the death of nature has just been posed by the tale of the wolfer. Contrasting those walking "with purpose", others "meandering around," and the cameraman's time-lapse image, the fox's "metronomic trot" seems to imply the stability of a continuous rhythm. In the meantime, pedestrians introduce us to the complexities of a temporality mediated by human ideals. The role of nature in global London is framed by the crossing of boundaries, where agents on all sides seem to follow different rhythms.

In this section, we are concerned with the temporal structuring of happiness and the ways in which happiness narratives may shift collective responsibility for the present to individual responsibility for the future. For instance, Vivasvan Soni claims the narrative structure of happiness conditions our thinking about suffering,[26] such that, if we look at these narratives not simply as genres but as "hermeneutic frames through which we make sense of our experience"[27], we may understand how our thinking of suffering is shaped by narrative paradigms of happiness. The entanglement between happiness and suffering is perhaps best explored by the character of Attila. He finds himself in London in order to deliver a keynote speech on his work. It is precisely Attila's reflections on trauma as the novel progresses that force the reader to ask questions about how suffering is regarded. As Oumar Chérif Diop demonstrates, this thematic development with trauma narratives is often the main point for theoretical engagements with Forna's novel;[28] however, the resulting critical work has yet to provide substantial tools for thinking happiness.

Attila contests a set of logical fallacies in conventional assumptions about suffering, which contribute to his thematic character formation and highlight his theoretical perspective.[29] He attends a conference titled "Responses to Adverse Life Events," where the speaker indicates, "Victims of trauma are less trusting, they feel less in control of their lives, [and] hold a greater belief that the world is a place where random acts of violence can occur than those who have not been victims of

[25] *Ibid.*, 10.

[26] Vivasvan SONI, "Trials and Tragedies: The Literature of Unhappiness (A Model for Reading Narratives of Suffering)" in: *Comparative Literature*, vol. 59, no. 2, 2007, 119-139, 119.

[27] *Ibid.*, 120.

[28] Oumar C. DIOP, "*Happiness*, The Wound and the Word: Aminatta Forna Joins the Conversation on Trauma", in *Cambridge Journal of Postcolonial Literary Inquiry,* vol. 6, no. 3, 2019, 388-399.

[29] *Ibid.*, 396.

trauma"[30]. Attila expresses his disagreement at the conference, and poses the questions, "What is life without incident? […] How do we become human except in the face of adversity?".[31] He continues to reflect: "What if you already saw the world as an uncertain and dangerous place, what difference did it make?".[32] These questions are not aimed at naturalising social precarious conditions, but rather at deconstructing the idea that a "good" life is one without adversity.

The answers to the questions are framed ecologically, as Attila is reminded of a conversation with his old mentor about the effects of forest fires. He tells us "scorched and burned trees" gradually grow back after it "seems as though nothing is left"[33]. A process called succession. This metaphor enables Attila's break with the normative tendency to equate suffering with damage. Indeed, the paradigm "suffering equals damage," which Attila further contests, is structured by another narrative paradigm: "the absence of adverse life events creates the ideal conditions for human development"[34]. As Attila points out, we don't know whether this is true, we simply assume it is. Succession is a result of adverse events, where the very adversity generates forms of life. These forms (life and narrative) only emerge when disaster and suffering are no longer seen as threats.

A similar logic is at work as Jean makes her way through Nunhead Cemetery. She first watches a flock of parakeets nested on a dead sycamore tree: "How had Argentinian parakeets come to live in this northern European city? And found a way to survive, to make it through winters…?"[35] The first time Jean had visited Nunhead, she was all the same astonished by the green landscape:

> Bright moss, andescent pale lichen on the gravestones, dark ivy which smothered every tree from the one-hundred-year-old chestnuts that lined the avenues to the thousands of saplings that had sprung up everywhere […] For two hours she wondered. Children's names on graves. 'Our Beloved Dolly, 13 months'. 'Matilda, who fell asleep aged seven'. 'Jesus said suffer little children to come unto me, Dewey, 13' (...) Another headstone bore the name of an entire family killed on 1 January 1900. How? Jean wondered. There was nobody to ask, if indeed the answer was there to be had.[36]

The first observation about the parakeets frames Jean's account in questions of survival, endurance, adaptation. Parakeets had found a way to survive in unknown and extreme environments. Thus, as Jean reads the names on graves lined by "innumerable hues of green", an allusion to the life that still springs in the cemetery, this impression of young deaths is also framed by the resilience of natural life. The gravestones are either of children or families, even a widow who out-lived two husbands and her children; tragedies, it may be argued. Any possibility of happiness

[30] FORNA, *Happiness*, 227.
[31] *Ibid.*, 229.
[32] *Ibid.*, 231.
[33] *Ibid.*, 231.
[34] *Ibid.*, 229.
[35] *Ibid.*, 48.
[36] *Ibid.*, 49.

for these people appears to have been compromised. And yet, indeed, there is no one to ask and no answer to be had.

These ecological parameters for thinking the entanglement between happiness and suffering occur in what Lauren Berlant calls an impasse: in the "ordinariness of suffering [and] violence of normativity […] the impasse is a rhythm that people can enter to while they are dithering, tottering, bargaining, testing, or otherwise being worn out by the promises that they have attached to in this world".[37] Berlant criticises the "ordinariness of suffering" since it signals the precarious living our attachments disguise. Yet *Happiness* attends to suffering as a productive and operative category. In this sense, ordinary suffering is not cruel, but rather ordinary indeed. Here lies an important distinction between Berlant's reading of suffering and the novel's. For Berlant, suffering occurs in a sphere of affective precarity that need not necessarily be. Thus their emphasis on improvisation, on "moving out" of the impasse or otherwise being defeated. *Happiness* situates adversity as the current politics of our time. Happiness, the future promise *par excellence*, is therefore a question of the present. It is because it develops in this stretch of time, the impasse, that happiness ceases to be a question about the future and opens a space to take responsibility for the present. In other words, happiness does not arrive after a trial has been completed or a threat surpassed; the affective disposition of the impasse allows happiness to thread and construct narrative in the present.

Present Attachments and Future Promises

The current discussion may have some inclination towards an apocalyptic worldview: the sense that there is no future worthy of (analytical) relation, and if there is, that this occurs in a "post-apocalyptic landscape", to use Lorenzo DiTomasso's terminology.[38] However, Forna's oeuvre is not characterised by this "apocalyptic shift" in contemporary popular culture.[39] The traditional apocalyptic narrative ends in destruction and judgement, the "end of the world". While nothing can truly be *post*-apocalyptic, as DiTomasso points out, the "shift" occurs in the "post-apocalyptic landscape": an appealing idea given its ample possibilities when all hope is lost, when the fear of disaster and future damage become unavoidable, or when such disaster has already reached us. In an Anthropogenic context, *Happiness* takes a different turn from such apocalyptic and post-apocalyptic tendencies. By affectively threading a narrative of happiness in ecologically-mediated environments, the novel offers a temporality of the present in a context where the theme of environmental deterioration has traditionally taken place. How can this concern with a different sense of the present give us alternate possibilities to those of a different sense of the future?

"If the present is not at first an object but a mediated affect", writes Berlant, "it is also a thing that is sensed and under constant revision, a temporal genre whose

[37] BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 28.

[38] Lorenzo DITOMMASO, "Apocalypticism in the Contemporary World", in Colin MCALLISTER (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Apocalyptic Literature*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2020, 316-342.

[39] DITOMMASO, *ibid.*, 323.

conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended now whose very parameters (when did the "present" begin?) are also always there for debate".[40] For Berlant, the focus on the present demands a "wandering absorptive awareness" and a "hypervigilance that collects material" in order to help clarify "those processes that have not yet found their genre of event"[41]. Recall here the falcon "riding" through London's skyline. The focalizing falcon structures our view of the city and the people moving in it: he presents a numb, inattentive and mediated reality. Meanwhile, he sores above this reality, presenting an alternate perspective to that of the human. The falcon's movements and observations allow us to see a dimension of human reality that humans themselves may not be able to see otherwise, or perhaps only with the help of other prosthesis. Human beings as global citizens operate in an environment framed by ecological networks. It is in this sense that the impasse as a stretch of time is significantly narratological: it constantly defines and re-defines its narrative parameters as we develop "gestures of composure, of mannerly transaction, of being with in the world"[42]. *Happiness* emphasises gestures of human and non-human "Others" in the search for ways of being in our globalised world.

Since dominant narratives of happiness in our times are future-oriented, they leave little room to contest, evaluate, or otherwise re-write the parameters that enable them in the present. It is in this sense that we have been discussing the ways in which space/time relations and the fabric of ecological narratives threading Forna's novel trouble such normative narratives. *Happiness* foregrounds the present by following environmental logics of adaptation and resilience, offering human and non-human relations as one of the parameters to read the narrative of happiness. Returning to Jean's observations at Nunhead cemetery, the London urban fox population, Argentinian parakeets, Greenhampton coyotes, pale lichen, dark ivy, and a continuum of different life forms, are all characters in an Anthropocene entangled with the (human) problematics of globalisation. It is in the very ecological mediation of the present that the attachment to happiness as a notion of the future may cease to exist and become an operative concept in globalised entanglements instead. Happiness is not a cruel promise that may never arrive. It is an attachment under constant revision by our ability to observe, adapt, and register the processes we fear in the world.

A happy ending?

A final connection that Forna makes in this complex structure is that between circulating scripts on the one hand and expectations of life and resilience on the other. Attila uses the metaphor of a glass snow globe when talking with his fellow negotiator in war situations:

> This is how most people want to live […] They want to be safe, they want to be comfortable. They want to believe that they are in control

[40] BERLANT, *Cruel Optimism*, 4.
[41] Ibid.
[42] *Ibid.*, 199.

> of their lives, and they want that thing we call freedom. It all comes at a price, but don't you dare mention that. People want choices without consequences. And we give it to them, fools that we are. We are the "somebody" people who have no bloody intention of doing anything themselves mean when they say somebody must do something. I blame books, films, all that nonsense.[43]

Earlier in the novel, Jean also compares her relationship with a happy couple from a movie. The film scripts are compelling and produce the expectation of a happy ending: "There's always a bloody hero who makes it all good"[44]. Attila also described London as a stage on which the inhabitants "enacted their lives against its magnificent backdrop. A theatre of delights, where nothing surely could go wrong, and if it did, all would be put right by the end of the third act"[45]. The suggestion is that people live their lives according to these scripts, which leave no room for harm or suffering, and which are not accessible for those who are excluded from the stage. The time in which we live, Forna shows, requires something other than fixed scripts that leave no room for suffering and learning from it. People should let go of these narratives and not see happiness as a merit or a right: "You know, a lot of people nowadays believe they're owed a happy ending"[46].

The question now is how this novel itself ends and whether there is still hope. To answer that question, let's first turn to the ending of the novel itself: we do not know whether Jean and Attila will meet again. The expectation of "and they lived happily ever after" gets frustrated: it doesn't provide closure. Our attention instead is drawn to the present, where there is hope that they might be together. The emphasis is not on the future, but on the connections and possibilities we can imagine in the present. The present is hopeful, in the sense that it provides options and chances. It is the possibility itself that our attention is drawn towards: happiness is not what might happen in future, but in the promising connections that we tend to overlook in the present.

Notably, a final encounter between Komba, the traffic warden, and Attila, steers the reader away from the notion of happiness and towards the idea of hope. Sitting on a bench by the river, Attila mourns his friend and once lover, Rosie, when Komba calls out to him.

> 'Komba,' replied Attila. 'How are you?'
> 'Surviving,' said Komba. 'And you?'
> 'Surviving too.'[47]

This exchange seems to give the impression that both men have equally encountered suffering. Yet, as Komba continues to tell Attila about a time in which they had met before but Attila does not remember, it becomes clear that these two men follow

[43] *Ibid.*, 206-207.
[44] *Ibid.*, 206.
[45] *Ibid.*, 14.
[46] *Ibid.*, 39.
[47] *Ibid.*, 288.

different stories. Komba had been a young rebel fighter; Attila remembers the event of their encounter, he does not remember Komba.

After Komba leaves, Attila goes back to his thoughts about Rosie. This gives him the conviction he needs to deliver his keynote speech, the reason why he is in London in the first place, without adhering to the "professional" gaze towards suffering. Both Attila's loss and Komba's words make this possible:

> I am hopeful, Komba had said. I am hopeful. He did not say, I am happy. That was his outlook on life. Another person might have talked about happiness, but Komba did not. Hope was of a different order from happiness. People owned the narrative of their own lives, it did not belong to the professionals. Komba was not a fighter, he was a signalman's grandson.[48]

Indeed, in conversation with Lisa Duggan, José Esteban Muñoz speaks of the critical and imaginative potential in "educated hope":

> [Hope] is not about announcing the way things *ought* to be, but, instead, imagining what things *could* be. It is thinking beyond the narrative of what stands for the world today by seeing it as not enough […] We need hope to counter a climate of hopelessness that immobilises us both on the level of thought and transformative behaviours… Hope is a risk. But if the point is to change the world we must risk hope.[49]

Let's emphasise two ideas in Muñoz's definition: The climate of hopelessness educated hope is meant to counter, and hope as a "risk". If hope and hopelessness exist in a dialectical relation, then the opposite of hope is complacency, "a form of happiness that will not risk the consequences of its own suppressed hostility and pain"[50]. As such, the hopeless climate given by the crisis of climate change (i.e., contesting our sense of the future) seems to require hope and the risks it involves (i.e., experimental forms under material and emotional conditions). If hope is understood as risky, then "there is fear attached to hope," writes Duggan.[51] Fear, especially the fear of suffering, is in fact suppressed by narratives of happiness. Komba does not talk about happiness because he knows suffering. Thus being hopeful is a way to continue being in the world, risks involved, to continue enacting "transformative behaviours".

The novel redirects us towards the notion of hope in a continuation of one of its central themes, shifts in perspective. Looking differently at the problems of our time, being aware of our limited perspectives, and attending to the need for imaginative solutions are all practices encompassed in hope. Attila understands this after his conversation with Komba. His loss does not hinder his actions; in fact, it allows him to deliver his keynote speech, which he rewrites just after this

[48] *Ibid.*, 290.

[49] Lisa DUGGAN, José ESTEBAN MUÑOZ, "Hope and hopelessness: A dialogue", in *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory*, vol. 19, no. 2, 2009, 275-283, 278.

[50] DUGGAN, ESTEBAN MUÑOZ, *ibid.*, 280.

[51] *Ibid.*, 279.

conversation. The new title of the speech is "Happiness: The Paradox." Underneath he writes three equations:

Trauma = suffering = damage

Trauma = suffering ≠ damage

Trauma = suffering = change[52]

Only after realising the potential in hope and the risks involved is Attila able to contest the narrative of happiness. Change, especially in a hopeless climate, can only occur when we cease to suppress the "threats" that come with being *affected*.

Conclusion

The practice of relating to the other is never straightforward, and its representation in *Happiness* is fittingly nuanced. But, to return once more to Attila's lecture, "the myths of ourselves" need not only be determined by the "suffering of others"— we can also create stories of solidarity and collective action.[53]

Happiness calls for interspecies connectivity and all the possibilities that it comes with for caring and relating to each other. By drawing attention to what and who we tend to overlook in the globalised city, our neglect of the current dystopic conditions becomes clear. In Forna's hyper realistic novel, affective possibilities are thread in the present. This present begins in affective and ecological mediation which cannot be fully grasped by human individuals, and as such requires the imaginative possibilities of hyper realistic fiction. In order to stand a chance at adaptation and remain hopeful, we must embrace the risks involved in the present, including encounters with unknown others. It may lead us to imagine different stories, told from multiple and imaginative perspectives.

Forna's novel rethinks human ideals, specifically our narratives of happiness, in planetary terms. Through its affective appeal, it emphasises connectivity and contingency. Happiness itself becomes marginal, and instead of a "happy ending", the novel alludes to the possibilities in hope. The ending is a warning: if we remain striving for happiness, we won't adapt, change, imagine. Hope is thus thematized, but the novel itself is not hopeful: it does not trust human resilience, progress, or globalising mechanisms, which do not incline us towards new strategies for adaptation. *Happiness* shows us ways to remain hopeful to adapt, but it is not hopeful that we will be able to see them.

In this sense, *Happiness* intertwines a network of multiple and juxtaposed perspectives that redefine the scripts of our lives. In reversing the gaze, focalizing narrative through beings which often remain "backstage", *Happiness* presents a metascript against the dangers of staying with a single script that leaves no room for suffering or misfortune. The present begins in imaginative and ecological mediations which cannot be fully grasped by human individuals, and as such requires the

[52] FORNA, *Happiness*, 292.
[53] Ibid., 305.

imaginative possibilities of fiction. We must rewrite the promises we have attached to, must imagine different stories told from multiple perspectives. And we must learn from those best suited to adapt to our changing environment, as this is our best chance at finding collective alternatives.

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