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ORIGINAL PAPER

On the Lookout for a Crack: Disruptive Becomings in Karoline Georges's Novel *Under the Stone*

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Abstract

Informed by medical science and biotechnology, Karoline Georges's novel *Under the Stone* offers a reflection on suffering bodies and imagines responses to an overwhelming sense of fear and passivity that embodied trauma and the world's many crises can create. In line with the editors' reclaiming of the milieu for the medical humanities, I draw on Deleuze and Guattari's geophilosophy and Sara Ahmed's notions of stranger and encounter for reading the novel's spatialization of oppressive power dynamics and its imagination of subversive emergence. I also complicate the literary text's discourse on space and body by relying on wonder studies to examine further its alternative forms of careful attunement enacted through the protagonist's affective and disembodied awakening, the latter fueled by his escape from "the incessant movement of automatic components that delineat[e] [his] presence in the world" (Georges 2016, 61). Happening from and because of the Tower's milieu, this escape becomes a mitigating force to physical, affective, and social struggles. I thus contend that Georges's text provides thought-provoking material about the functions and effects of art for addressing the dangers and promises of bioethics, body sovereignty, and life protection.

Keywords Fiction · Embodiment · Wonder · Relationality · Singularity

The novel *Sous béton,*[1] written in French by the multidisciplinary award-winning[2] artist from Québec Karoline Georges and published in 2011, offers a thought-provoking fictionalization of problematic caring spaces and embodiment. Georges's text is a dystopian narrative in which the protagonist, a nameless child, experiences and revisits his resistance and disruption of a totalitarian regime in a sealed-in, mile-wide, and mile-high bunker named "the Tower" and made of a unique assemblage identified as "Total Concrete." The child tells the story, in the past, of how he first rebelled by challenging his parents' authority, then by escaping their living space, and finally by transforming into a different life form that allowed him to explore the many layers of the Tower and discover the truth about the sustainability of life in the building: a cruel yet necessary system of anthropophagy that maintains life in the Tower. Among the chaos, the child's transformed embodiment—which

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I configure in the Spinozan/Deleuzian sense[3] and in line with Sara Ahmed's conceptualization of the "leaking body"—provokes a reclamation of space, within the walls of Total Concrete, in a different flow, in a renewed mobility for himself through an attunement to vibrations and other presences whom he hears through the living structure. By the end of the narrative, these encounters[4] lead to the emergence of a geography of care from a subversive, more-than-human space created between them.

Following a vague apocalyptic event, the Tower is a space of protection turned space of confinement that manages a population of passive, highly medicated subjects. *Under the Stone* imagines the possible consequences of a world where dehumanized beings are confined and forced to eat pills called "nutrients," living on a tight schedule dictated by absent and omniscient authorities, and working mechanically so that the Tower can function. While oppression, violence, and fear saturate life in the Tower, the child slowly transforms and finds "his singularity." He first does so by noticing a stain and crack on the wall of Total Concrete and then by responding to a murmur coming from that same wall. The murmur gets louder and turns into more precise voices, giving him confidence and strength to push back against the private and public expectations of passivity and obedience: "Everywhere around me, concrete. … except in the living room where a line of three dark stains was drawn near the floor. … I enjoyed watching the stains. But more than anything, I was on the lookout for a crack. Cracks were impossible, according to the father" (Georges 2016, 11–12). Early in the narrative, it becomes clear to the reader that the protagonist sees, hears, and feels a presence that no one else seems or wants to notice, for any escape or breach is neither imaginable nor allowed: "The father pretended not to have heard. The mother as well. I concluded that perhaps they were only pustules of the mind, like any one of the ideas I thought of and considered. The unfettered enthusiasm of a lonely child's deformed brain" (27). One could argue that the child symbolizes literature's ability to imagine the unthinkable, to turn to poetic language when nothing else offers solace and reinvention, when everything else is constrained and painful. Indeed, under stone,[5] nothing grows, nothing breathes, and yet the child, his body transformed, in thought, in a disembodied state, prevails.

Told in the first person, the narrative clearly establishes through the child's descriptive voice that life in the Tower is clinical, cold, and anonymous: "I was measured. I had a medical identification number that validated my existence. … But the father and the mother hadn't deemed it necessary to give me a name" (Georges 2016, 10). Here, the language marks an emotionally detached, soulless atmosphere and an absence of care between the parents and the child and between the authorities of the Tower and the population. As shown in the excerpt above, the use of the passive voice, the namelessness, and the definite article *the* replacing what could be expected to be the possessive adjective *my* to refer to one's parents participate in the text's precarious, dark, concrete-filled dystopian[6] world where this curious child struggles with deprivation and abuse:

> In the Tower, the distribution of water and oxygen was never a sure thing. Entire floors were deprived intermittently, leading to disasters. But the concrete, the concrete was immutable. The father proved it every day. With his hand wrapped around my skull, he'd smash my forehead against the ground. You see, I can crush your brain with a single hand, but concrete endures all. I'd silently acquiesce, immobilized against the floor. (Georges 2016, 12)

The father's words are not isolated from the rest of the text, as the narrative voice shifts from the child to the father for this one sentence, suggesting the father's

all-encompassing authority that swallows the child's subjectivity in the novel's early chapters. As such, the last sentence of the excerpt highlights the child's abdication and powerlessness.

To balance the oppressive and dark scenes, the text relies on paragraphs of single up to a few sentences, getting smaller as the narrative progresses and allowing the pages to breathe and mimic the child's experience from imprisonment to freedom. Such formal choices also provide an irregular rhythm that echoes the child's rough journey, giving the prose narrative a poetic, philosophical style to mitigate the reader's impulse or expectation for realism or familiarity when reading a dystopian novel. Georges's writing weaves together fiction, poetry, and philosophy, providing a textual form that imbricates life and death, big and small, inside and outside, in a uniquely affective and spatial embeddedness that makes place for subversive knowledge.

To examine the novel's fictionalization of milieu through relational subjectivity and its discourse on dis/re/embodiment, I situate, in the first section, the narrator's struggle for belonging and place, his need for care, and his battle for making sense, on the one hand, of the Tower's abusive care, while embracing, on the other, its hidden internal structure that brings him a certain solace. To better understand this complex structure, I mobilize Deleuzian theory on the milieu as a tool for reading the protagonist's embodied and relational struggle. This struggle shifts through his strange encounter with disembodied singularities calling on him from within Total Concrete in a manner that, not unlike the rhizome, is characterized by resonance, by an absence of beginning and finitude. The second section relies on the notion of wonder to further interrogate the child's process of becoming, in space, and his reappropriation of the milieu. Finally, considering what the author shared with the media regarding her creative process for writing *Under the Stone*, the conclusion reflects on writing and imagination as gestures to make sense of the ill, suffering, and hopeless bodies.

"We Will Rot Here, Our Destiny"

In this analysis, I rely on care ethics and politics not by mobilizing their feminist genealogy but by examining their impact on the representation of lived space to disrupt the Deleuzian milieu and expand its conceptual scope. Accordingly, I rely on the Deleuzian concept of the milieu to read the narrative's spatialization of struggle not strictly as a representation of a restrictive environment or—in light of the author's experience with physical injury—as a metaphor for illness but rather as the imagination of struggle as movement within movement, as a "trajectory [that] merges not only with the subjectivity of those who travel through a milieu, but also with the subjectivity of milieu itself, insofar as it is reflected in those who travel through it" (Deleuze 1997, 61). How Georges's narrative takes a turn when the presence of transgressive, traveling beings become known and how these beings come from within Total Concrete and bring new, unsuspected knowledge to the child—also strengthening his singularity through hospitality and a sense of togetherness—shed an interesting light on this idea of the subjectivity and *feelingness* of the milieu.

In this world of violent, affection-less, and nameless relations, the child appears as a vulnerable stranger, learning to pretend to be obedient, numb, and uncurious: "I learned very quickly … that the ultimate application of a well-rounded mind consisted in pretending never to have looked or found—and especially not understood—the truths that consequently became self-evident" (Georges 2016, 13). When questioning the purpose

and the inner mechanics of the Tower, the child is heavily reprimanded and brutally beaten. He is taught that his inquisitive personality and self-awareness have no place and threaten his aliveness: "The only difference between one door and the other is the attitude behind it. Some children don't ask pointless questions that could lead to immediate banishment. The father's answers cooled my heels. And put ice in my heart" (15). As the excerpt above shows, the novel's first two chapters emphasize the child's struggle to belong in the family living space, his hopelessness, and the threatening atmosphere that dictates behavior.

Early in the narrative, the narrator also describes the father's addiction to a "numbing agent" and the emotional detachment of the mother—two different forms of paralysis—contextualizing a violent, loveless, and volatile family dynamic in an abusive domestic space: "The father and the mother were adults. But the father was numbing himself more and more. And the mother rotted at the same rhythm" (Georges 2016, 76). The child further reflects on being caught between them, "Between the father and the mother, in silence, without moving, only my jaw a few seconds at a time to swallow nutrients" (67), and on being stuck in an alienating daily routine consisting of learning and faking sleep: "I waited all day, sitting on my grey sheet, my head tucked snuggly into the learning box, immobile between the concrete walls without windows" (19). If the child has an unfortunate talent for pretending, he initially accepts the father's violence: "You had to passively accept his moods or silences. You could never show suffering after punishment, no matter the depth of the wound. I swallowed my tears, arguments, and moaning, despite the tension that grew in me. There was no choice but immobility. React like concrete" (87). As such, pretending to sleep and to learn—the concrete-like behavior, in self-awareness—marks the beginning of a transformation for the child protagonist.

Then, looking back on his life before his transformation, the child comments: "Before, I'd often been immobilized on my seat, always busying myself with not moving" (Georges 2016, 107). From within their unit, they can also witness the violence of the outside because three daily banishments are televised and publicly announced: a first one for "the unemployed and unchosen," a second one for "the infected," and a last one for "the old and the dead" (48). The authorities make sure, in their ongoing panoptical surveillance, that the Tower is entirely hermetic: "We will rot here, our destiny. … Featureless wall, without a single opening. Concrete, its roots planted deep in the lithosphere, its apex high up in the stratosphere" (11). The child seems convinced, initially, that his fate is sealed. Yet, coming from the milieu of the Tower, hidden in the inner structure of Total Concrete, voices suggest to the child that he can live differently, and the narrative then focuses on the child's coping mechanisms to escape The Tower, to avoid the father and the agents' "firm grip" (84). As such, I find the rhizomatic milieu useful to read Georges's configuration of the Tower's inner structure as a space for the emergence of a different life form, a resonance, of disembodied, intersubjective voices—*singularités*—that, despite not precisely mirroring one another, are intrinsically interconnected.

Once the context is presented, *Under the Stone* centers on the child's thinking process and process of becoming, on his risky attempt at making sense of his environment and living conditions despite the parents' refusal to answer his questions: "And when I dared ask what would happen now, the father knew how to give an immediate answer, to choke out my brain's overeagerness and activity. … Walls, seats, air, nutrients. Screens with the same landscape" (Georges 2016, 14). The dismissive parental treatment, along with the violent beatings experienced at home, the useless tasks completed through a screen that feeds him propaganda, and a sense of "being on the edge of rot" (81) contribute to the child's sense of

lifelessness as well as serve as the trigger for a desire to escape despite the impossibility of that happening:

> My presence had been reduced to this minuscule knot. ... A microscopic point that revealed its limits. That pushed against my limits. To free itself. But there was no room for me… There was no place in my own body. I was already too big despite my smallness, too present. I no longer wanted to be *there*, at all. (Georges 2016, 98; italics in original)

The expression of being an unwanted "presence" by using the possessive *my* contrasts with the image of the "minuscule knot" pronominalized in the neutral *it*: "its limits." The ambiguity of the child's life form persists in the subsequent short sentences that use the possessive and personal "my limits," only to revert to the generic pronoun "itself." In addition, the juxtaposition of "too big" and "smallness" reinforces the contrast between the child's agency and self-determination—a big personality and thirst for knowledge that are bothersome, that take too much space—and his smallness, which could be attributed to malnutrition, physical violence, and poor health.

The realization that the building seems to contain other singularities and that they acknowledge his presence gives him the strength to resist and confront the parents, as he is about to be punished violently again: "But instead of protecting myself, I declaimed with newfound certainty: I don't want to do as you do. It makes no sense. You are the worst possibility. You are already dead" (Georges 2016, 97). A powerless witness to his parents' rotting away and to the banishments, the child finds purpose in critically interrogating his lived experience: "*Why?*" (46). The interrogative adverb is isolated on the page, between two double spaces, and is in italics. These two textual strategies bring attention to the child's awakening in the form of a question that, while it gives him a greater sense of agency, makes him even more vulnerable to his milieu, as his father responds to his questioning with violence and his mother with cynicism: "Why would I answer when you can't understand? she often said" (47). However, as the child discovers his singularity, the adverb takes on a different meaning: "It wasn't a why about the father's foot or the mother's glazed eyes. It was a why without a landmark. A why that produced vertigo. As if the entire Universe had titled off its axis" (47). This capacity to question his lived space and his fate, which consequently puts him at greater risk of retaliation, marks the beginning of his attempt at breaking free from this immobility. His sensory experience—seeing the crack and hearing the voices from this mysterious place within—and his newfound critical skills to question his surroundings and living conditions provoke a wonder—a concept that I flesh out in the next section—that establishes new possibilities of becoming.

Despite the violent repression, towards the end of chapter two, the child faces "the event," "the one that would cause [his] disappearance" and which he calls "the first Singularity" (Georges 2016, 44–45). If he already asked the question "*Why?*" several times before this moment, "[t]hat day, the question seemed radically different" (47). He felt a shift: "Suddenly I felt as if I'd moved. As if I'd toppled beyond the ordinary gaze that showed things as they were" (47). I suggest that this moment is a moment of wonder and that in wonder, the child encounters the world differently, attuned to other presences that appear for him through the crack he notices in the wall. These interconnected aspects of the narrative focus the text's multilayered critical and creative reflection on care as a strictly biomedical need and responsibility and on survival strategies that require moving from margins to the milieu to reclaim the space of struggle.

Furthermore, I think of this fictionalized careless space as a manifestation of how "bodily and social spaces leak into each other or inhabit each other" (Ahmed 2000, 100), a leaking

that, in *Under the Stone*, provokes an alternative space within the middle of the Tower, within its porous milieu. In her seminal essay *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*, Sara Ahmed mostly centers her reflection around the figure of the stranger and their experience with mobility and community in postcolonial studies and issues. However, her argument for complicating the familiar trope of the unbelonging-ness of the stranger—one who does not fit—with Levinas's idea of "feeling the otherness of the other" (Ahmed 2000, 140) is valid for examining, in *Under the Stone*, the child's place/lessness and singularity, as well as for interrogating the voices he responds to within Total Concrete, voices that are indicated in italics in the text: "We are not two; we are together. *One and the other and our shared consciousness. … You are exactly in You.* The others who have been swallowed up are in me. *Patience, you reached the point of fusion*" (Georges 2016, 134). The novel contends with embodiment by interrogating and imagining how conscious subjects are "produced through encounters, rather than preceding" (Ahmed 2000, 143–44).

As this previous excerpt suggests, and aside from the novel's dystopian proposition of disembodied beings, *Under the Stone* resonates with Ahmed's relational ontology in how it suggests, through the child's process of becoming and his singularity only made possible through relation, that a subject "comes into existence as an entity only through encounters with others" and that "[a] subject's existence cannot be separated from the others who are encountered" (Ahmed 2000, 7). More precisely, similarly to Ahmed's focus in her essay on the impact of asymmetrical power dynamics on relationality, the relationality of Georges's protagonist—his disembodied relational reinvention—comes into existence in tension with a power struggle against and within the Tower: in tension with the authority of the father, the passive complicity of the mother, and the oppressive methods of patrolling agents. In the novel, these tensions impact this "leakage" between embodied and social space, threatening the child's sense of belonging and saturating the environment—private and public—of the Tower with constant fear, exhaustion, and hypervigilance. This new spatialized relationality reshapes the milieu of the Tower, instigating intersubjective reinvention and new affective moments as well as leading the troubled character to develop, as I have argued elsewhere, survival strategies "that challenge the opposition between life and death and bring attention to the textures between"[7] (Hétu 2015, 161). Looking closely at the novel's spatial production of the milieu as a structure of feeling—feelings that are woven in the narrative voice and the poetic organization of the text—provides a critical understanding of the text's subversive fictionalization of body and lived space, of its brutal portrayal and mobilization of a child character who is a misfit and stranger in the only world he knows and who experiences physical and psychological abuse, as well as of the purpose for the more-than-human care the child encounters. Once again, the child is hopeless before these encounters: "The circle of becoming appeared to me as a hangman's knot" (Georges 2016, 89). This unexpected care from the mysterious voices he hears from within the Tower provokes a sense of belonging, agency, and possibility—in wonder—that brings him relief, as he remarks, "I am no longer afraid" (Georges 2016, 138) towards the end of the narrative.

Reclaiming the Milieu, in Wonder

This singular sense of wonder, first toward his desire for truth and knowledge, then for the crack in the wall, and finally for the inviting voices, provokes an affective consciousness and an awareness of an otherness within Total Concrete, reaching out, as if to save him from repeating the sameness in the living space with the father and mother. As I have previously

stated (Hétu 2015, 2018), this knot triggers a sense of wonder at the new possibility for the child's dis/re/embodied experience through this breach that will eventually allow him to transform and merge with the concrete building, and to join with the other singularities.

The contemporary genealogy for the notion of wonder mostly stems from scholarship in gender and sexual difference, such as that of Luce Irigaray and Elizabeth Grosz. As I have previously explained,[8] scholarly readers of Irigaray, such as Marguerite La Caze and Grosz,

> have remarked, … that the latter complicates Descartes's idea when she suggests that "in regarding the other with wonder, their existence resists assimilation or reduction to sameness or self and we are able to accept difference in them" (La Caze, "Encounter" 5). Indeed, in her theorization of sexual difference Irigaray, argues that "wonder involves a realization that the self is not alone" (6) and it is this recognition of the self as being with others, as being together in a certain vulnerability, that connects her and Descartes's notion of wonder with the wonder represented in … *Sous Béton.* (Hétu 2015, 168–69)

This connection uncovers a broader conception of wonder that reaches beyond—without dismissing—sexual difference, allowing a helpful extrapolation for the analysis of the text and for thinking about the place of wonder in dystopian imagination.

Also relying on the work of Irigaray as well as that of Iris Marion Young, Louise Economides suggests that wonder,[9] as a critical and ecological concept, "is vital not only to sexual politics but also to ethics more generally: 'wonder and desire remain the possible spaces of freedom between the subject and the world' " (Irigaray, quoted in Economides 2016, 25). In *The Ecology of Wonder*, she defines wonder as a "welcome uncertainty," a "gateway to new possibilities" (Economides 2016, 1), and a "capacity to respond to the call … of things" (6). Although suspicious of certain scholars' overconfidence in configuring wonder as a systematically compelling and guaranteed source of ethics and respect, Economides nonetheless argues that wonder shares ground with notions of "conservation" and "protection" (26) as well as with "something worthy of awe and care" (24). Her claim that wonder can operate as "an aesthetic and ethics of possibility and creativity" (22), along with her focus on the relationship between ecology and wonder, resonates with Georges's imaginary world. In the latter, there is also, through the dramatized, poetic voice of the child who moves through and reclaims space while being physically constrained, "a certain productive naiveté in the name of positive change" (Economides 2016, 34) along with a focus on the symbolic and material interactions of space, body, and identity. Following the work of Irigaray and Young, these different theorizations of wonder do not idealize or romanticize the notion and rather explore the complexities of shared and singular experiences to resist dominant ideologies of response to "otherness."

This instrumental wonder in *Under the Stone* also echoes Vicki Kirby's use of the notion in *Telling Flesh: The Substance of the Corporeal*. She writes that wonder is a "relentless process of identity formation" that allows interrogating "the very notion of circumscription, difference, the limit, the line" of "what secures the identity of one thing, or one self to the other" (Kirby 1997, 110). Drawing on and departing from Judith Butler, Jane Gallop, and Drucilla Cornell, Kirby revisits, through the work of Ferdinand de Saussure, the idea of the body as a site of cultural writing, provocatively suggesting that if the body is a site of inscription, it is also a site where "flesh reads" (127). For Kirby, "matter" constituting and traversing the body can also be thought of as "speaking to us" (127). This idea that flesh speaks is rich for reading *Under the Stone* and its configuration of bodies in and within Total Concrete. It offers a conceptual breach with which to think about the relational interaction between dis/embodied beings, and between human and nonhuman.

As such, the child's sense of placelessness shifts when he disembodies and disappears within the Total Concrete, turning into a way of inhabiting the Tower differently, of resisting, in strangeness, in togetherness, and in disembodiment, the Tower's surveillance[10] and its dehumanizing, sanitizing, and alienating practices:

> The crack continued growing in me. I didn't have a body anymore, and hadn't had one for a long time, I had thought up until then. But it turned out that wasn't exactly true. My consciousness was another form of the nucleus of my being, the true presence for which my body was only a carapace. I was still me. … The self with the singular path. (Georges 2016, 129)

With his newfound singularity, the child feels an anxious knot growing inside him: "A knot in me that had become denser through the alienating repetition of sameness" (Georges 2016, 97). In wonder, the child "feels something moving" inside him, pushing him to confront, one last time, the father, who then reacts very violently: "The father punched and punched and pushed and pushed … And so I disappeared … And the next moment, hearing and sight were reactivated. Simultaneously. And better than before" (99–104). Having disappeared and reappeared in an ambiguous shape within Total Concrete, the child interrogates his new state of being: "I can't contain myself anymore. … Am I rotting? … There's almost nothing left of me" (136). A voice responds, as shown by the italics in the text: "*Don't fear. Everything that you were arises now. Your being opened, manifest. … You're expressing yourself ... Don't resist. It is a moment of opening*" (136). Here, almost at the end of the novel, the new life form is further expressed by a shift in textual structures as single sentences are spread out on the page, poem-like, forcing a different speed and rhythm, embracing the paratextual space, and extending the affects of the narrative over the empty parts of the page. The narrative also shifts from the child's perspective to a blurring of *I* and *we*: "Something beats. A regular pulse. … All the noises of the Living, the echoes of the past, … become one, dissolve, call to one another. I receive the totality of these combined presences that push toward Me" (145). This new pulse as a response, as pushback, to the systematic, organized repressive repetition of the Same, suggests a new codification, a re/configuration of life and death in the Tower, along with new knowledge: "I knew nothing during my body. Why?" (137).

At the same time, in a narrative turn that pushes further the dystopian discourse on dehumanization and sustainability, this idea of "becoming one," of "dissolution," takes on a different meaning when the narrator understands that the Tower feeds on itself, that anthropophagic practices are what sustains life on the inside. In his disembodied state, as the narrator explores the Tower, he witnesses the crushing of the dead bodies of those who were "ejected" but who "never made it to the bottom of the Tower" (Georges 2016, 116). He also witnesses their transformation into what he calls "mash" before they become the "nutrients" (116) and the "mind-numbing agent": "I saw the residue of the mash mixed into this mess, fecal matter homogenized, all of it filtered, heated, then a new operation of division—the solid concentrate sent into the Tower's energy systems, and the liquid substance refined into a colorless substance. The mind-numbing agent" (117). The faceless authorities have used those nutrients and the numbing agent to sustain a lifeless existence in a heavily controlled environment, and the text, through the mobilization of anthropophagy, further exacerbates the precariousness that ties life and death, cure and care, together. Accordingly, while the disembodied subjectivity of the child "survives" by blending with a plural voice in the end, the text does not entirely dismiss the body but strangely, brutally, and poetically repurposes it. The text also subverts this hopeful relationality with this

brutal utilitarian decision to turn bodies into sustenance, to further reframe and disrupt the transformative possibility of this relational existence.

The narrator contends with the dominant system to better subvert and disrupt it, using its porous walls to escape the production chain. And the use of the first-person narrative voice moving from the singular to the plural suggests, through its messiness and its intersubjective transformation, not just a corporeal shift but also a symbolic one for the narrator's consciousness, symbolic of a desire to emancipate if escaping the Tower is not entirely possible: "Your limitations are fading. … You're expressing yourself. All your identity, your memory. And we're absorbing it. … *Because we are searching for the Way Out*" (Georges 2016, 136–37; italics in original). Now somehow a part of Total Concrete, the child is no longer subjected to it.

The text makes it clear, despite the ambiguous enunciation that characterizes the strange reinvention of the child's being, that his presence is now best understood as a process: "I was going to disappear, completely, if I didn't flee immediately. I felt the process happening as I stood there" (Georges 2016, 128). A reclamation of space, an appropriation of the milieu of the Tower, his disembodied relational singularity is also motivated by a desire for the survival of consciousness, for an *inhabiting* of consciousness, to borrow from Ahmed again. For instance, as the child analyzes his new state of being, he characterizes his new sense of self (in an awareness that might seem uncanny for a child). The short paragraphs are double-spaced, in fragments that echo the protagonist's dissolved, dispersed being:

> Dissolution had accelerated the moment I discovered my face etched in the Tower.
>
> As if the part of the *who* folded into myself had found its true source. And wanted to melt inside it. And yet something of me survived.
>
> Something that wanted to survive.
>
> And so I pressed forward. … I thought only of my journey's objective. I couldn't do anything else. There was nowhere to reach. …
>
> Only this intention of putting distance between myself and the Tower. (Georges 2016, 128; italics in original)

The child was initially letting himself die as he witnessed the murders of his siblings by the father and the hopeless rotting of his mother. The breach in the wall and the voices heard, along with his disembodiment into the milieu of the Tower, lead to an encounter, in strangeness, that shifts his rapport to life and death and allows a different spatialization and possibility for life, a poetic strategy that echoes one of Ahmed's claims in *Stranger Encounters*: "It is only through meeting with an-other that the identity of a given person *comes to be inhabited as living*" (Ahmed 2000, 8; italics in original). Through this newfound relationality, the child's process of "becoming"—a term used extensively by both Deleuze and Ahmed—begins when his singularity kicks in, the latter taking root in his discovery of the crack in the wall and the vibrations of the voices within. As such, this relational, caring "otherness of the other" appears not in a strangeness that perpetuates the violence of the Tower and of the private space where his family decays but in hospitality and attention, in opposition to a repetition of the same through the figures of the parents.

If the Child cannot escape this milieu, he can nevertheless build different relations, in wonder, among the chaos and barbaric practices and ultimately subvert some boundaries from within. For instance, in contrast to the rhythmic patterns that structure most of the narrative, the final section, in which the child completes his transformation and emancipates by using cryptic, quantic pseudo-theoretical words—for example, "Everything compressed into a single point. I am that point. A microscopic entity immediately closed in on itself" and "*You can reach the quark state*" (Georges 2016, 135; italics in original), raises questions for the reader about whether this process symbolizes death or whether the protagonist becomes one of the walled-in voices. What seems to really matter, however, is best represented by the protagonist's final statements: "I had never imagined such … gentleness" (138), the latter word standing out in an ironic abruptness on the page.

The child's strange sense of becoming, in wonder, further develops when he can gesture, in recognition, toward those similarly strange voices that he encounters. Ahmed's critical configuration of strange encounters—despite its different postcolonial context—thus provides additional ground on which to sit Georges's fictionalized strangeness, the latter which is poetized for the protagonist to embrace it to survive and to resist, from within, from the milieu, in his singularity. Indeed, Georges's fictional and philosophical text stresses, by the covert movements of the protagonist inside the Tower, that this milieu is not entirely immune to and independent from the outside. That being said, focusing on a porous relationship from within between the child and other beings whom he longs and searches for through the crack in the wall, the narrative suggests, through the protagonist's ability to think and imagine, in wonder, beyond the limits of his confined lived space—that there is something in its milieu that is already there, co-constitutive of the protagonist's subjectivity—the text disturbs and reorganizes understandings of body and relationality. As the narrative progresses, it slowly unfolds that something in the Tower's inner structures somehow pushes back. In its discussion of survival, embodiment, and self-reinvention, the text contends with notions of corporeality and hospitality, strategies of adaptation, and subversive care that allow imagining a different milieu and challenging dominant configurations of the embodied, singular self. The text thus offers, more broadly, a unique reflection, dark and poetic, for thinking about and imagining what is possible when biomedical care is not enough to sustain life and afford agency.

Writing the Body in Pain

In different media interviews, Karoline Georges remarks that she imagined, through writing, the protagonist's transmutation to examine better another obsession of hers: how, in nature, any obstacle leads to adaptation, which further explains the impossibility of escaping the Tower. For instance, in an interview for the literary magazine *Nuit blanche*, she says: "It is because there is no possible get away that the narrator's conscious and singular experience can happen and provide material for this anticipation towards a new sense of embodiment" (Bergeron 2019, 35, translation mine). Asked about a similar trope in her first literary text, *La mue de l'hermaphrodite* (Georges 2001), she further explains her focus on the idea of consciousness: "From the outset of all my fiction work, there is always a being that feels as if they are in the blind spot [sic] of existence, that has the impression that they don't know how to exist. And this character will try to reach another state of consciousness" (Bergeron 2019, 36, translation mine). Accordingly, Georges's exploration of a different form of embodiment through this consciousness suggests new avenues for thinking relationality not only when the

situated body gives in to pain but when the nurturing and sustaining system denies proper care beyond primary, mechanical needs and serves only to dehumanize and control. The text plays with the limits of embodied subjectivity and relationality by imagining a form of care that unfolds in the milieu by this relatedness made available through the crack in Total Concrete. This availability, this hospitality is to be understood as a responsiveness to vulnerability, a form of at/tending to that is shaped by the child's singular attempt at reinventing his life form with those others whom he hears and feels, rather than to succumb to the violence of the father and the authorities who have the power to barge in their suite randomly.

It also seems that this attention to consciousness stems from a traumatic experience that caused her to rethink her own rapport with her body. Indeed, Karoline Georges first trained as a contemporary dancer before turning to other forms of art following a tragic car crash that left her immobile for a long time, forcing her to rethink her relationship with a body over which she felt she had no power. As such, Georges makes explicit another source of inspiration for this immobility and confinement that the Tower enforces on its inhabitants: "I have scars, I've had serious accidents in my life … I know what physical pain is, deeply, and I think we pursue themes in our life, as a form of resilience" (Lalonde 2011, translation mine). While other forms of crises inform her work, such as climate change, overpopulation, and mass extinction, each shaping the novel's exploration of the pain of living, Georges does not shy away from explaining how her own traumatic experience with embodied pain shapes her creative work:

> When you experience something so tragic, you are not prepared to face the fragility of the body, and that radically changes your perception. I became more interiorized, I would say. I took conscience … of my conscience. From this experience of severe physical pain, right away, in my imagination, there was this desire for the sublime, for transformation, for getting out of my body that was too heavy. (Guy 2014, translation mine)

In another interview for the Montréal newspaper *Le Devoir*, Georges admits that rather than seeking a disembodied mind, she uses fiction to explore the sublime: "Maybe because I don't really accept that I live in a body. I was always fascinated by transcendence, by this idea that the human being is transition, that the body is embryonic. The idea of sublimation is to reach this higher level" (Lalonde 2011, translation mine). Accordingly, in *Under the Stone*, chaos, death, life, and a sense of wonder for a different form of embodiment interweave with caring and careless subjects and spaces to produce a complicated and troubling reinvention of the self in crisis.

It would then be reductive to suggest that Georges's use of dystopia is about imagining the body's disappearance. Instead, as this final section suggests, her artistic world, including her writing practice, calls for the creative and critical emergence of a new experience of embodiment through a sense of wonder and care that, as inductors of openness, awareness, and possibility, help confront and problematize the world's hostility. As I have shown in the first section, it is also noteworthy that the text does not glorify the protagonist's singularity, nor does it naively rely on hope or empathy to reframe individuality as the only way out: "Since the beginning of my singularity, I was in a constant state of worry. Something had to give" (Georges 2016, 49). On the contrary, as I discuss in the second section, the text's mobilization of singularity, through a sense of wonder, asks for a reinvention of relational experience through a reconfiguration of this leakage between body and space, hence reinforcing, rather than discarding, the potential of intersubjectivity for reclaiming the milieu and for choosing vitality over apathy.

Endnotes

[1] Jacob Homel translated the novel in 2016 ass Under the Stone. I am using his version.
[2] Georges has won, among several other prizes, the Governor General's Award for French Fiction in 2018 for De Synthèse, a text she wrote while caring for her terminally ill mother. Sous béton was a finalist for the Prix des libraires du Québec in 2012.
[3] Deleuze (1988, 127) writes: "A body can be anything: it can be an animal, a body of sounds, a mind or idea; it can be a linguistic corpus, a social body, a collectivity."
[4] In "Milieu, Territory, Atmosphere: New Spaces of Knowledge," Andreas Philippopoulos-Mihalopoulos (2016, 83) explains: "An encounter for Deleuze and Guattari pushes the encountered parties off their comfort zone of categories and identities and throws them in a 'mad becoming' (Deleuze 2004, 141)."
[5] In the title, something seems lost from the original "béton." While it makes sense to avoid the ambiguous "concrete" in the title, "stone" does not convey the airtight, impervious quality of "béton." As such, it is interesting to note that in the novel, béton is translated as concrete; for instance, "Béton total" becomes "Total Concrete."
[6] Sous béton adds to a growing category of post-apocalyptic fiction published in Canada and Québec since 2000. For example, Atwood's trilogy MaddAddam (2003–2013) and Emily St. John Mandel's Station Eleven (2014) have gained significant popular and critical praise, while in French, the novel Faune, by Christiane Vadnais (Fauna, translated by Pablo Strauss, Coach House Books, 2020), and L'Avenir, by Catherine Leroux (The Future, translated by Susan Ouriou, Biblioasis, 2023), have also been acclaimed for imagining the environmental and traumatic impact of apocalyptic destruction. Georges's novel confirms Marlene Goldman's observation in Rewriting Apocalypse in Canadian Fiction that "contemporary Canadian fiction … typically portrays the apocalypse from the perspective of marginalized individuals" (Goldman 2005, 18). It also resonates with Susan Watkins's analysis in Contemporary Women's Post-Apocalyptic Fiction, more specifically in the chapter "The Posthuman Body," of the political, ethical, and symbolic significance of fictional bioforms as new figures of kinship reimagining the world and its relationalities (Watkins 2020).
[7] I first analyzed Sous béton in comparison with Emma Donoghue's novel Room in an article (Hétu 2015) that focuses on the role of the nonhuman in the child characters' development of a spatial and affective sense of wonder as a survival strategy.
[8] To better situate its potential for literary analysis, I first mapped a genealogy of wonder in "Of Wonder and Encounter: Textures of Human and Nonhuman Relationality in Two Novels" (Hétu 2015).
[9] I also mobilized the notion of wonder to analyze the fiction of Anglo-Québécoise writer Heather O'Neill. The latter uses the term repeatedly in her work, at times juxtaposing it to that of "squalor," such as in her novels Lullabies for Little Criminals and The Girl Who Was Saturday Night as well as in her collection of short stories Daydreams of Angels (Hétu 2020, 2021). While I recuperate some of the general framework to study Under the Stone, I rely on it differently in my previous work on O'Neill by tying it to the notion of the ordinary.
[10] My critical analysis is also indebted to Michel Foucault's concepts of the biomedical gaze and panopticism: his understanding of power relations in medicalized and scrutinized spaces is crucial for reading the narrator's vulnerable and intertwined rapport to space, body, discipline, and health.

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