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POSTCOLONIAL FEARS AND POST-APOCALYPTIC IMAGERY IN *KIPO AND THE AGE OF WONDERBEASTS*

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ABSTRACT: Fantasies of (post-)apocalypse are both a product and a producer of the Anthropocene, reproducing the concerns and fears that populate our unconscious imaginary, while providing us with unrealistic and inefficient solutions to current crises. Nevertheless, apocalyptic films can prompt us to yearn for something different, conceiving the disaster not as an ending, but as the beginning of a new world. The aim of this paper is to examine the series *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* from a postcolonial perspective claiming its initial premise reflects current western fears of reverse invasion and colonization. Through the inversion of human/animal hierarchies, this series interrogates the legacies of colonialism within our Anthropocene present. However, unlike other post-apocalyptic narratives, *Kipo* addresses these fears through restorative frameworks of hybridization and more-than-human relationality to create a post-anthropocentric society that embraces change and becoming as their core values.
RESUMEN: Las fantasías del (post)apocalipsis son a la vez producto y productoras del Antropoceno, reproduciendo preocupaciones y temores que habitan nuestro imaginario inconsciente, al tiempo que nos proporcionan soluciones ineficaces a las actuales crisis. Sin embargo, las películas apocalípticas pueden incitarnos a anhelar algo diferente, concibiendo el desastre no como un final, sino como el comienzo de un mundo nuevo. Este artículo examina la serie *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* desde una perspectiva poscolonial, alegando que su premisa inicial refleja los temores occidentales actuales a la invasión y colonización inversas. A través de la inversión de las

jerarquías humano/animal, esta serie cuestiona los legados del colonialismo dentro de nuestro presente Antropocéntrico. Sin embargo, a diferencia de otras narrativas postapocalípticas, *Kipo* aborda estos miedos a través de marcos restaurativos de hibridación y relacionalidad más-que-humana para crear una sociedad posantropocéntrica que adopta el cambio y el devenir como valores fundamentales.

INTRODUCTION

In the last twenty years, animated media has become a powerful site for cultural production that engages with complex social, political and environmental anxieties. Series such as *Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005-2008), *Adventure Time* (2010-2018) and *Steven Universe* (2013-2019) took a groundbreaking approach to their worldbuilding by including diverse representations of disability, gender and sexuality (Robinson). Moreover, their narratives undertook complex themes that pushed the boundaries of what, up until then, was considered appropriate for children's media, including elements of indigenous genocide, nuclear fallout, and imperial conquest, all the while, focusing on the lives and experiences of teenage protagonists. Far from being mere escapist entertainment, such narratives often function as cultural workshops, where visions of societal breakdown, environmental destruction and reconstituted power relations are imaginatively explored. Despite the increased diversity of themes in children's animation, this medium continues to be read primarily through perspectives of gender and sexuality (Reinhard and Olson; Lamari and Greenhill; Aley and Hahn; Harriger et al.), which have nevertheless challenged the assumption that children's media is "lacking in cultural or ideological value" (Buckingham 49). However, this limited scope fails to engage in wider interdisciplinary discussions that connect issues of gender and sexual identity with wider postcolonial and environmental humanities approaches to nature.

The aim of this paper is to examine DreamWorks Animation Television's series *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* (2020) through a triangulated framework of ecocriticism, postcolonial theory and critical posthumanism. The ecocritical perspective helps to illuminate how the series mobilizes apocalyptic tropes not as fatalistic closures but as opportunities for ecological and cultural renewal, whereas the postcolonial lens reveals how the narrative interrogates fears of reverse colonization (Giuliani) and the persistence of imperialist logic,

particularly through its depiction of hybrid bodies and identities. As such, the series is ideally placed to interrogate the legacies of colonialism within our Anthropocene present (Cristofaro 18). Finally, the posthumanist perspective enables an examination of the ways the series reimagines kinship, care and relationality beyond anthropocentric hierarchies. The paper argues that by narrating stories in which humanity is able to "reinvent itself affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relations" (Braidotti 195) it can displace the self-fulfilling prophecies of post-apocalyptic fiction and provide fictional playgrounds in which to envision creative alternatives to our current crises. This essay begins with a review of the theoretical debates surrounding apocalyptic imaginaries, situating the discussion within current ecocritical and postcolonial scholarship. It then turns to an overview of the series' narrative worldbuilding, particularly how it engages the post-apocalyptic setting. The essay continues with an overview of anthropomorphism as a narrative strategy within animated media, followed by an analysis of the disruption of the human/animal binary present in *Kipo*. Finally, the argument narrows down to the series' engagement with colonial anxieties, as exemplified by its antagonists, arguing that in the end, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* displaces apocalyptic fatalism through its fantastic use of hybridization and affective posthuman futures.

CONFRONTING THE (POST)-APOCALYPSE

The term Anthropocene has come to define our current geological era; one marked irrevocably by human activity. The term was first proposed by Crutzen and Stoermer to designate the new geological epoch proceeding the Holocene (17), and since then, many scholars have either embraced the term or proposed alternatives to refer to our current socio-political or geo-environmental era, one that has been shaped extensively by the anthropogenic transformation of the Earth's systems. The term, however, has not been without its criticisms, and as a result of the proliferation of its critique, there is an abundance of monikers that promise to capture more precisely the socio-political and ecological complexities of our time. Donna Haraway's *Chthulucene,* Jason Moore's *Capitalocene,* or more recently, Marco Armiero's *Wasteocene* are some of the most popular re-conceptualizations of the term, which include alternative genealogies for the beginning of this turbulent era, or, as is the case of Haraway,

it offers speculative alternatives to confront our cultural and ecological crises. However, in spite of all the criticism and debates surrounding the concept of the Anthropocene, there seems to be a general consensus indicating that more than a crisis about the designation of a geological epoch, this is in fact a period in human history that is culturally, politically and economically unstable. Despite the technological advances of the last decades, and the growing interconnectedness of the world, this era is one marked by uncertainty, hostility and constant danger. Even with the creation of the United Nations at the end of War World II, which sought to "maintain international peace and security" (United Nations Charter), according to the conflict index of ACLED, in the past five years the levels of warfare have "almost doubled" and "50 countries rank in the Index categories for extreme, high or turbulent levels of conflict" (Raleigh and Kishi).

The ever-growing threat of war at a global scale has aroused a myriad of fears and anxieties over the current status of the world and the possibilities of its future, which are explored in apocalyptic or post-apocalyptic narratives. In popular media, such stories have always abounded and although "such visions are an imaginative force oriented toward the future, [they are nevertheless] driven by [a] pervasive anxiety about the prospects for life" (Ginn 352). In cinema, the question of what these apocalyptic narratives can achieve has been addressed from multiple perspectives. One of them is the eco-Marxist viewpoint which suggests that apocalyptic imaginaries are "politically disabling" (Katz 277), rendering an otherwise catastrophic event into an equalizing force that "produces an ecology of fear, danger and uncertainty while reassuring the 'people' […] that the techno-scientific and socio-economic elites have the necessary tool-kit to readjust the machine such that things can basically stay as they are" (Swyngedouw 11). A more productive standpoint is the ecocritical perspective, which argues that cinema has the potentiality to "reframe perception" for progressive ends (Rust et al. 11). The latter is echoed by narratologists and eco-film critics alike, both of which emphasize the potential of narratives to "engage us emotionally and sensually and thereby move us to action" (Mossner 8). This group of scholars highlights that ecofilm's potential lies in its capacity to reveal "contradictions as the fissures through which we may glimpse and further imagine an ecology without capital—an ecology to come" (Hageman 66). In the field of econarratology, Arran Stibbe identifies various instances in which apocalyptic narratives have been successful in mobilizing and

encouraging new ways of thinking about the current unsustainable world order (196) and suggests that, despite the criticism these narratives have accrued in ecocritical circles, there is merit to them, as they can help us "discover stories and ways of using language which […] can speak to our times" (218). Following this line of thinking, *Kipo*'s use of the post-apocalyptic setting allows for a questioning and reconstitution of the world, creating space "for a now-orientation that disrupts normative teleologies of development, enabling queer possibilities for existing and relating to others" (Staite).

Besides approaching the post-apocalypse from an ecocritical standpoint, this paper also engages with it through a postcolonial lens. This perspective opens up the possibility of critically assessing the reconstituted power relations of the new world order that the series proposes. To do so, I borrow from the work done by Gaia Giuliani, who suggests that "unruly mobility from the Global South to the Global North, post-9/11 organised terrorism and the ever-evolving environmental crisis have unleashed a complex assemblage of anxieties, fears and apocalyptic imagery" (Giuliani 1). In her work, she identifies zombies, viral attacks, aliens and immigration hoards as the figures that exemplify the fears of reverse invasion and colonization. In this essay, my interpretation of the mutant animals of *Kipo* will be based on Giuliani's analysis of the figure of the alien, particularly for its dimension as an agent capable of "bio-mutation" (89). According to her, this figure triggers two very different reactions:

> On the one hand, there are fears of a reverse postcolonial genocide—that is, a backlash of the impact of modern colonisation and Western viruses and bacteria on the indigenous people. Likewise, there are fears that an alien invasion will result in the extinction of the former coloniser. On the other hand, there is enthusiasm for a new, beautifully monstrous dimension that is contrapuntal to the Anthropocene, which Donna Haraway has called the Chthulucene. (90)

Unlike the other figures identified by Giuliani, the alien becomes crucial to the analysis of the series, given that it questions the common "fantasies of post-apocalyptic survival, [in which] the human body is still envisioned as untouched or at least not contaminated in its (genetic) essence" (176). Stories that resist this idea of the superior and pristine human body are increasingly challenged by narratives in which this bio-mutation or hybridity

becomes the only way for humanity to survive, as is the case of *Kipo*. These stories inaugurate "a post-human epoch based on *awareness* that life is inherently contaminated and interdependent" (Giuliani 178), displacing the idea that humanity must always find a way to maintain its purity and assert dominance over nature and the more-than-human. This will be explored at length in the final section of the essay, where the anxieties arising from the contamination of mutant animals are explored by focusing on the main antagonists of the series.

Finally, the critical posthumanist perspective of Rosi Braidotti is pivotal for the analysis of the series. As she has aptly pointed out, for much of Western history, the term human has been used to define a limited selection of what constitutes humanity, excluding from its definition anyone who is "non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, non-healthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced" (Braidotti 68). In the same book, she later argues that for humanity to move away from its anthropocentric ways of life, it needs to "reinvent itself affirmatively, through creativity and empowering ethical relationships" (195). As will be demonstrated in the following sections, the series achieves this vision of the posthuman through the use of hybridization and more-than-human relationality. These elements are central in creating a hopeful future that moves away from anthropocentric hierarchies, as well as unsettling the conventional post-apocalyptic logic, which has a propensity for "nihilism and the portrayal of a human species beyond redemption" (Doyle 99).

NARRATIVE WORLDBUILDING

Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts is a United States and South Korean animated science-fantasy series produced by DreamWorks Animation Television and Studio Mir and released on Netflix. An adaptation of Radford Sechrist's webcomic by the same name, it consists of three seasons, all released in 2020. The series is set in a post-apocalyptic setting, following the story of a teenage girl named Kipo Oak who is searching for her father and her human colony after it is destroyed by a giant mutant monkey. In this future world, animals have mutated into beings of varying degrees of intelligence, size and power, colloquially referred to as mutes. In the series timeline, in the year 2020, the newly mutated animals overran human cities, forcing the humans to retreat to underground shelters now referred to as burrows. The series begins in the 23rd century where Los Angeles has been reduced to a post-apocalyptic wasteland collectively known as

"Las Vistas." Both humans and animals have survived in the face of this apocalypse, but humanity is no longer the apex species, having been physically and culturally displaced in this new world-order. The new sentient mutant animals, having found themselves in the midst of a human world, adopted and adapted the cultures of the human occupants and appropriated them to create their own species identities and dynamics. As such, what the series initially displays are animal factions whose behavior and identity are very much rooted in human history and culture, whereas the human population has more or less maintained a more passive and stable cultural identity, removed from its anthropocentric past.

This hierarchical inversion is not merely a fantastical element, but a deliberate narrative strategy that evokes and interrogates current postcolonial fears of reverse colonization and human extinction. The series' depiction of mutant animals as both sentient and, in some cases, powerful predatory figures, operates as a powerful metaphor for Western fears of reverse invasion, in which "fear of invasion […] is clearly *fear of racial replacement*" (Giuliani 143). Historically, Western narratives have often portrayed colonized subjects as Other and subordinate; however, *Kipo* disrupts this paradigm by inverting these roles. In the reimagined landscape of the series, the colonized, here symbolized by the animal mutants, rise to challenge the authority of their former rulers and manage to recreate a world that replaces the Anthropos as the measure of all things. This narrative inversion is indicative of a broader postcolonial anxiety: the fear that the oppressed may one day overturn the established order, thereby exposing the fragility of colonial legacies. Moreover, this inversion is not presented as a simplistic reversal of power but as a complex interplay of agency and interdependence.

Visually, the series juxtaposes the chaotic remnants of a once-dominant human civilization with the vibrant, unpredictable forms of mutant life. This is achieved by situating the storyworld in a post-apocalyptic time, given that

> apocalyptic metaphors play an important role in econarratives because they envision a collapse, unravelling or rupture of prevailing unsustainable world orders, and open up the imagination for something new. (Stibbe 195)

This new world, therefore, has not become lifeless and listless in the face of human's societal collapse. Instead, it is populated by a plethora of mutes that engage with their new life and environment in highly creative and diverse ways. For instance, one of the first animals that Kipo encounters are the dubstep bees (figure 1). These mega-bees express themselves through dubstep beats, synth sounds, and neon lights presumably made by the movement of their bodies instead of their usual buzzing. The vibrant and multicolored design of these animals reveals a world that has thrived in the aftermath of this apocalypse and in the absence of human life. Unlike the fears evoked by such drastic changes in apocalyptic media, which envision a world devastated and unable to renew itself in the face of humanity's destruction, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* uses this contrast as a visual metaphor for the breakdown of hierarchical structures and the emergence of new, hybrid ecologies.

Figure 1 - Dubstep Bees

Furthermore, the series deconstructs throughout its seasons our assumptions about these mutants, playing with the pre-existing prejudices that currently exist about animals and the post-apocalypse. Narratively, Kipo begins her journey aboveground in a precarious situation: away from her home, her dad and the safety of a human environment, thrown into the seemingly dangerous world of the mutes. Besides her initial encounter with the dubstep bees, Kipo meets a small non-talking mutant pig that she names Mandu (figure

2), who immediately runs away from her in fear ("Burrow Girl"). Despite the narrative indications that mutants are a danger to what remains of human life, Mandu and other mutants Kipo encounters in her first moments away from her human community, dispel her human-entrenched notions that life above ground is inherently dangerous and that mutants always pose a threat to human life. She quickly realizes that a post-apocalyptic world does not entail the actual end of the world, but rather, it sparks in her a yearning for something different that might move beyond the current anthropocentric myopia, highlighting that the "the question is not how to continue present ways of life, but the deeper challenge of crafting new ways to respond with honor and dignity to unruly earth forces" (Ginn 359). Likewise, as her journey progresses, she continues to cross paths with various other individuals, human and mutant alike, and through these encounters, it is shown that the animal mutants possess their own ethical and affective dimensions, marked by distinct species groupings and complex social dynamics. This is realized by various degrees of anthropomorphism of the mega-mute fauna, as well as naturecultural hybridity which will be explored in the following sections.

Figure 2 - Mandu

THE NATURECULTURAL THROUGH ANTHROPOMORPHISM

Anthropomorphism has been addressed within the field of Animation Studies, most notably in Paul Wells' book *Animated Bestiary*, which delineates the history and use of animal stories in animated media. Wells argues that the animal "is an essential

component of the language of animation, but one so naturalized that [their] anthropomorphic agency […] has not been particularly interrogated" (2). Furthermore, he claims that unlike other forms of fiction, the

> animated form almost inherently resists coherence as a textual currency, even if it speaks […] to a conventional narratology. This enables the text to carry with it a diverse phenomenology and potentially subversive agendas. (50)

This is why, despite there being a varied body of scholarship devoted to the animal question within the text, animation continues to resist a fixed meaning, given its history as a comic medium that facilitates a "flux of meaning and intention" (Wells 48) within its story. To address this gap, he proposes that animals in animation can be represented and understood through the concept of "bestial ambivalence" (51), a recognition that animals are often depicted through a "raft of polar opposites" (51). His model for bestial ambivalence includes the terms "pure animal," "aspirational human," "critical human," and "hybrid humanimality"; all of which are a result of his engagement with Haraway's concepts of "natureculture" (*Companion Species* 30), and "in-the-making" (*Reader* 208), as well as Deleuze and Guattari's "becoming animal" (256-351). Wells stresses that because of animation's tendency to fluctuate in meaning and intention, the terms included to define bestial ambivalence should be taken as a "set of oscillations" that do not "remain static and fixed" (51) throughout the text, and a singular animal character can in fact express any and all of these throughout the narrative.

Conversely, within ecocritical studies, Kautz points out that previous research has "primarily considered anthropomorphism in denigrating terms" (174), criticizing that scholars such as Lawrence Buell and Greg Garrard see it is as being "too anthropocentric" (175) even when it is used in the interest of underscoring the "plight of the natural world" (Buell 134), or for "implying sentimental projection of human emotions onto animals" (Garrard 154). Kautz also examines the output of material ecocriticism and new materialism as a counterpoint to these attitudes. To do so, she highlights the work of Iovino and Oppermann as "useful ways to reconcile material agency and anthropomorphism" (Kautz 176). Their work suggests that anthropomorphism "can act against dualistic ontologies and be a 'disanthropocentric' stratagem meant to reveal the similarities and

symmetries between humans and nonhumans" (Iovino and Oppermann 8).

Though Kautz makes a sound argument in favor of anthropomorphism, claiming that it "is not inherently negative, but rather can allow humans to understand and empathize with the nonhuman" (175), her toolkit is predicated upon the analysis of trees and their agency as displayed in literary texts, whereas, Wells' concept of bestial ambivalence is more in line with the textual reality of the series, and it aligns more closely with the affordances of the animated form. Drawing on Wells, the article will consider how the various animal mutants of *Kipo* both reveal and subvert different aspects of the post-apocalyptic logic and postcolonial anxieties.

DISRUPTING THE HUMAN/ANIMAL BINARY

Through the complex engagement with anthropomorphism, the series destabilizes the binary between human and animal. Besides the aforementioned mutants that Kipo encounters, her first significant exchange is with a human girl who goes by the name of Wolf. At a young age, Wolf is adopted by a pack of mutant wolves and trained alongside their pups, thereby providing the wolf pups a "pray with their own strength" ("Mute-Eat-Mute World" 15:50-16:05). Though she manages to escape them, Wolf's betrayal at the hands of the wolves becomes the cornerstone of her distrust of all mutant animals. In her chapter, Sheppard critiques the representation of Wolf as that of an "image of the savage" (196), a result of her unmistakable blackness, as well as her innate and acquired athletic constituency. However, Wolf's perceived animality is more a result of the character's history and environment, than it is a preconceived idea of the black feminine. Her harsh training under the wolves' supervision, as well as the prolonged absence of human caretakers and referents, have made her highly adapted to the harsh environment of the mutants, unlike Kipo, who has been raised in a human-only environment. Moreover, Wolf is the most critical and skeptical towards Kipo's desire to unite the human and mutant factions because of her own reluctance to accept mutant-kind as anything but the ruthless predators she has come to know. Despite this, Wolf herself cannot divorce her being from the naturalcultural sphere in which she has been raised. She has adopted the ruthlessness and fighting styles of her former Wolf pack, believing that weakness is the ultimate flaw. However, in spite of her lack of socialization with humans, Wolf displays care and empathy when she

agrees to help Kipo find her dad, providing her with the guidance and protection she needs to survive the various mutant packs that want to harm them. Likewise, along their journey together, Wolf "becomes-with" the mutant domain, opening herself to more ethical ways of being in the world. As Wright points out, this becoming-with has "important implications for ethics," allowing [Wolf] to appreciate the "nonhuman's [...] capacity for meaning-making and worlding" (280). This is exemplified by her gradual acceptance and care for various mutants, including the small pig Mandu, and the later reconciliation and alliance with the Newton Wolves, her former wolf pack.

This worlding is further echoed by Kipo's second set of companions, Dave and Benson, a mutant bug and a human boy respectively. They are the last two members of two rival mutant and human factions that fought for centuries over the possession of a hand-held fan. Dave's particular mutation allows him to cycle through different life stages and as such, he took on the responsibility of Benson's care and upbringing when he was left alone as a child ("Requiem for a Dave"). In turn, Benson cares for Dave whenever he cycles through a vulnerable life stage, for example, when he becomes a larva. Benson keeps him safe from larger predators and feeds Dave to help him transition to a less vulnerable life stage. This mutual care speaks to María Puig de la Bellacasa's notions of care as "concomitant to the continuation of life for many living beings in more than human entanglements" (70). It likewise highlights the series' commitment with recreating and underscoring ethical multispecies care, which, as Puig de la Bellacasa suggests, means "standing for sustainable and flourishing relations, not merely survivalist or instrumental ones" (70). A similar attitude is verbalized by these characters when they decide to stay with Kipo after witnessing her success in establishing mutually beneficial relationships with two mutant factions, the Timbercats and the Umlaut Snakes. In a moment of weakness Dave declares to Benson: "When we were with Kipo we were doing something more than just surviving. For the first time ever, we were part of something bigger than us" ("Cäctustown" 15:32-15:42). From that moment on, Dave and Benson's relationship becomes a pillar in Kipo's conviction that humans and mutants can in fact co-exist and thrive together. Their becoming-with each other disrupts the binary oppositions that have long defined anthropocentric discourses.

Dave's articulation of belonging foreshadows the broader scale at which Kipo's ethical orientation toward multispecies care operates. If Wolf, Dave, and Benson exemplify becoming-with at an individual and interpersonal level, Kipo's subsequent encounters with organized mutant factions such as the Timbercats and the Umlaut Snakes (figure 3 and 4) extend this ethic to collective and cultural domains.

Figure 3 - The Timbercats

Figure 4 - The Umlaut snakes

These groups are initially presented as threatening, yet, like Kipo's companions, they embody hybrid identities that blur human-animal boundaries. The Timbercats, for example, model a culture that merges human and feline practices, combining lumberjack aesthetics and Norse-inspired rituals with recognizably feline behaviors such as climbing, chasing, and scratching ("Real Cats Wear Plaid"). This mixture underscores Haraway's notion of *natureculture*, destabilizing the "Cartesian fantasy" (Curry 91) of a clear divide between the natural and the cultural. Kipo recognizes this hybridity and restores harmony within the faction by reuniting their leader with the group, a gesture

that secures the Timbercats' respect and alliance. Similarly, the Umlaut Snakes, sworn enemies of the Timbercats, parody rock-and-roll culture while retaining their serpentine traits ("Cäctustown"). Though initially combative, they are won over when Kipo and her companions respond creatively, by engaging with them through music rather than violence, demonstrating what Braidotti describes as a commitment to "collectivity, relationality and [...] community building" (49). What distinguishes Kipo here is not the erasure of difference but her insistence on forging alliances across it, a move that unsettles entrenched rivalries and opens new possibilities for multispecies coexistence. Kipo's involvement with both the Timbercats and the Umlaut Snakes results in a truce between these two opposing factions and establishes a multispecies alliance between Kipo's group, which is already composed of humans and mutes, and these larger collectives. In this sense, her journey demonstrates that the practices of care and becoming-with initially modeled by Wolf, Dave, and Benson are scalable to broader networks of community. These interactions underscore a nuanced critique of colonial hierarchies, suggesting that the act of othering is inherently unstable and prone to subversion when confronted with hybrid identities and alliances.

DISPLACING APOCALYPTIC FATALISM

The series' exploration of hybridization, particularly, the blending of human and more-than-human ontologies to create new forms of identity and community, is central to its critique of colonialism in the post-apocalyptic context. During the first two seasons, the series also explores fears of reverse colonization and fear of racial replacement through its first antagonist, Hugo Oak, later known as Scarlemagne. Hugo was a non-mutated mandrill held in captivity in a human burrow, submitted to experimentation at the hands of his captors ("Sympathy for the Mandrill"). The human colony he belonged to was led by Dr. Emilia, a scientist determined to reverse the animal mutations that had forced humans to live underground. Moreover, Hugo's experiments were carried out by Lio and Song Oak—Kipo's parents—, who were successful in decoding the megamutations responsible for bestowing speech and sentience to animals. Hugo's unique mutation allowed him to manipulate other primates through the use of his pheromones, and when this is accidentally discovered by Dr. Emilia, she forces him to create more so she can use it to submit other humans and primates to her own will. The parallels of the white

scientist abusing and extracting labor and commodities from the racialized other should not go unnoticed. Hugo's narrative codification as the adopted child of Lio and Song (Black-American and Korean-American respectively), marks him as a racialized and naturalized other, placing him as a dominated individual in relation to Dr. Emilia and her technoscientific prowess. Therefore, when he manages to escape her grasp, Hugo swears to destroy the remaining humans, seeking vengeance for the damage done by Emilia and her fellow scientists. He forcibly wants to create a unified "mute empire" and turn the humans into their slaves. His speech is clearly resonant with ideas of racial superiority:

> It was only two hundred years ago that humans, like that burrow girl [referring to Kipo], kept us locked up in prisons just like this one [showing the remains of a zoo]. Well, now the tables have turned. This is how all humans should be, obedient [showing the mind-controlled humans behind him]. I can make them into an army. An army I can use to build an empire. Mutes on top! Humans below! ("Twin Beaks" 00:59-01:30)

That Hugo/Scarlemagne is marked as the primary antagonist of two seasons indicates how his rationale for subjugating and enslaving humanity arouses the fears of racial replacement and reverse colonization that Giuliani identifies in post-apocalyptic narratives. Nevertheless, the design choice for Hugo (figure 5) indicates that the true object of the criticism lies behind the mode of "bestial ambivalence" embodied by his attire and attitude. He is dressed in clothes resembling that of the British military red coats, uses powdered wigs like the British nobility did, and he is further voiced by a British actor. Hugo's character can therefore be read through the notion of "critical human" proposed in Wells' conceptualization of bestial ambivalence, as his character is meant to parallel British colonists' behavior towards Black slaves during the colonial era. As Cristofaro suggests,

> post-apocalyptic fiction is ideally placed to interrogate the legacies of colonialism within our Anthropocene present as colonialism itself was fueled by traditional apocalyptic logic, an element signaled by the colonial and apocalyptic trope of the New World. (18)

Hugo therefore plays a triple role. He is, on the one hand, a vulnerable racialized other, subjugated by the white scientist and exploited for his labor; on the other hand, he is the vengeful racial subject that has come to replace and subjugate the white [human] population, arousing fears of racial replacement; but ultimately, he is meant to criticize the British colonial enterprise, underscoring that even in fantastic or post-apocalyptic narratives, the patterns of repetition of colonial logic can be seen even centuries and genres apart.

Figure 5 - Scarlemagne

Despite the dangers that Hugo poses for both mutants and humans, the final and most dangerous individual of the series turns out to be a white female human: scientist Dr. Emilia, whose goal is to revert mutant animals to their "natural state." In her article, Staite aptly describes Dr. Emilia's intentions in restoring the mutants to their subordinate place as a "vision for a future that replicates the past," one that is depicted "as out of synch with the interapocalyptic setting of the program." For Staite, Dr. Emilia's notion of "[h]uman supremacy is an anachronistic goal" that does not fit in the overall trajectory of Kipo's own development, nor in the multispecies world that has risen due to the megamutations. This perspective stands in stark opposition to Sheppard's reading of the series, in which she suggests that, seen through an esperpentic lens, Dr. Emilia's actions reflect "the morals and ethics of her human community, its consciousness and civilization" (197). However, Dr. Emilia is the only character given an honorific title, she is also revealed to be from a line of white geneticists whose only goal is to return mutant animals to their "natural state," and to achieve this, she has enslaved and

subjugated two racialized characters—Hugo and Song Oak—, as well as having killed her own brother for being lenient towards mutants. These actions mark her as perpetuating and upholding the racist ideologies of white imperialism, that are generated and repeated, as Huggan and Tiffin suggest, whenever the prioritization of humans and human interests are placed above those of other species (6), particularly when they are expected to be in a subservient state. Her rhetoric and behavior echo the anxieties of the colonizer who has seen their control slip away once the colonial subject gains independence.

Furthermore, Dr. Emilia's insistence of reversing the mutant population to their natural state resonates with Giuliani's analysis of the responses triggered by the figure of the alien as an agent capable of "bio-mutation." She argues that the alien invasion "does not bring death but a deep transformation" (89), much like the mutations of animals brough about apocalyptic changes to the world of *Kipo.* Dr. Emilia's racist and imperialistic ideologies are channeled through her hate of the mutant population, seeing in them the contaminants of the human world, one that, in her eyes, must remain pure and untouched to preserve the ideal of human exceptionalism that she has been taught. Her fears are wholly realized in Kipo Oak, whose status as a human/mutant hybrid destabilizes Dr. Emilia's hope for a humanity that is "untouched or at least not contaminated in its (genetic) essence" (Giuliani 176).

Besides her cross-species hybridity, Kipo is also culturally hybrid, given her parents' ethnic ancestry. However, most importantly, Kipo's actions and attitudes are what truly reflect this hybridization. At an ethical and affective level her interactions with mutant beings are not solely about survival but are also about forging meaningful and ethical relationships that defy conventional categorical boundaries. This praxis on Kipo's part is highly resonant with Haraway's notion of "response-ability" (*Companion Species* 4), which emphasizes the necessity to be responsive and responsible for the beings with which we share the planet, recognizing that "nothing is connected to everything [but that] everything is connected to something" (Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble* 31). Similarly, in her work on affective ecologies, Alexa Weik von Mossner argues the bonds formed between disparate beings can catalyze significant societal change by fostering empathy, responsibility, and creative reconfigurations of power. Conversely, Dr. Emilia's affective relationship with the mutants and other humans is one based on fear of the other, one that, as Sara Ahmed suggests is constructed "as a

danger not only to one's self as self, but to one's very life" and this conception is therefore used to "justify violence against others, whose very existence comes to be felt as a threat to the life of the white body" (64). Narratively, this violence materializes in the mutant cure, which, while ostensibly intended to eliminate animal mutations, instead reveals the biopolitical logic of eradication that parallels genocidal threat. This analogy is narratively established in the series throughout its seasons, as it is shown that all mutant factions, regardless of their ethical alliance to Kipo and her group, embody a distinct and creative culture, one that is rooted in both human history and animal behavior. In this new world of animal mutants, the divide between culture and nature is therefore even more evidently blurred and as the story progresses, one cannot help but believe that humans and mutants are equally deserving of life and the continuation of their ways of being.

Consequently, Kipo and her multispecies kin ultimately emerge as the narrative's clearest articulation of a hybrid future, one where the boundary between human and mutant dissolves into a shared, generative space of becoming. Her bodily metamorphoses, far from being sources of shame or fear, are embraced as part of a larger interspecies kinship network, aligning her with Braidotti's assertion that becoming-posthuman is acknowledging "the collective nature and outward-bound direction of what we still call the self" (193). Additionally, by resisting Dr. Emilia's apocalyptic demand for purity and Hugo's vindictive vision of domination, Kipo and her allies delineate a third path: one that privileges connection, reciprocity, and responsibility across species lines. In dialogue with Haraway, Staite argues that in *Kipo*, "it is human and other-than-human making kin that facilitates flourishing" of their new world. Furthermore, Kipo's metamorphosis into a megajaguar is unstable and partial until she learns to control it with the help of her "multicritter kin, choosing community over individualism, the unruly over the disciplined, and now over the future" (Staite). Hence, Kipo's hybrid being does not signal contamination but rather a radical opening toward multispecies futurity. The significance of this possibility is underscored in the multispecies spaces her metamorphoses help make possible, "spaces that embrace cooperation, and melding with the environment rather than pursuing mastery over it" (Staite). In embodying such relational ethics, Kipo functions not just as a protagonist but as a beacon of hope, resisting narratives of sacrifice and exclusion that demand vulnerable lives be given up to secure a normative future. Kipo's example illuminates how survival in the wake of catastrophe does not

depend on restoring human exceptionalism but on affirming the relational, the hybrid, and the collective. Through her, the series gestures toward a post-apocalyptic imaginary that reconfigures kinship and identity as processes of mutual becoming, where flourishing is only possible when humans and other-than-humans imagine a future together.

CONCLUSION

One of the most compelling arguments emerging from *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* is its potential to displace self-fulfilling prophecies of apocalyptic fatalism. Traditional apocalyptic narratives often reinforce a sense of inevitable decline, suggesting that once the old order collapses, nothing positive can emerge. However, by embracing the transformative possibilities inherent in disaster, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* offers a counter-narrative. I have argued that the series exemplifies how reimagined identities can act as a bastion against the resignation that often accompanies apocalyptic thought. By presenting a future in which humans, mutants, and other beings work collaboratively to resist oppressive forces, the series' narrative challenges the deterministic view that apocalypse necessarily equates to annihilation. Instead, it posits that the very forces that threaten to dismantle society may also be harnessed to rebuild it along more ethical and sustainable lines. Instead of succumbing to despair in the face of crisis, *Kipo and the Age of Wonderbeasts* invites its audience to engage with the possibilities of a future that is replete with ethical, emotional, and ecological interconnections. This vision is especially pertinent in an era marked by rapid environmental and social change, offering both a critique of current trajectories and a hopeful projection of what might be possible when traditional hierarchies are deconstructed. As our global society continues to confront unprecedented challenges, embracing such narratives may prove essential in forging a path toward a more inclusive, sustainable, and interconnected future.

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