

# TRANSGRESSING THE CODE OF DESIRE: QUEERING THE POSTHUMAN IN ANNALEE NEWITZ'S *AUTONOMOUS*

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**PALABRAS CLAVE:** transhumanismo; posthumanismo crítico; narradores robot; deseo queer; inhumanismos; narrativas transgénero; temporalidad queer; biohacking; narradores no humanos.

**ABSTRACT:** The cyborg, a being that merges the technological with the biological, is frequently used as a conceptual tool to dismantle binaries and explore the nature-culture continuum. However, SF representations of cyborgs tend to be anthropocentric. Annalee Newitz's novel *Autonomous* (2017) problematizes this figure by refusing to call its hybrids as such, nuancing their utopian aspects. This article examines gender and sexuality in the novel in relation to biobots and their relation to trans and nonbinary identities. It explores how its queer and inhuman characters disrupt the heteronormative code where they are inscribed. Relying on Luciano and Chen's (2014) concept of the inhuman and on Braidotti's (2013) posthuman relational subject, this article envisions two types of desire transgressions. The first transgression is transhumanist, based on biohacking. The second one is critical posthumanist, based on queer epistemological hacking through bodily interactions and confrontations, a metaphorical biohacking of the narrative code that intersects our DNA.

**RESUMEN:** El ciborg, un ser que fusiona lo tecnológico con lo biológico, se suele utilizar con frecuencia como herramienta conceptual para dismantelar el binarismo y explorar el continuo naturaleza-cultura. Sin embargo, esta figura suele ser representada en la ciencia ficción de forma antropocéntrica. La novela *Autonomous* (2017) de Annalee Newitz problematiza el ciborg al negarse a llamar a sus personajes híbridos así, cuestionando su estatus utópico. Este

artículo se centra en el género y la sexualidad en la novela, en relación con los biobots y su asociación con las identidades trans y no binarias, explorando cómo sus personajes *queer* e inhumanos alteran el código heteronormativo en el que están inscritos. Basándose en el concepto de lo inhumano de Luciano y Chen (2014) y en el sujeto relacional poshumano de Braidotti (2013), plantea dos tipos de transgresiones del deseo: una transhumanista, basada en el biohacking, y otra poshumanista crítica, basada en el hacking epistemológico queer a través de interacciones y confrontaciones corporales, un biohacking metafórico del código narrativo que se cruza con nuestro ADN.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1985, Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto* put the cyborg, a construct made of "metal" and "meat," at the center of academic discourse. Haraway used this figure as a symbol for hybridity and enmeshment, and as metaphor to encapsulate what, according to her, was our current posthuman condition (150). We have already become posthuman by accessing experience through technological extensions of ourselves, such as computers or implants. Thus, the cyborg became the preferred object of analysis in academia to explore, especially through science fiction (SF), posthumanity, the blur of binaries and the nature-culture continuum. However, the human is still at the center of media representations of cyborgs. Most of them are depicted as humanoid, disregarding that some are AI systems.

This article advocates questioning the cyborg by engaging with Annalee Newitz's *Autonomous* (2017), a novel that refuses the term and offers a division of enhanced humans and biobots—robots with biological parts—despite both being hybrids. I read this refusal as an attempt to make the reader see the differences present in this type of figure, and how, despite its richness, the human still plagues the cyborg, as humans anthropomorphize the more-than-human. Emphasizing difference, so one version of being cyborg does not overshadow others, seems pertaining in a category that seeks to break apart from the universal humanist subject. Problematizing this type of figure seems necessary to escape the fantasy of seeing the cyborg just as the next stage in human evolution, as transhumanists do by promoting human enhancement.

The view of body modification as a form of progress is at the heart of transhumanism. This branch of theory explores the posthuman and embraces technological development for the sake of

human perfectibility. It envisions human augmentation as the means to overcome the constraints of the flesh. For Melinda Hall:

Transhumanism's imagined "cyborg" does not celebrate difference but rather the maximization and optimization of familiar valued traits such as cognitive ability and rational choice. These valued traits, transformed into ideals for the future, inform and support existing hierarchies that harm those who are believed to lack them. (18-19)

Transhumanism's view of posthumanity is deeply rooted in a rhetoric of eugenics, as bodies are catalogued as desirable or not. In fact, for transhumanists, the body is relegated to a secondary status, inferior to the mind. They promote a disembodied existence, searching for the immortality of the mind by downloading it into computerized disposable bodies.

Critical posthumanism (see Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*; Braidotti; Wolfe) emerged due to the need to problematize these posthuman discourses that rely on humanist ideas that privilege the experience of the mind over that of the body and that seek technological perfection (Moravec; Rheingold). This branch of theory sees technology as "neither emancipatory nor repressive in and of itself and [it] can be used to signify new forms of exclusion as well as new spaces of freedom" (*Bodies of Tomorrow* 21). However, it warns us about how there is an ideology behind technological development that may increase current disparities. Instead of disembodied agency, critical posthumanism reclaims a post-anthropocentric notion of embodied and embedded subjectivity to be able to ethically articulate the impact of technology onto posthuman subjects. Moving away from the individual and autonomous humanist subject, humans are seen as the product of a complex relational web. Thus, subjects are enmeshed in an interdependent net of relations with the nonhuman. This conception of subjectivity is called posthuman relationality.

Critical posthumanism is central to my analysis and it is used in conjunction with the queer inhumanisms of Dana Luciano and Mel Y. Chen, who have explored the possibilities that arise from the association of the queer with the inhuman. For them, the interrelation of the human/nonhuman binary generates friction and leakage as boundaries are porous. It is this leakage, this contamination of the binary offered by the inhuman, what the queer must pursue, instead of being considered human, since the human serves as a means of regulation, exclusion and control (186). The "inhuman" points to the violence that the category of the human has historically contained

within itself and resists the binary; inhuman implies both being a human that does not behave as such, and not “being” one (Luciano and Chen 196). The association of the queer with the inhuman opens new spaces for imagining other types of embodiments and relationality based on transformation and hybridity. This paper favors this liminal concept of the inhuman over the nonhuman to explore the association of bots and other types of AIs with trans and nonbinary identities in the novel.

*Autonomous* belongs to a trend in SF of narratives that have AI narrators and focalizers.<sup>1</sup> They offer an insight into the minds of this type of figure, portraying them in a more positive light. These narratives tend to explore the existing ties of AI with exploitation, depicting their unique more-than-human perspective, and giving them agency. Indeed, this type of narrator is usually used to imagine how AI may perceive the world, which can help us to envision, among other things, alternate ways of being and experiencing gender and sexuality.<sup>2</sup> Accordingly, *Autonomous* explores through robot focalization if we can challenge the narrative code in which we are embedded, and up to what extent we can transgress the code of desire. This article examines these issues, focusing on how biobots intersect with trans and nonbinary identities in relation to gender and sexuality, and how narrative affects and is affected by this intersection. This paper argues that the novel presents two types of desire transgressions, one more aligned with transhumanism and the other with posthuman relationality. It delves into queer temporality to explore how narrative time and structure affect the reader’s perspective on indenture, questioning Paladin’s narrative agency. Then, it explores biohacking and its relation to transhumanism and capitalism, followed by an examination of indentured relationships. Lastly, it discusses gendering and anthropomorphizing, culminating into the aftermaths of queer posthuman relationality.

Relevant to this research is Vint’s (*Biopolitical Futures*) analysis of the novel in relation to how the commodification of life carried out by pharmaceutical corporations is a central vector through which neoliberal biopolitics turns life into capital, presenting the novel

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<sup>1</sup> Other examples are The Murderbot Diaries series (2017-) by Martha Wells, or The Imperial Radch trilogy (2013-2015) by Ann Leckie.

<sup>2</sup> For instance, in *Klara and the Sun* (2021), Kazuo Ishiguro depicts Klara’s cognition as if divided by boxes, making a direct reference to pixels. This imagined inhuman perception is what can trigger a change in how we perceive gender and sexuality, which can be observed in *Autonomous*.

as a celebration of biohacking and resistance through distribution of open-source medications. Building on Vint's ideas, it can be argued that Jack's pirate activism in the novel mirrors trans sorority.<sup>3</sup> Jack is one of the focalizers of *Autonomous*. She is a bioengineer augmented human, who produces and sells drugs on the black market, so she can get funds to manufacture and distribute for free antivirals and gene therapies to those in need. Trans people frequently share hormones, patches, and other drugs among their community. It is an act of solidarity and resistance to a medical system that exerts heteronormative violence in their praxis and that is heavily reliant on a drug market which seeks to maximize profit, which turns hormones into a luxury. Inspired by this queer biohacking net, this article promotes a vision of queerness as a mode of hacking that is both bio and epistemological. Queerness is seen as a force that tweaks with the heteronormative code of the novel through bodily interactions with the human and inhuman, producing subversive assemblages beyond the capitalist status quo. Indeed, it argues that the accumulative interaction of queer bodies with the inhuman in *Autonomous* produces ripples in the heteronormative code, allowing for momentary spaces of experimental performative resistance, understandings and (un)becomings that open points for future experimentation.

Ultimately, this article states that desire in the novel is presented as the effect of enforced practices of embodiment and performance (code), in which the subject is embedded and may embody, clashing with the coded practices of queer/inhuman subjects. This generates a leakage, a liminal space between narrative codes where meaningful encounters between different posthuman identities can be glimpsed. As Stryker envisions "[i]n these repeated trans-movements across the cut of (in)human difference, we find a potential for agential intra-action through which something truly new, something queer to what has come before, begins to materialize itself" ("Transing the Queer (In)Human" 230).

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<sup>3</sup> Furthermore, though Jack is gendered as she/her by the narrator, Jack's full name is Judith Chen, a clear allusion to two important theorists in queer theory: Judith Butler and Mel Y. Chen. Additionally, Jack's nickname may also refer to Jack Halberstam, a trans theorist, and Captain Jack, a performative figure symbolizing resilience and piracy. These references suggest that Jack's gender may be fluid.

## HUMAN-INHUMAN NARRATIVES: QUEERING NARRATIVE TIME

*Autonomous* features a story told from two points of view, which represent the two sides of the conflict around which the plot revolves. A black-market reverse engineered version of the work stimulant Zacuity has been killing people and driving them mad by making them addicted to work to the extent they stop attending to their basic needs. Its heterodiegetic narrator gives a restricted view of the events through the focalization of two of the protagonists of the story: Jack and Paladin. Jack's perspective depicts her search for a cure for Zacuity. Her involvement with the manufacturing and distribution of its black market reversed-engineered version prompts Paladin to pursue Jack. Conversely, Paladin's perspective depicts her experiences as an indentured bio-(ro)bot with a "human" brain under the orders of The International Property Coalition (IPC)—a paramilitary organization subjugated to big pharmaceutical corporations.

These two sides are presented juxtaposed—one chapter depicting Jack's perspective, the following, Paladin's—disrupting the reader's perception of time, as time is repeated and goes backwards and forwards. Chapters are fragmentary scenes, comprising the account of some days or hours from one of the perspectives. The result is that past narrative time becomes enmeshed with the present. *Autonomous* compromises the apparent compulsory linearity of experience by offering a collage of discontinued lines and regressions to capture the queerness of the protagonists. As a result, rather than creating a sense of progression, there is a feeling of repetition with a difference. This arrangement aligns with queer and inhuman experience, which is characterized for being fragmentary and nonlinear. This temporal phenomenon is referred in queer theory as queer temporality. Freeman claims that the regulation of time in a sequentially chronological order, which she calls "chrononormativity" (3), is a technique by means of which institutional forces come to seem like somatic facts. She adds that the manipulation of time contributes to normalizing historically specific regimes of asymmetrical power (3). Against this conception of time, she suggests the notion of temporal drag, whose emphasis on "retrogression, delay, and the pull of the past on the present" (62) resists the notion of progression. Furthermore, Jack Halberstam states that queer time operates outside of these temporal norms, privileging modes of life that are not tied to the conventional timelines of family and reproduction (*In a Queer Time & Place* 1-2). By playing with how chronological time is

presented, *Autonomous* forces readers to examine the narrative closely, side by side, comparing each account and the characters' experiences with one another.

The novel uses queer time to challenge the reader to detach from the narrative status quo and notice the uneven power dynamics that are displayed in its pages. By assembling different fragments narrating a similar time from a different perspective, similitudes and differences are exposed to the reader (Larrodera-Arcega 90). It forces both narratives to interact with each other, affecting the way the reader perceives the events. Thus, Jack's and Paladin's narratives will resist their initial status as part of a binary as the story progresses, exemplifying posthuman concerns through storytelling. As Caracciolo states, narratives that disrupt the chronological sequence of a story may be valuable from a posthumanist perspective since, by following multiple trajectories and resisting a traditional closure, linearity comes into question and, in turn, so do the reader's conceptions about the nonhuman (1100).

In fact, as Larrodera-Arcega explains, "the juxtaposition of the augmented 'human' narrative with the inhuman narrative of a biobot in *Autonomous* calls into question the narrative status quo by placing an indentured robot at the same level as a free human as main focalizers" (89-90). As Caracciolo points out, "by integrating a posthuman perspective into its workings at the level of narration and characterization, these [non-human] narratives [...] translate the insights of posthumanism into an imaginative and affective practice" (1100). Indeed, this strategy makes readers see the connections between these apparently opposed narratives and the problematics of the issues explored from a detached position, seeing their narrations as complementary to each other. This resonates with Bernaerts et al.'s view of nonhuman narrators as part of a "dialectic of defamiliarization and empathy" (73). This narrative device in *Autonomous* fosters seeing the inhuman as part of an assemblage with the human. The juxtaposition of perspectives produces a leakage, which blends dichotomies. Both narratives start from a master/slave dynamic between, on the one hand, indentured beings—Threazed, a "human" rescued by Jack, and Paladin an inhuman bot—and, on the other, the augmented human masters Jack and Elias. The duplicity of narrative also transpires into the frames in which the story is embedded. The catalyst of the story, Zacuity, a drug that can modify existing patterns of desire and its plot serves as a micro exploration of and excuse to propel the line of inquiry of the novel: Can we challenge the narrative code in which we are embedded? The answer to this question is



presented not only by the Zacuity plot, but also through the master/slave dynamics of the two main relationships of *Autonomous* that present features belonging to the romance genre.

## BIOHACKING THE NARRATIVE STATUS QUO: ZACUITY

*Autonomous*, set in 2144, presents a world where drugs make you live longer, look younger and be more efficient at work. It is a transhumanist utopia. As Huberman states transhumanists envision a human future where biological limitations have been transcended through enhancement (44). She adds that,

for transhumanists, the body is not so much regarded as a text as it [is] conceived of as a tool that can be modified, augmented, and even “hacked” in order to [...] attain ever more enhanced and exalted forms of experience. [...] The body is] an ongoing project to be worked on and continually transformed. (104)

However, as *Autonomous* illustrates, transhumanists fail to acknowledge how enhancement can aggravate social disparity and be used to regulate bodies, rendering some as useless and deviant. Indeed, the novel presents how drugs are under patent laws that protect property and economic interests over the well-being of the population. Thus, these new enhancement technologies have the opposite effect, aggravating the existing inequalities and creating new ones. If one cannot afford to buy Vive, a drug that rejuvenates and prolongs life, one's life will be shorter. This person will earn less, which, in turn, will affect their descendants' wealth, which may affect their performance at work and their earnings, if they cannot afford work-enhancers.

*Autonomous* is critical of transhumanist ideas of technological enhancement in search for continuous perfection, responding to them by exploring the consequences of such enhancement on the conceptualization of the self under a neoliberal late capitalist status quo, heir to our own. It offers a nuanced view of the future in which the self has transformed into an enterprise. As Vint emphasizes, “labor [in *Autonomous*] is structured as indenture to a corporation or ownership of a franchise, a certification that grants privileges to ‘own property, apply for jobs, go to school, and move to another city’” (*Biopolitical Futures* 167). Those who fall outside the system are trapped into a cycle from which it is difficult to escape.



The story explores Jack's journey to reverse the effects of Zacuity, a drug that she reversed engineered and sold, which has made people be addicted to work to the point of death.<sup>4</sup> As a result, she will be hunted by Paladin. Under a quest propelled by the same drug, both narratives will unfold and interact. This plot represents the transhumanist transgression of desire, as it is produced by modifying pleasure patterns using technology. Desire comes in many forms and Zacuity is an example of how easy it can be to change your genetic code in a neoliberal advanced capitalist society, if it is profitable for the system in both a consumer and a productive dimension. This is what Braidotti calls bio-genetic capitalism, which she claims "induces, if not the actual erasure, at least the blurring of the distinction between the human and other species when it comes to profiting from them" and which, she adds, is "insatiable" (63).

Zacuity is a new legal drug—made by the company Zaxy—that makes work desirable. Vint argues that "any kind of work [under this drug] becomes a kind of clinical labor, an intervention into the biological body for the sake of profit" (*Biopolitical Futures* 166). It is marketed as a productive drug, and it enslaves the subject through tweaking their own chemical reactions, aligning them with the market: "Completion reward was so intense that it made you writhe right in your plush desk chair, clutching the foam desktop, breathing hard for a minute or so. [...] After a Zacuity-fueled work run, all you wanted to do was finish another project for Quick Build" (Newitz 4). Thus, this drug brings to life the ultimate dreamed goal of advanced capitalists, which is to make its labor force addicted to their own exploitation. The association of the word "dream" with capitalism and its pursuits is intentional, since what Zaxy in *Autonomous* intends to do by releasing this drug is having an effect in the unconscious aspects of the subject that could not be accessed in any other way. Corber and Valocchi point out that the unconscious space where fantasies and desires lurk is at friction with the conscious construction of identities, which may affect the alignment of an individual's sex, gender and sexuality in ways that cannot be mapped (12). By trying to tame the seemingly untamable, advanced capitalism literally experiments in the novel with the genetic code and chemical processes that materialize desire to control and enforce the effect that aligns better with the market, minimizing undesirable symptoms in

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<sup>4</sup> Made by a process in which the molecular composition of the drug is deconstructed to extract its formula and reproduce it.

the heteronormative capitalist narrative in which the subject is embedded.

Even though from the very beginning readers know the effect of Zacuity on humans, it is not until Jack's augmented human body intersects with that of Med's, a biobot who is an expert in neurogenetics and pharmaceutical development, that it is discovered how the code is changed by the drug. Med is the one who discovers that:

Zacuity is reducing the number of dopamine receptors on the neurons in the midbrain and the prefrontal cortex [...interfering] with decision-making, and [making] the brain extremely vulnerable to addiction. As he loses more and more of those receptors, he gets more addicted to the specific thing he did while taking the drug [...]. Zacuity has basically rewritten the neurological history of his brain. (Newitz 106-07)

The only way to save the people who had taken Zacuity from death is to undo the overwriting of the chemical code of the brain by using a drug, Retcon, which removes the memories associated with taking Zacuity. The effect is instantaneous for those who took pirated Zacuity, making them, ironically, uninterested in work. However, for those that took the drug for a longer time—under the supervision of big corporations—the erasure of their memories produces a lasting effect on their code. Fragmenting the chronology of their memories produces a physical revulsion to anything associated with the work they have been doing. These workers have been queered by Retcon, who was the result of the collaboration between a bot and a queer human. Wrapped in excess, Zacuity materializes how enforced code can be changed, exploring the literal and metaphorical dimensions of code transgressions and their aftermaths.

### **QUEERING THE NARRATIVE STATUS QUO: ROMANTIC INDENTURED NARRATIVES**

Romantic relations in *Autonomous* are at the core of the subject and are intersected by indenture. Braidotti conceives the subject as constituted in and by multiplicity, working across differences, internally differentiated and accountable, embodied and embedded. She advocates for configurations of the posthuman subjects that rely on a strong sense of relationality and community (100-01). The inhuman and indentured characters of the novel,

though lacking a community, get involved in different human-inhuman interactions that set grounds for future posthuman relational assemblages, based on accountability, interdependency, differentiation and embeddedness. These characters are embodied subjects that are embedded in multiple narrative performances of being that intersect among and through the interaction with other bodies. Through this interaction, the reader can observe characteristics from the romance genre, such as tropes like love at first sight or “being special,” and how indenture comes across. The genre is both an enforcer of heteronormative discourses, and a space for subversion, since, as critics like Corber and Valocchi, Sheldon, and Braidotti hint at, sexuality is a subversive force that permeates within the hegemonic forces, not fitting just one type of morphology. Both Paladin’s and Jack’s perspectives are framed under a romantic structure. However, it is Paladin’s indentured narration whose exorbitant tone is in synch with its frame, to the point that it makes the reader question her agency in her romance with Elias.<sup>5</sup>

Jack’s narrative problematizes the master/slave dynamic from the beginning. In her first interaction with Threezed, she kills Threezed’s owner and frees him from indenture. She initially mistakes him for a bot. As a result, as Larrodera-Arcega argues, Threezed’s ties with the inhuman are emphasized, underlining his passive, inhuman brokenness. Therefore, from that moment onwards, Threezed’s body is juxtaposed to that of Paladin’s, “creating a bond in which exploitation [and treatment] of those considered inhuman bleed through its friction” (94). Moreover, Jack’s first words to him are cold commands, subverting the typical female passivity in romance stories. She is a pirate, hard and assertive. By contrast, Threezed is first framed as inhumanly passive. Threezed offers his body to Jack as a reward for saving him: “She ran her fingers through Threezed’s hair and thought about dying wishes. ‘Are you sure?’ she asked. He bowed his head in an ambiguous gesture of obedience and consent” (Newitz 43). Not pleasing Jack is not an option because runaway slaves cannot find work anywhere due to their lack of franchise and work experience, which will result into falling back again into indenture and prostitution.

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<sup>5</sup> This article uses she/her pronouns to refer to the robot when alluding to her in both pre- and post- transition narrative, since once she reaches autonomy she reclaims them. Although they do not capture how robots have no intrinsic gender, they do capture her experience of how being gendered in the universe of the novel is inevitable.

Jack initially sees Threzeed as “a practice flirt” (Newitz 42), which emphasizes the failure, among the humans, to grasp the full implications of slavery, in which not only most bots are inscribed, but humans as well. Their relationship gets messier as Threzeed starts developing feelings for Jack, and she refuses to submit to romance and to her assigned role in it. Instead, she is assertive and emotionally distant to him, not caring about how he feels and what he wants, but trying to help him, nonetheless. Their initial lack of understanding, coupled with her subversion of tropes and Jack’s refusal to be romantically involved, will bring to the fore the problematics inherent in a genre that tries to idealize precarious and morally gray relationships, and overlooks the complexities of consent when your social agency is removed from you.

Due to Paladin and Threzeed’s indenture bond and their similarities, readers establish parallels between both master/slave narratives. The clash of inhuman-human perspectives makes both master and slave narratives become entangled, infecting one another. Hence, readers can distance themselves from Paladin’s obsessive romantic narrative. Robots are treated poorly. Thus, when Paladin meets her mission partner, Elias, an augmented human who cares about her opinion, she cannot help but feel something “different.” Paladin is placed into a semi-passive romantic role, falling for him. He adopts the role of Paladin’s mentor, teaching her how to “interact” with humans, and benefiting from his position of power to touch and violate her physical intimacy without asking for consent. Although Elias is somehow aware that there is a code forcing her to feel in a certain way, that does not make him stop his sexual advances on her. On the contrary, he engages in several sexual intercours where Paladin has dubious agency: “Elias had already gone rigid in ecstasy again, his mouth slack and worthless. The bot did not resist when the man faced him, hooking one arm and one leg over his carapace, clinging as hard as he could” (Newitz 154).

Paladin becomes obsessed with him, using her sensors to gather as much information on his biometrics as possible to fully understand what is happening between them. She wants to know what he is feeling, thus she penetrates through touch his body with her sampling of his blood and checks his fingerprints for more information that would solve the puzzle that his “code” is. This obsession is the result of Paladin’s programs, which force her to serve and idolize those with whom she has worked, making readers question how much consent there is in their relationship. Although she is aware that there are some programs running to which she has

no access that affects her interactions with Elias, her own code does not let her elaborate on its implications.

Instead, she keeps asking herself if there is something beyond her programming that is making her feel that way. Elias also prompts this line of questioning by placing Paladin's identity into her human brain: "Your feelings must be coming from the real you, in here.' He touched the armor over her brain lightly" (Newitz 258). By placing Paladin's identity into her only biological part, Elias is placing her identity, and what makes her sentient into the deceased human donor. This aligns with humanist and transhumanist views of the human subject, divided by the mind/body binary, where the mind is the valuable part, and the body must be transcended. By giving importance to the brain, what Elias is looking for is a window that he could cross, enabling him to reconcile his own repressed desires towards the body that he regards as male with his own internalized homophobia. He represents a humanist essentialist view of identity, thinking that this deceased human, pre-existing Paladin, is making her be herself. *Autonomous* explores the absurdity of this conception, bringing to the fore the violence that trans and nonbinary people experience because of it. Besides, it also emphasizes how there is a bias when dealing with hybridity, as the inhuman is anthropomorphized, but augmented humans are not apparently affected by their implants in any essential way.

Elias is the prophet of hyperbolic heteropatriarchal masculinity, queer in its excess of violence, his feeling of self-righteousness, his homophobia and his desire for the militaristic, to the extent he asks Paladin to fire her guns, while being aroused by the contact:

"It's wired into your nervous system, isn't it? You can feel my hand."  
[...] He continued to touch the exposed metal of Paladin's guns, fingers wrapped around each slim barrel for a few seconds until they became too hot. Then he slid his finger beneath them, to the cool carbon alloy of the bot's chest, stretching his thumbs back until his hands formed two V shapes beneath the protruding weapons [...]. The man's reproductive organ, whose functioning Paladin understood only for military anatomy training, was engorged with blood. (Newitz 66-67)

Elias's desire for Paladin's body, in conflict with his homophobia, would prompt Paladin to transition to be able to date him. As Rebekah Sheldon states, heteronormative binaries limit the range of possible erotic attachments and so erotic energies that

cannot be contingent threaten to spill, opening floodgates to the self (173). Eliazsz's desire will make Paladin become a monster for the heteronormative status quo.

## THE MONSTER WITHIN GENDERED NARRATIVES

Paladin states that gender rules cannot be applied to robots since they do not follow gender coding, since they are inhuman. In fact, as Paladin's focalization shows, she has a more-than-human epistemology when perceiving the world through her sensors. She receives information split into molecules; thus, smell reaches Paladin through the presence in the air of the molecules to which that smell belongs. Additionally, she perceives someone's desire by checking the electric impulses, heart rate, blood pressure and biochemical levels in their body, thus suggesting a haptic way of perceiving reality that is both foreign and close to our "human" epistemology. Vaccaro defines the haptic as a way of knowledge production through touch. She uses it to explore the connection of the material, fabric, crafts and the handmade with transgender identity ("Handmade" 96). This association is not accidental, as Paladin will undergo several transformations through her intersection with other bodies during the novel. Therefore, as Luciano and Chen observe, the interactions with the inhuman posthuman subject produce an unfolding (196), a process that facilitates new visions that decenter our human privileged position from other species, conceiving new ways of perceiving reality and new spaces of epistemological and ontological embodied experimentation.

However, as Jack Halberstam points out, not being affected by gender is a wish rather than a real possibility, since relating to other human beings implies being attributed some gendered embodiment (*Trans\** 9). Thus, the narrative genders Paladin from the very beginning. She is addressed as "he" before her transition, because humans call her in that way. They associate her militaristic inhuman body to that of a male, despite not showing any sexual marker in her body. This is because, as Butler explains, "the body' is itself a construction" (12) and cannot precede gender (12).

Zimman adds that

bodies are social things that receive their meaning in the same way as other cultural signifiers: not from the inherent properties of the object itself, but as emergent from a complex web of social contexts. The "maleness" or "femaleness" of a body part does not derive directly

from the material body. Instead, it is imbued with its meaning by the discourse of social actors. In other words, sex does not precede gender [...], gender precedes sex. (5)

*Autonomous* explores how humans enforce gender, anthropomorphizing the inhuman, imposing upon their body, their own human ontological structures. Most bots do not care how they are called, but some autonomous bots have preferences. That is not the case of indentured robots, who are compromised by their indentured programs. They are forced to want to please those who have power over them.

Paradoxically, Elias wishes Paladin to be a female in a body he regards as male; his own homophobia pushes the limits of heteropatriarchy. Elias replicates Halberstam's notion of transgenderism as he desires forms of embodiment that are impossible in the present gender ontology (20). He reconciles his desires and his coding by placing Paladin's identity in her brain. When she realizes that if her brain belonged to a female's, Elias would be willing to have a relationship with her, she decides to tell Elias that her brain belonged to a female's. She "consents" to being called "she." And, thus, from that point onwards, the narrative shifts, and the pronouns used to refer to Paladin become she/her. They remain that way, even though the rest of the humans still call her "he." Paladin's narrative mirrors Paladin's consent, despite being fueled by her narrative code.

Desire is a subversive force, disturbing Elias' code, since by juxtaposing the masculine body that he used to associate with men with the female brain, he is queering both categories, making them interact and leak, absorbing characteristics from one another. Thus, Elias is both heterosexual and gay. Luciano and Chen claim that the encounter with the inhuman makes us question what sex and gender might look like apart from the human. It lets us imagine new genders, sexualities and forms of sex beyond it (189). Paladin's inhuman body becomes that of the androgynous, both male, female and neither, a body that has the potentiality of (un)becomings, an effect of the intersection and overlapping of queer bodies and desires. It is camp, a collage, a monstrous body for the heteropatriarchal status quo since the monstrous, as Stryker points out, "problematizes gender partly through its failure as a viable subject in the visual field [...]. The monster accomplishes this resistance by mastering language in order to claim a position as a speaking subject and enact verbally the very subjectivity denied it in the specular realm" ("My Words" 247).



Paladin's monstrous metamorphosis is reworked and re-inscribed after she claims her position as a speaking subject. Once she has access to a temporary autonomous key, she is able to access her programs and write her own code as an admin would. However, she still belongs to the Africa Federation, which can access her data storage in the cloud and modify her own experiences. This means Paladin has neither privacy nor definitive control of her own mind. Still, this experience changes her, since, as Stryker points out, agency within fields of domination is possible, but reclaiming agency requires a transformation (254). The first thing the reader realizes once she gets autonomy is that the romantic narrative disappears, the fantasy of romance being dispelled. She revises her feelings, realizing that: "Yes, there was gdoggie, guiding her reactions to Elias. [...] There was a buggy app called masterluv [...]. Then she found a huge, memory-hogging chunk of code called objeta that seemed to be triggering her desire. Her love" (225).

*Autonomous* questions the master/slave trope in romance narratives, as feelings are contaminated by the power dynamics in which they are inscribed. Though Paladin is no longer compelled to feel, she still has feelings. Moreover, she detects that the programs running through her relationship with Elias had created a pattern, a leakage of unprogrammed desires, such as her feelings when he looks at her, or when he called her "buddy." Despite knowing that this leakage is the result of enforced desire, she decides to overwrite her experience, by reclaiming her pronouns and replaying her memories, revisiting them. Following Butler, by reinscribing her experience, Paladin is shaping her own desires. She alters the code by repetition, shifting the meanings attributed to that experience, stylizing herself (45). Her using "she" means that she asserts her own autonomy, which is the result of the intersection of her inhuman body with that of Elias. As Butler claims, agency comes from "the cultural exchanges among bodies" (173), and identity, borrowing Vaccaro's ("Feelings and Fractals") terminology, becomes a crafting process, embodied and temporal. This is why the narrative, after she loses her brain, will keep addressing her as a "she."

## **INHUMAN TRANSFORMATIONS: LOSING THE HUMAN CODE**

Paladin will be transformed again, after meeting autonomous biobot Medea (Med), once both sides of the narrative collide into the same two chapters. The narrative becomes more fragmentary and disconnected because of the continuous change of perspective, but it

follows a chronological order. Paladin and Eliasz discover Jack's whereabouts. Med and Threezed follow them. Medea's name resonates with her Greek mythology homonym and establishes a bond with magic and subversion since Medea is related to Circe, the witch of transformations. Med's connection to magic goes beyond her name since, resorting to science, she will transform both Paladin and Eliasz through her interaction, which will propel them to reassess their relationship. As Vaccaro asserts: "[t]he body becomes. It becomes with and over time. It becomes with and through other bodies that are human, possibly 'transgender' or 'queer' or 'sexed' [...], as well as objects, species [...]. The body becomes with and through its movement and proximity to these other bodies" ("Felt Matters" 94). Med, trying to stop Paladin, will destroy her brain, thus completely changing Paladin's way of accessing reality. Eliasz will also be changed by Medea's intersection with his body. She will shoot him a virus, a failed hair removal experiment, transforming him into a kind of werewolf, metaphorically getting his patriarchal insides out in the open. Hence, Eliasz is able, for a second, to see beyond his code what he truly desires and how there are alternative ways of seeing. Med penetrates the human, making explicit the intersection of queer bodies, spawning spaces of resistance to the imposed heteronormative code.

Though seemingly momentary, Med's shot would have a lasting effect on Eliasz's perception of the world. Little by little it will ripple the already existing holes in his narrative, opening him to the inhuman, the bot. Med's shot is the symbol, but he had already been compromised by his relation to Paladin, by his past relations to "other Paladins," and by the death of Paladin's brain. Med's shot is the symbol that seems to trigger change, the autonomous bot revenge. However, the real trigger is seeing Threezed, the indentured human-inhuman, being treated well by what he had regarded as the enemy. He realizes that he still had an indentured bot that he could save. Consequently, Eliasz lets Jack and Threezed go, prioritizing for the first time the bot's life to the success of the mission.

In fact, it is the first time that Eliasz complies with the desire of transgressing his heteronormative narrative code—which mirrors that of the advanced capitalist status quo—and following his own. He will continue to navigate through his human code; however, now that he has been penetrated by the inhuman in its full force, there is hope that the willingness to understand the other will remain. This is one of the premises that the novel explores, and which is presented through the interaction of bodies. Though there are different ways of

sensing and performing, if the posthuman subjects are willing, despite our own ways of making sense of the world, new ways of communication between queer, inhuman and human bodies can be envisioned.

Paladin's brain loss was unavoidable, as the encounter with a fully autonomous bot demands a transformation. In order to become fully autonomous Paladin needs to affect and be affected by both the human and nonhuman. She must have indenture physically removed from her body, as the human brain was another enforced code. At first, Paladin mourns this loss, being unversed in how to navigate the human without it. However, she will endorse in an epistemological journey, resorting to other senses to analyze it. It will involve sensing and knowing through the haptic. She will have to analyze the human as she perceives other matter, bringing the human closer to the inhuman. Following Vaccaro's ("Feelings and Fractals") concept of craft, Paladin will have to make temporal associations through touch and the rest of the senses to navigate the human, carving meaning with her interaction with matter. Moreover, she will render the visual of materiality, relinquishing it from its humanist disembodied objectivity, in favor of feeling and sensing images.

Ultimately, Paladin's new challenge to make sense of the human beyond the human will cohabit with her new sense of privacy, changing the way she accesses her own experience. After the aftermath of Med's intersection with Paladin and Elias, he purchases Paladin's contract to free her from indenture. Thus, her data is removed from the Federation. Although they cannot start their relationship from scratch due to their history together, they can rewrite it from a more equal position, both being free agents of their own romantic narratives. However, the novel projects a pessimistic vision of freedom, since it is contingent on the needs of the neoliberal capitalist status quo. Hence, *Autonomous* emphasizes the need to subvert our current advanced capitalist systems, before change at large scale becomes an impossibility.

## CONCLUSION

Can we transgress the code of desire in which we are embedded? Transgression of the code of desire is the possibility not only to resist the enforced practices of gender, sexuality, pleasure and yearning in which we are embedded, but to overwrite them in a way, envisioning glimpses of alternative codes. As this paper has explored, desire not only cannot be completely coded through practices, but it

is a rather leaky productive force that resists being coded, which aligns with Braidotti's vision of sexuality as a polymorphous force in itself (98). Though desire and sexuality are closely intertwined, they are not the same; however, a conception of sexuality that tries to navigate the fluidity of desire can be useful for queer posthuman identities. Desire in *Autonomous* is the effect of the friction between the coding narratives in which we are embedded as subjects, which are constantly intersecting through our practices and performances and the market, as the Zacuity plot demonstrates.

*Autonomous* presents two types of narrative transgressions. The first transgression depicted is the transhumanist one, in which the subject, by resorting to drugs and chemicals, rewrites their molecular coding. It is the literal transgression of their material body. Their effect is more intense, but can be undone, resorting to overwriting, using the same channel on which they were produced: science. However, the effect of the transhumanist transgression on the system is scarce, this is due to being based on practices that put the human, and its enhancement, at the center, and not dissecting the productive code in which beings are embedded. Perfection of the body through science does not necessarily mean a real and lasting change of the self and of the status quo in which beings are inscribed.

Vint argues that "the novel is pessimistic about the potential for large-scale imaginative transformation, given the hegemony and ubiquity of corporate power" (*Biopolitical Futures* 167), as social change with the Retcon project does not fully materialize due to Zaxy's power. I agree with her on the impossibility of imminent large-scale meaningful change in a neoliberal advanced capitalist status quo, as Zacuity's plot demonstrates. Yet, I claim that the second type of transgression, the metaphorical one, offers a more tentative transformation on the code of desire; although its reach is smaller, it leaves a lasting effect on the subject who experiences it. This second transgression aligns with Braidotti's critical posthumanism and her view of porous boundaries between the human and the inhuman.

Through experimentation, repetition and interaction between inhuman and queer posthuman bodies, new ways of communication can arise and destabilize the system. Gender and sexuality in *Autonomous* cannot be completely coded through practices, since desire is a leaking force that resists coding practices. Our encounter with the inhuman and queer transforms us, freeing us from human centered gender codes for navigating the posthuman. Embodied experience, haptic epistemology is reclaimed. Categories are

transformed by interaction; therefore, they need to be envisioned as crafts, experimental makeshift structures to mend and rework.

Can we play an active part in our own narratives? *Autonomous* answers affirmatively to that question but warns the reader of the need to break free from advanced capitalist systems. Paladin's indentured code is a product of corporations' desire to enslave bots through their own bodies. It is not farfetched to say that we are also enslaved by advanced capitalist coding practices, and, thus, need to look beyond the human-like and examine AI potential to imagine ways out of it. Indeed, *Autonomous* as a study case of AI inhuman narrative presents how heterodiegetic external narrators can serve to encapsulate robot agency. By means of internal focalization, this type of narrator manages to give proximity to the narrative, depicting the way robots access and process the world, as well as detaching the reader enough to be able to see the narratological forces at play. *Autonomous* achieves this through the juxtaposition of "human" and "inhuman" narratives, opposite perspectives, an initial symmetric portrayal of master/slave dynamics in indentured narratives that gets more asymmetric as both relationships collide. Besides, its queer, messy and fragmented reorganization of the story time in the plot contributes to make the reader feel how queer and inhuman bodies navigate experience.

To conclude, as Hayles states, these types of narratives imagine the kind of relationships that humans and sentient robots may form, and she advises to dissect our current assemblage with the machine ("Cognitive Assemblages" 1219) and to pay attention to narrative as it can be the place to experiment and imagine how to do so. Thus, research needs to pay more attention to bot SF narratives. As *Autonomous* illustrates, their different epistemological perspectives that offer visions beyond anthropocentric ideologies, and their makeshift haptic capacity to navigate the liminal may help us to find spaces of resistance to hegemonic heteronormative advanced capitalist practices. Besides, these perspectives rework our too human centered conception of hybridity and the cyborg, which could affect our way of approaching present AI systems, reassessing our labor and social relation to them.

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