

# The Future is Collapsing: Feminist Narratives of Unmaking in Laura Pugno and Veronica Raimo

Alice Parrinello  
University of Oxford, United Kingdom  
[alice.parrinello@stx.ox.ac.uk](mailto:alice.parrinello@stx.ox.ac.uk)

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## Abstract

While long ignored in the Italian panorama, in recent years science fiction and speculative fiction have seen a significant increase in the number of novels and critical analyses related to the two genres. Women writers are reclaiming a central spot in the fields in general, as demonstrated by collapse and extinction narratives in particular. Laura Pugno's *Sirene* (Mermaids, 2007) constitutes a significant example of such fiction. The work depicts a dystopic future, in which humans are facing extinction due to a dangerous cancer caused by pollution. While mermaids are immune to the disease, they are imprisoned by humans either for mermaid meat production or for sexual purposes. Veronica Raimo's *Miden* (2018) has points in common with Pugno's novel, even if from a (seemingly) utopian perspective. Miden is an ideal society that has flourished according to gender equality, happiness, and community principles. However, not too long after having moved there due to the economic (and moral) "Collapse" of their country, the main character and his partner are investigated by Miden's society as the protagonist is accused of sexual assault. Both novels have been described by Marco Malvestio as eco-dystopias. Stemming from his definition, the paper investigates how both *Sirene* and *Miden* apply the concept of collapse as a key methodology in constructing their narratives. In this way, Pugno and Raimo collapse the human and nonhuman and the dystopia and utopia binaries. The paper argues that the authors follow a queer practice of unmaking theorised by Jack Halberstam, who stated that the only way forward is to unbuild, unmake, and collapse (2021).

**Keywords:** collapse, ecofeminist fiction, Laura Pugno, Veronica Raimo, queer theory.

## Resumen

La ciencia ficción y la ficción especulativa se han visto tradicionalmente relegadas a un segundo plano en el panorama de las letras italianas, si bien en los últimos años el número de novelas escritas en estos géneros, así como la crítica literaria sobre ambos, ha aumentado significativamente. Las escritoras están reclamando un lugar central en este campo en general y, en particular, en las narrativas de colapso y extinción. *Sirene* (Mermaids, 2007), de Laura Pugno, constituye un importante ejemplo de este tipo de ficción. La obra representa un futuro distópico en el que los humanos se enfrentan a la extinción debido a un cáncer peligroso causado por la contaminación. Las sirenas son inmunes a esta enfermedad, pero los humanos las han encarcelado y las utilizan bien para producir carne bien con fines sexuales. *Miden* (2018), de Veronica Raimo, tiene puntos en común con la novela de Pugno, incluso aunque esté escrita desde una perspectiva aparentemente utópica. Miden es una sociedad ideal que ha florecido de acuerdo con los ideales de la igualdad de género, de la felicidad, y de la comunidad. Sin embargo, poco tiempo después de haberse mudado allí por el desplome económico (y moral) en su país, el protagonista y su pareja son investigados por la sociedad de Miden, porque acusan al protagonista de violencia sexual. Marco Malvestio denomina las novelas eco-distopías. Basándose en esta definición, este artículo analiza la manera en que ambas novelas utiliza el concepto de derrumbe como la piedra angular en la construcción de la narración. Así, Pugno y Raimo derriban los binomios de lo humano y no humano, así como los de la distopía y de la utopía. El artículo sostiene que las escritoras siguen una práctica queer denominada 'unmaking', como propuso Jack Halberstam, que afirmó que la única manera de proceder es desconstruir, deshacer y derribar.

*Palabras clave:* derrumbe, ficción ecofeminista, Laura Pugno, Veronica Raimo, teoría queer.

## Introduction

Tales about flying saucers, aliens, dystopic regimes, apocalypses, or utopian planets have rarely appeared in critical analyses on Italian literature. As argued by Daniele Comberiati and Luca Somigli, due to various reasons, such as the division between high culture and low culture or the incorrect assessment of the genre as derivative from Anglo-American cultural productions, science fiction in Italy has not easily legitimised itself in the second half of the twentieth century (7). Despite this context, Italian science fiction works were not limited in numbers during that period, “between 1952 and 1979, Italian sf works were published in consistent numbers: 71 collections, 20 magazines, and 2256 books” (Brioni and Comberiati, *Italian Science Fiction* 2). Catching up on this cultural trend, in recent years many critical analyses on Italian science fiction or speculative fiction have been published, such as the monograph *Distopie, viaggi spaziali, allucinazioni: Fantascienza italiana contemporanea* by Giulia Iannuzzi (2015), the volume by Simone Brioni and Comberiati *Italian Science Fiction: The Other in Literature and Film* (2019), or the *Narrativa* issue on “La fantascienza nelle narrazioni italiane ipercontemporanee” edited by Comberiati and Somigli (2021), just to name a few. These publications denote a significant shift in the perception of the fields, which is perhaps due to the genres’ own characteristics.

Science fiction and speculative fiction<sup>1</sup> have been praised by Italian scholars due to their ability to analyse modern-day conflicts (Comberiati and Somigli 16). For instance, as stated by Florian Mussgnug, Italian apocalyptic narrative is a strongly political genre, as it often investigates “political, military and economic interests operating on a planetary scale; weapons of mass destruction; industrialisation; unstoppable environmental degradation; exponential population growth; forced migration; genocide” (213). Considering its crucial relevance today, many works of science fiction and speculative fiction have unsurprisingly engaged with climate change (or the inability to fully portray it).<sup>2</sup> Mussgnug argued that “an ever-increasing awareness of the environmental catastrophe has aroused interest in new literary forms and themes” (209). Localising the phenomenon in the Italian context, Marco

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<sup>1</sup> While stemming from a similar background, science fiction and speculative fiction present a distinctive nuance. Margaret Atwood specified the distinction by saying, “I liked to make a distinction between science fiction proper – for me, this label denotes books with things in them we can’t yet do or begin to do, talking beings we can never meet, and places we can’t go – and speculative fiction, which employs the means already more or less to hand and takes place on Planet Earth” (513).

<sup>2</sup> In *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable* (2016), Amitav Ghosh argued that the Anthropocene tests “the arts and humanities, but also [...] our commonsense understandings” (9). Ghosh stated that today the humanities are unable to engage with climate change and that, consequently, there is a crisis of the imagination (11).

Malvestio claimed that “the diffusion of ecological dystopias (eco-dystopias) in Italy is in line with the [international and Anglo-American] trend [...] of a revival of the modes and forms of dystopian and post-apocalyptic science fiction to narrate climate change” (31). In this way, Malvestio also promoted the use of the productive label, “eco-dystopias,” which denotes many key Italian works today (34).

The development of the science fiction and speculative fiction genres has also been marked by a proliferation of works written by women and of works promoting a feminist view (Carrara 46). In Italy, the sheer number of novels belonging to the feminist science fiction genre cannot match the one of the Anglo-American contexts (Carrara 46). Nonetheless, as argued by Giuseppe Carrara, an increasing amount of works can be read from a feminist perspective and “there is no shortage of community-based cultural and creative experiences, very often born out of counter-cultural claims or explicitly linked to feminist movements” (46). The analyses by Carrara, as well as the volumes *Femminismi futuri: Teorie, pratiche, fabulazioni* (2019) edited by Lidia Curti, and *Donne e Fantastico: Narrativa oltre i generi* (2020) by Giuliana Misserville, to name a few, denote a significant blossoming in the field of Italian feminist science fiction.

Two relevant examples of the genre are: *Sirene* (Mermaids, 2007) by Laura Pugno and *Miden* (2018) by Veronica Raimo.<sup>3</sup> Pugno’s work depicts a dystopic future, in which humans are facing extinction due to a dangerous “cancro nero,” caused by atmospheric changes and spread both by sun exposure and contagion (16).<sup>4</sup> The main character is Samuel, a man grieving the loss of his partner Sadako, caused by the black cancer. He works for a criminal organisation, a “yakuza,” which raised him and gave him a job in an underwater mermaids’ farm. Upon appearance to humankind, the mermaids were imprisoned by criminal organisations both as sources of meat and of pleasure. For this reason, yakuza created mermaids’ farms to breed them and produce mermaid sushi or opened brothels where to keep (and exploit) female mermaids. While humans are constantly dying from the black cancer, the mermaids are immune. Veronica Raimo’s *Miden* seemingly stands in stark opposition to Pugno’s novel, as it depicts an ideal society that has flourished according to gender equality, welfare, and community principles. However, not too long after having moved there due the economic (and moral) “Crollo” of their country,<sup>5</sup> the main character, a professor, (simply called “il compagno,” the male partner) and his partner (“la compagna,” the female partner) are investigated by Miden’s society as the protagonist is accused of sexual violence by a girl, who used to be his student. The novel follows the trial against the professor, the investigation by a Miden committee, and the reaction of *la compagna*.

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<sup>3</sup> Unsurprisingly, Pugno centred mermaids in her work of feminist science fiction, as they have been described as “lively feminist figures for rethinking human–water dependencies along posthuman lines” (Stifjell 99).

<sup>4</sup> Black cancer.

<sup>5</sup> Collapse.

A comparison between the novels by Pugno and Raimo seems productive because of the several thematic threads that connect them. For instance, both novels centre women (and female mermaids) in a context of patriarchal violence and human collapse. In particular, while in oppressive circumstances, the narratives by Pugno and Raimo both bring to the forefront humans and nonhumans and their bond. Taking its cue from Malvestio's thought-provoking definition of *Sirene* and *Miden* as eco-dystopias (34), the paper will firstly explore their depiction as "eco-" novels. The paper will investigate how the novels depict the human and nonhuman binary and if they promote its collapse, by employing ecofeminist tools for the analysis (Haraway 2016). Secondly, the paper will build on the definition of *Sirene* and *Miden* as "dystopias," by claiming that both novels are not easily classifiable and that they encourage a blurring of the dystopia and utopia categories. Thus, after having examined the collapse of the human and nonhuman and utopia and dystopia binaries, the paper will investigate the contextual societal collapse described both in *Sirene* and *Miden*. In particular, the analysis will suggest an affinity between *Sirene* and *Miden* with queer modes of collapse (Halberstam 2021). Finally, the paper will connect the novels' societal undoing with forms temporal disruption (Lothian 2018). Thus, the term 'collapse' in this paper possesses a multi-faceted nature; it refers to both a descriptive societal and environmental collapse, as well as collapse as an active practice of disruption of oppressive systems and binaries.

## Eco

Marco Malvestio included both *Sirene* and *Miden* in his overview of Italian eco-dystopias because, although they do not adhere perfectly to the definition, they engage with climate change issues (37). For instance, while in *Miden* the Collapse of the protagonists' former society was socio-economic in nature, it also was accompanied by a crucial waste management crisis. According to Malvestio:

Waste disposal is a recurring theme in recent Italian environmental history, and it is significant that Raimo, in one of the few passages devoted to the country of origin of her protagonists, chooses to focus precisely on this detail; at the same time, the difficulty of waste disposal in capitalist modernity is a topos of ecological dystopia. (38)

Arguably, alongside such a crucial environmental issue, there is also another element that allows an ecocritical (and ecofeminist) analysis: the connection between humans and nonhumans. In particular, the novel features recurrent associations between women and nonhumans.<sup>6</sup> For instance, the girl who accuses the professor is described by *la compagna* as menacing and predatory animal, "Her thinness appeared menacing, the skinned carrion of an animal that has come to bring misfortune into the

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<sup>6</sup> One exception is an art installation done by a student of the professor, depicting him and the girl as porcupines.

home” (14).<sup>7</sup> Similarly, *la compagna* is described as an animal through her partner’s point of view, “She looked in pain, an animal that does not know in which direction to flee. [...] Then she burst into tears” (93).<sup>8</sup> In another scene, the professor describes her again in similar terms, “I found her by the window as if in a painting. The shadow of her belly created the silhouette of a strange sleeping animal on the wall” (151).<sup>9</sup> Significantly, the act of seeing the two women as animals is only associated with negative feelings on their part—they are suffering, isolated, upset, and, thus, wild animals.

This trend of painful association between women and nonhumans continues in a crucial moment of the narrative, when the professor and *la compagna* go into the woods to bury her trolley. By mistake, *la compagna* kills a mole-looking nonhuman that was hiding in the ground surrounded by baby moles (169). Upon seeing them, the woman bursts into tears. Even in death, a connection is established between the mole and *la compagna* through motherhood, as the latter was pregnant at the time. Furthermore, when the professor suggests leaving them to die, *la compagna* complains, saying “You are abandoning our son to groan in the mud” (171),<sup>10</sup> creating an immediate connection with the pups. *La compagna* is, even briefly, extending a kinship bond towards the pups, generating, in the words of Donna Haraway, oddkin. According to Haraway, oddkin is formed by “unexpected collaborations and combinations” and “rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family” (*Staying with the Trouble* 2-4). The connection between *la compagna* and the pups blurs any human and nonhuman division and hierarchy, and in this way, creates a stronger bond between the woman, her child, and the moles, than the one between her and her partner. The connection is brief, because the professor decides to kill the pups without warning, fully embodying a form of patriarchal violence and oppression.<sup>11</sup> Significantly, after this episode, the relationship between the two protagonists will start to crumble.

Malvestio describes Pugno’s *Sirene* as an eco-dystopia as well (34). However, if Raimo places humans and nonhumans on the same level for a brief, even if meaningful, amount of time, Pugno takes a more explicit approach. At the beginning of the novel, Samuel, while in charge of overseeing the mermaids’ breeding, decides

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<sup>7</sup> “La sua magrezza appariva minacciosa, la carogna spolpata di un animale che è venuta a portare sciagura dentro casa”. (All translations of texts are mine)

<sup>8</sup> “Sembrava sofferente, un animale che non sa che direzione prendere per la fuga. [...] Poi è scoppiata a piangere”.

<sup>9</sup> “L’ho trovata vicino alla finestra come in un dipinto. L’ombra della sua pancia creava la sagoma di uno strano animale dormiente sul muro”.

<sup>10</sup> “stai abbandonando nostro figlio a rantolare nel fango”.

<sup>11</sup> The professor’s predatory behaviour towards women is equated to the one towards the environment, matching his killing of the moles. A character argued that the professor’s inappropriate relationship with his student was caused by the Collapse, “pensavo che lo sradicamento dal suo Paese passasse attraverso questo tipo di sublimazione [...]: voler possedere un altro corpo perché si è persa una terra” (“I thought the uprooting from his Country went through this kind of sublimation [...]: wanting to possess another body because one has lost a country.”102). The simultaneous patriarchal oppression of women and the environment is at the core of Western ecofeminist theory (Plumwood 1993; Gaard 1993), thus, it situates Raimo’s novel on a specific genealogy.



to substitute a male mermaid with himself to mate (or, more appropriately, rape) a mermaid, who has the most human-like features, the “half-albino” (14).<sup>12</sup> Not only the *mezzoalbina* has human-looking features, but also, she is associated with Samuel’s late partner, Sadako, as he thinks of her while diving into the water tank. The connection between the *mezzoalbina* and Sadako is also contextual to their situation as victims of a patriarchal and violent environment: just like the *mezzoalbina* is imprisoned by the criminal organization, similarly Sadako was treated as an object by yakuza men and was given to Samuel as a gift. Born the illegitimate child of a senior member of the yakuza, Sadako was enslaved by a man, who decided to tattoo her body not only as a mark of his ownership, but also to relish her pain, “While the old man pierced her skin with needles Sadako had not moved a muscle, until he asked her to cry and scream, to wriggle out of the pain, and then she did” (63).<sup>13</sup> The world depicted by Pugno equally exploits women and mermaids, justifying the violence in the name of men’s needs.

The connection between women and mermaids takes physical shape, when the *mezzoalbina* gives birth to a mermaid that is half human half mermaid after she was raped by Samuel (56). As described by Roberta Tabanelli, “in Pugno’s post-human hybridity, the title of Haraway’s recent study, *When Species Meet*, becomes a literal assumption” (16). The post-human quality of *Sirene* is also highlighted by Pierpaolo Antonello, who states that, “*Sirene* can easily be inscribed within the articulation proposed for example by Rosi Braidotti of the post-human as a theoretical field of emancipatory character in relation to epistemic categories and anthropocentric social practices” (162). Following the mores of the violent patriarchal society in which he lives, Samuel is immediately tempted to rape his child and decides to name her Mia, highlighting his possessiveness and entitlement towards her body. He then decides to tattoo her body to look like Sadako’s (90-91). Mia becomes an object, much like Sadako used to be for the old yakuza men. While they both have no agency, they are brought together by their condition.

Just like Raimo placed the unborn child of the main characters on the same level as the baby moles, Pugno similarly creates a connection between Sadako, the *mezzoalbina*, and Mia. Not only their condition and equal suffering disrupt any notion of hierarchical division between them, but also Mia physically blurs it by being a hybrid between humans and mermaids. In this way, Mia and her daughter embody Haraway’s cyborg, as suggested by Hanna Serkowska and Aleksandra Pławska (177). Haraway defined the cyborg’s appearance where “the boundary between human and animal is transgressed” (*A Cyborg Manifesto* 11), it “is about [...] potent fusions, and dangerous possibilities” (Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* 14).<sup>14</sup> A blurring of the human

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<sup>12</sup> “Mezzoalbina”.

<sup>13</sup> “mentre il vecchio le buca la pelle con gli aghi Sadako non aveva mosso un muscolo, finché lui non le aveva chiesto di piangere e urlare, di divincolarsi per il dolore e lei l’aveva fatto”.

<sup>14</sup> Furthermore, according to Amélie Aubert-Noël, the hybridation of the human and nonhuman categories is reflected in the structured of the novel itself, as it is “deeply hybrid because of the way it reworks the mythical material from which it takes its cue, particularly through the influence of Japanese manga” (188).

and nonhuman category is embraced by both Raimo and Pugno, as a way to de-centre an anthropocentric and patriarchal point of view. In a way, *Sirene* and *Miden* “can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves” (Haraway, *A Cyborg Manifesto* 67).

## Utopia

*Sirene* and *Miden* seemingly belong to two opposite genres, the first appearing as a canonical dystopia and the second depicting a utopian world. While the terms ‘dystopia’ and ‘utopia’ have often been understood as part of a binary, strongly opposing one another, in recent years the two categories have assumed porous connotations. For instance, Francesco Muzzioli, in his analysis on dystopian fiction and catastrophe writings, stated that utopia and dystopia are often woven together and that they are often “paradoxically interchangeable” in contemporary fiction (20). Similarly, Fredric Jameson in *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005) argued that today utopia is represented in new ways and that is often mixed with its opposite (in Muzzioli 20).

Despite the porosity of the utopia and dystopia division, recent scholarship regarding *Miden* seemingly prefers one label over the other. For instance, Malvestio describes *Miden* as a dystopia, arguing that, “the dystopian dimension concerns *Miden*'s social and cultural system, a strange version of collectivism and Protestant ethics in which citizens seem obliged by law to nurture good feelings” (37). On the contrary, Giuseppe Carrara classifies *Miden* as a utopia, “*Miden* [...] could be identified as a ‘critical utopia’ or a ‘non-utopia’, as a seemingly perfect world is revealed, through small details, to be in reality, not exactly desirable” (55-56). On a surface level, *Miden* seemingly also rejects the porosity suggested by Muzzioli and Jameson (as well as Malvestio’s classification), as it intensely appears as a utopia: it is an ideal place, where its inhabitants are moved by the highest ideals.

In *Miden* they are obsessed with these things because they are at the top of all the rankings. First place for: Quality of Life. Confidence in the Future. Social Equality. Human Rights. Job Satisfaction. Women's Emancipation. If you add up all the factors you get bingo, and you get what you are looking for: first place for Happiness. (17)<sup>15</sup>

Furthermore, *Miden*'s principles are integrated into its citizens' social practices. For instance, they were not allowed to know the sex of unborn babies, in order not to create prior psychological conditioning (135). Not only *Miden* has put into place ways to avoid sexist behaviour, but also as a society it possesses infrastructures to eliminate poverty and unhappiness (72). In order to maintain this generalised wellbeing, *Miden* heavily influences and regulates the lives of its citizens, and, simultaneously, its biopolitical apparatus expects that citizens contribute to it. Once

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<sup>15</sup> “A *Miden* sono fissati con queste cose perché sono in cima a tutte le classifiche. Al primo posto per: Qualità della vita. Fiducia nel futuro. Uguaglianza sociale. Diritti umani. Soddisfazione professionale. Emancipazione della donna. Se sommi tutti i fattori fai bingo, e viene fuori quello che cerchi: al primo posto per Felicità”.

the professor is accused of rape, he does not risk being incarcerated, but being expelled from Miden, since “the germ of violence that lurked within me would have threatened to undermine the social fabric il germe della violenza che si annidava dentro di me avrebbe rischiato di compromettere la tenuta sociale” (27).<sup>16</sup>

While apparently based on the most noble ideals, Miden nonetheless promotes happiness at all costs in a forceful and coercive manner, which soils its image of perfection. This negative aspect is slowly discovered by the protagonists in the course of the narrative. For instance, the antisociality displayed by *la compagna* is frowned upon because it betrays Miden’s lifestyle, “In Miden, no one had anything against a romantic couple, or even against a solitary heart, and yet you felt a greater and more generous idyll looming: the Dream of Miden claiming your tribute of universal love” (29).<sup>17</sup> Perhaps due to her lack of social skills or due to her foreign status, *la compagna* is constantly placed under scrutiny by her neighbours. They spy on her to make sure she adheres to Miden’s rules, for instance, by checking if she throws away the trash in the appropriate bin (58). Almost imperceptibly, the novel shows cracks in the perfectly crafted image of Miden’s society and atmosphere, cracks that question its utopia definition. For instance, in the Garden dedicated to elders, *la compagna* sees people picking cherries that were deceptively placed on fir trees to create an enjoyable environment (45).

Thus, Miden oscillates between being a utopia and a dystopia, rendering Carrara’s and Malvestio’s assessments both equally accurate. Its coercive state, while based on honourable ideals, suppresses its citizens. At the same time, as a society, it is flourishing and allows its citizens to live a wealthy and happy life. Miden is thus the perfect example of the literary porosity described by Muzzioli and Jameson, as the ‘utopia’ and ‘dystopia’ definitions as “paradoxically interchangeable” (Muzzioli 20).

While in *Miden* the dystopian elements are under the surface, the world described in *Sirene* strongly places itself on the side of the dystopia, as suggested by Malvestio. The primary reason is that humankind is dying because of the black cancer and there is no available cure. At the same time, the mermaids’ treatment at the hands of humans presents an equally robust reason behind its dystopia classification. Upon their appearance, the mermaids were regarded by some as deities, but the majority of the humans decided to exploit them. For instance, in one of the first years of the mermaids’ appearance, many of them died *en masse* on the beaches. While the living mermaids were imprisoned, the dead were exploited:

During the mass death, the Museum teams had taken some mermaids still alive from the beach. They had killed them with a shot of poison mixed with sedative, and had embalmed the bodies. It was said that they had made up their faces, to make them

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<sup>16</sup> “Il germe della violenza che si annidava dentro di me avrebbe rischiato di compromettere la tenuta sociale.”

<sup>17</sup> “A Miden nessuno aveva niente in contrario a due cuori e una capanna, o persino a un cuore solitario, eppure sentivi incombere un idillio più grande e generoso: il Sogno di Miden che reclamava il tuo tributo di amore universale.”



look more human. Green lips covered in lipstick. The muscular mass of hair braided with flowers. (21)<sup>18</sup>

One scene especially epitomises the way the mermaids were violated: when it was still possible to hunt mermaids, Samuel witnessed an old yakuza simultaneously raping, eating, and killing a wild mermaid (52). The scene highlights the complete disregard towards nonhumans and the multiple ways they were violated and exploited.

According to the Mermaid Liberation Front activists (a group that wanted to save the mermaids), the black cancer was God's judgement for humankind's treatment of the mermaids (10). While the disease appeared as unrelated to the mermaids, the black cancer nonetheless foreshadows a future extinction of humankind. A general decline is already present at the beginning of the novel:

In Underwater, food was becoming scarce, for everyone, but not for the yakuza. Everything was going wild again. Underwater, the Territories, the ocean. The mermaids would stop living at the bottom of the sea and succeed us on Earth. We haven't tamed them, not yet. We keep them captive, we eat their flesh. But we have not tamed them. (19)<sup>19</sup>

After the numerous gruesome descriptions of violence against mermaids (and women), the end of humankind is seen as almost a relief for nonhumans and the planet itself. It anticipates final freedom and respite. In this way, *Sirene* does not fully belong to the utopian or dystopic genres, it oscillates between the two. As stated by Aubert-Noël, the novel is a "anti-anthropocentric utopia, which reaffirms the survival and strength of the savage in spite of all humanity's efforts to subjugate him, and poetic utopia, which celebrates the irreducible permanence of that space of freedom and creative reflexivity" (194). The novel is indeed a dystopia, given the rapid decline of humankind both in terms of population and its morals. Simultaneously, the same decline cannot be perceived negatively for the nonhumans inhabiting the Earth.

*Sirene* and *Miden* oscillate between various perspectives: the human, the nonhuman, the local, and the foreign. Arguably by complicating the depiction of a single narrative and by embracing a multi-faceted view, they successfully collapse a rigid distinction between utopia and dystopia. In this way, the two novels conform to Muzzioli and Jameson's analyses regarding the porosity in the utopia and dystopia binary. Rejecting a strict division between the two, *Sirene* and *Miden* embrace indefiniteness and a liminal positionality.

## Collapse

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<sup>18</sup> "Durante la moria le squadre del Museo avevano prelevato alcune sirene ancora vive dalla spiaggia. Le avevano uccise con uno shot di veleno misto a sedativo, e avevano imbalsamato i corpi. Si diceva che avessero truccato loro il viso, per farle sembrare più umane. Labbra verdi coperte di rossetto. La massa muscolare dei capelli intrecciata di fiori. ".

<sup>19</sup> "A Underwater, il cibo cominciava a scarseggiare, per tutti, ma non per gli yakuza. Tutto stava ritornando selvaggio. Underwater, i Territori, l'oceano. Le sirene smetteranno di vivere in fondo al mare e ci succederanno sulla Terra. Non le abbiamo addomesticate, non ancora. Le teniamo prigioniere, mangiamo la loro carne. Ma non siamo riusciti a addomesticarle."

The blurring of the human and nonhuman and the dystopia and utopia binaries situate the collapse of rigid definitions as a key practice of *Miden* and *Sirene*. This approach is mirrored in the way that the novels engage with societal and environmental collapse in the narratives. For instance, in *Miden*, the two protagonists moved there after an economic collapse invested their country:

The newspapers spoke of the Collapse every day, counted the emigrants as displaced, fenced off the survivors. It seemed that natural disasters were in a lull: no earthquakes, hurricanes, floods. There were no pests to flay the trees, no scorching heat to crack the earth [...] "The worst is over," the politicians said, and meanwhile they were sending children and money to the other side of the world. The truth was that the worst could not pass, because it would never really come. (13)<sup>20</sup>

The socio-economic collapse is echoed by the one enacted through *la compagna's* betrayal of the professor. Throughout the novel, the professor displays a backward way of thinking, rooted in patriarchal thought, which is a stark contrast to *Miden's* mentality. A character summarised the differences by saying, "a culture so different from ours, where the role of women is unfortunately still subordinate to that of men. I have read things about their country, many interesting articles, and if I may say so... they have a long way to go!" (113).<sup>21</sup> *Miden's* citizens see the professor's backward mentality as a remnant from his former country. For instance, one of his other acquaintances argues that it would have been able for him to have a cultural mediator, since "The professor comes from a different culture than we do, and I think a certain *forma mentis* is hard to overcome. If you have been used to atomising a woman's body, it is difficult then to grasp the whole, no?" (112).<sup>22</sup> In this way, the *Miden's* citizens' view of the professor follows their attitude regarding *la compagna*: since they are foreign bodies into the seemingly perfect environment of *Miden*, the professor and *la compagna* are not as progressive as them and should be constantly monitored and brought up to speed. The comments by *Miden's* citizens reproduce the xenophobic and racist remarks that distinguish narratives of migration from the Global South to the Global North, which connect backwardness to specific geographical locations.

After the trail against him ends with his mandatory expulsion from *Miden*, the professor and his partner set to leave the country together, but in a sudden twist, *la compagna* leaves him and returns to *Miden*. The change of mind was caused by a series of factors, such as the killing of the moles. Most importantly, it was affected by

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<sup>20</sup> "I giornali parlavano ogni giorno del Crollo, contavano gli emigranti come sfollati, recitavano i superstiti. Sembrava che le catastrofi naturali fossero in un periodo di stanca: niente terremoti, uragani, alluvioni. Non c'erano parassiti a scarnificare gli alberi, né l'arsura a crepare la terra. [...] "Il peggio è passato" dicevano i politici e intanto spedivano figli e soldi dall'altra parte del mondo. La verità è che il peggio non poteva passare, perché non sarebbe mai davvero arrivato."

<sup>21</sup> "una cultura così diversa dalla nostra, dove il ruolo della donna è purtroppo ancora subordinato a quello dell'uomo. Ho letto delle cose riguardo al loro Paese, molti articoli interessanti, e se posso permettermi... ne hanno di strada da fare!"

<sup>22</sup> "il professore viene da una cultura diversa dalla nostra e credo che una certa *forma mentis* sia dura da sconfiggere. Se sei stato abituato ad atomizzare il corpo di una donna, è difficile poi cogliere l'intero, no?"

her attitude towards the student, “There was something much more serious that I could not forgive myself: the hatred for the girl. I could have become a better companion, but life was not going to discount the price I had to pay for that feeling. It was still there, intact, [...]the girl had made me the partner of a rapist” (195-196).<sup>23</sup> By refusing to follow the professor, she collapses her attachment to him and to her former country. Instead, she embraces female solidarity and frees herself from the strict patriarchal norms, which had previously moved her to side with the professor. By depicting *la compagna*, who resisted more than the professor to Miden’s norms and the one that could more easily see through Miden’s façade, as the one to stay and not return to their original country, the novel questions the progressive Global North and backward Global South binary it seemingly reproduces. *La compagna* is free at the end of the novel not because she uncritically adapts to Miden’s standards and is able to develop because of them, but because she continues to have a critical and questioning attitude, starting from her doubts about the place itself. In this way, she is able to overcome her former patriarchal mentality.

The professor is not only described as backward because of his morals, unable to fit into Miden’s modern society, but he is also temporally turned back towards his past, stuck there and unable to move forward. He is trapped searching for a past that does not exist anymore. A former colleague describes him as “A man who clings as best he can to certain vices of his life gone; I find it very human, a chasing after youth, what will not return” (122).<sup>24</sup> The professor even portrays himself as someone who spends a lot of time focusing on his regrets, “I thought back to my country as a nostalgic old man, a shitty old man that I would once have hated” (124).<sup>25</sup> His attachment to the past is significant, as in the end he does move both in space and in time, as he is sent back to his former country and his former life. By deciding to stay in Miden, *la compagna* refuses to be sent back to her past, and instead creates a new future for herself, highlighted by the fact that she gives birth to a daughter at the end of the novel and becomes friends with the girl.<sup>26</sup> *La compagna* does embrace a future opposed to patriarchal norms and instead based on female solidarity.

In *Miden* the socio-economic collapse is in the past, but in *Sirene* the collapse of humankind is in the making and the novel’s ending is constituted by the collapse of its key individual, Samuel. After he tried to kidnap Mia and was imprisoned by the yakuza, he manages to free both himself and Mia, by opening a secret passage into the ocean. While Samuel dies in the process, but Mia is free for the first time in her life. Meaningfully, the novel assumes her point of view for the first time in its final pages

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<sup>23</sup> “c’era qualcosa di molto più grave che non riuscivo a perdonarmi: l’odio per la ragazza. Potevo diventare una compagna migliore, ma la vita non mi avrebbe mai fatto sconti sul prezzo da pagare per quel sentimento. Era ancora lì, intatto, [...] la ragazza mi aveva reso la compagna di uno stupratore”.

<sup>24</sup> “un uomo che si aggrappa come può a certi vezzi della sua vita andata; lo trovo molto umano, un rincorrere la giovinezza, ciò che non tornerà”.

<sup>25</sup> “ripensavo al mio Paese come un vecchio nostalgico, un vecchio di merda che un tempo avrei odiato”.

<sup>26</sup> The child is named after the girl, who becomes the baby’s babysitter. While none of the names are mentioned in the novel, *Miden* presents a stark difference from *Sirene*’s Mia and “the logocentric impulse of the man’s possessive dominance” (Antonello 168).

to recount the birth of her daughter. Her new-found freedom is directly opposed to the patriarchal oppression she has suffered throughout the novel. The world of men is substituted by a new order dominated by mermaids and Pugno “seems to suggest [it] is necessary to replace the patriarchal model” (*Ideologia e rappresentazione* 181).

The end of the novel does not only describe Samuel’s death, but Mia’s complete forgetting of him. While she repeats the one word he taught her, his own name, she does it cluelessly:

When she was very tired, or away from the herd, that cry would come back into her throat. Mia never hissed in front of the other females, never in front of the betas. She no longer remembered that it was Samuel’s cry. She didn’t even know where they were, her and her pack, on human maps. Samuel could have told her she was far, far away from the yakuza marine reserve, but Samuel and the yakuza, for Mia, were no more alive than her last meal. That was the ocean.

Mia’s mind was tabula rasa. (133- 134) <sup>27</sup>

Mia’s mind is completely blank of any memory of humans and of her experiences with them, a “tabula rasa” (134). According to Tabanelli, Mia’s mind “is the void/all of possibilities [...] the end of the human for the triumph of the (post)female” (17). The verbal and knowledge void depicted by Pugno is a way of depicting humankind’s collapse and its aftermath. According to Robert Rushing, Pugno engages with the dilemma of “how to speak from the ‘other side’ [...] The only possible register is that of *suggestion* [...] without effectively ‘gentrifying’ that alien world, re-colonizing it with human speech or the speech of men” (14). Thus, the novel’s ending de-centres not only men, but humankind as well, leaving space only for their absence, allowing us to “criticize, challenge, and even overcome our humanity” (Fulginiti 172). Humankind is left in the past, opening up to new possibilities for the mermaids.

Much like *Miden* ends with a declination of female future and the interruption of the patriarchal timeline dominated by the professor, in the same way, the mere existence of Mia’s daughter changes dramatically the course of events. Mia’s pregnancy is the trigger of her escape, which allows her to collapse the timeline that the yakuza wanted to impose on her. A timeline that would have resulted in either slaughter or sexual slavery. *La compagna* and Mia cause collapse and, if seen in accordance with their nonhuman and human bonds, they can be connected to Donna Haraway’s encouragement to stay with the trouble, “to stir up potent response to devastating events, as well as to settle troubled waters and rebuild quiet places” (*Staying with the Trouble* 1). Haraway’s theory possess a temporal dimension, as “staying with the trouble requires learning to be truly present, not as a vanishing pivot between awful or edenic pasts and apocalyptic or salvific futures, but as mortal critters entwined in myriad unfinished configurations of places, times, matters,

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<sup>27</sup> “Quando era molto stanca, o lontana dal branco, le tornava in gola quel verso. Mia non soffiava mai davanti alle altre femmine, mai davanti alle beta. Non ricordava più che era il verso di Samuel. Non sapeva neanche dove si trovassero, lei e il suo branco, sulle mappe degli esseri umani. Samuel avrebbe potuto dirle che era molto, molto lontana dalla riserva marina yakuza, ma Samuel e la yakuza, per Mia, non erano più vivi del suo ultimo pasto. Quello era l’oceano. La mente di Mia era tabula rasa.”

meanings” (*Staying with the Trouble* 1). *La compagna*’s and Mia’s temporal position is deeply situated in the present; they refuse to be brought back to a patriarchal and backward timeline and they are on the cusp of a potential future transformation for them and their daughters. *Sirene* does not depict the future, the mermaids’ domination, but the events that immediately preceded it. Similarly, *Miden* only suggests *la compagna*’s and her child’s future.

While the two novels are not explicitly queer, they nonetheless present key elements that connect it to queer theory, starting from the indication of collapse as the only solution. Collapse has been regarded by Jack Halberstam as a queer methodology in the context of climate change and societal crisis, arguing that the only way out is to unbuild, unmake, and collapse (2021)<sup>28</sup>. In this way, *Sirene* and *Miden* can be read alongside Alexis Lothian’s analysis of science fiction and queerness. Lothian stated that:

Queer theory and activism pushed against structures that seemed immutable, insisting on the contingent past and unpredictable future of masculinity, femininity, kinship, and desire. How could attempts to envisage possibilities outside heteronormative structures not involve a certain futurity? There is a powerful speculative element in the move from deconstructing existing binaries to visualizing—one might even say fictionalizing—how the world might be changed by those binaries’ subversion or destruction. (5)

In particular, *Sirene* and *Pugno* can be associated to a specific approach of queer science fiction narratives, “just as some speculative fictions may be prototypes for the prediction of a future more or less like the present, others may preemptively imagine its collapse or transformation” (Lothian 19).

Other key elements of the novels can be scrutinised through queer theory. For instance, *Sirene* and *Miden* centre the act of disrupting the human and nonhuman binary. Thus, Raimo and Pugno’s work can be linked to Mel Y. Chen’s theory around queer animacy and its ability to “to blur the tenuous hierarchy of human-animal-vegetable-mineral with which it is associated” (98). While usually “nonhuman animals are typologically situated elsewhere from humans” (Chen 89), in the novels, humans and nonhumans are connected by deep bonds, which also assume the form of hybridisation. Furthermore, *Sirene* and *Miden* straddle the line between the utopia and dystopia labels, occupying a liminal position. While indeed part of a larger trend within dystopian fiction, the novels’ oscillation presents many similarities to the way queer scholars challenge “essentialist categories, while emphasizing notions of multiplicity, fluidity, and hybridity” (March 459). Furthermore, by creating a new future for themselves, a future based on the disruption of patriarchal norms, on the centring of human and nonhumans, and of female subjectivities, Mia and *la compagna* produce queer “strange temporalities” (Halberstam, *In a Queer Time and Place*), which hint simultaneously at the past, the present, and the future.

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<sup>28</sup> Albeit Halberstam focused on the black aesthetic of Alvin Baltrop, Cameron Rowland, and Gordon Matta Clarke (2021), it can arguably be expanded onto other cultural venues because of its relevance on present-day issues.



## Conclusion

*Sirene* by Laura Pugno and *Miden* by Veronica Raimo are the Italian embodiment of current trends within women writers' science fiction. Even if the two novels seemingly are set in opposite worlds, they present substantial similarities. The essay has been developed following Marco Malvestio's definition of both novels as eco-dystopias and it has expanded both terms of the definition, not to challenge such classification, but to explore all the further possibilities provided by the two narratives. The essay has investigated how *Sirene* and *Miden* embrace collapse as a key practice, and not just as a contextual element. *Miden* blurs the human and nonhuman hierarchy by placing on the same level the protagonists' unborn child and various baby moles, while *Sirene* focuses on Mia, a mermaid that is half human and half mermaid. This binary is not the only one probed by the narratives by Pugno and Raimo, as their novels also oscillate between a utopian and dystopic definition, without finding a fixed position. Finally, the protagonists of *Miden* and *Sirene* collapse a temporal linearity that is based on violent patriarchal norms and would force them into a trajectory of oppression. Instead, they are free and create a future for them and their daughters. Unsurprisingly, both novels construct the future by focusing on a mother and daughter bond, as it is one of the key elements of contemporary women's apocalyptic writing (Watkins 119-120). According to Susan Watkins, the genre promotes "the replacement of colonial and patriarchal narratives of paternity and conquest with metaphors of mother-daughter relationships" (119-120). Recent works of science fiction and speculative fiction "express discomfort with the focus on returning women to domesticity and the home and the recreation of traditional gender roles" (122) and instead are able to engage with motherhood "in more complex and positive ways" (125). Both *Sirene* and *Miden* end with the birth of a daughter, but they do not reproduce patriarchal and traditional family structures. In both novels, the fathers are de-centred (being either dead or exiled) and the children are raised by a female network, either by *la compagna* and the student, now the child's babysitter, or by the wider pack of female mermaids. In this way, Pugno and Raimo show new future possibilities and the collapse of backward structures, troubling them.

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