Demystification of (Lesbian) Romantic Love and Estrangement in Motherhood: Eva Baltasar's Lonely Protagonists

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Eva Baltasar's two published novels, *Permafrost* (2017) and *Boulder* (2020) are the first two volumes in a planned trilogy about the lives of three different women who experience the contradictions of modern society. Although the three stories are unrelated, their protagonists share an interesting similarity: they are lesbian women who embrace solitude and have a particular relationship to motherhood. The aim of this essay is to analyse the main characters in *Permafrost* and *Boulder* and their lives. Baltasar's female protagonists seek solitude in order to find meaning and happiness. Their narrative vicissitudes yield a demystified conception of romantic (lesbian) love and imply an estrangement from the experience of motherhood. The depiction of lesbian sexuality in both stories challenges our social constructions of love and couplehood while deconstructing the notion of romantic love. Furthermore, the unexpected irruption of motherhood represents a critical turning point in both stories, prompting critical consideration of the notion of motherhood as an instinctive and natural experience.

Keywords: Eva Baltasar, Permafrost, Boulder, Motherhood, Love, Lesbian, Estrangement

Before Eva Baltasar (1978) made her debut as a novelist in 2017, she had spent ten years writing poetry. Even though she is the author of ten volumes of poetry, all of them prize-winning,[1] it is, no doubt, her fiction that has brought her widespread recognition and success. Baltasar's first and acclaimed novel *Permagel*[2] (2017), which received the 2018 Premi Llibreter (Catalan Bookseller's Award) and was translated into several languages. Its English translation by Julia Sanches –*Permafrost*– was recently launched (2021). Permafrost is not a stand-alone novel but is the first part in a planned triptych of novels, where Baltasar aims to explore in the first person the lives of three different women who experience the contradictions of modern society.

1 Baltasar's poetry works include: *Laia*, Columna, 2008 (Miquel de Palol Award); *Atàviques Feres*, Cossetània, 2009 (Ramon Comas i Maduell Award); *Reclam*, Institut d'Estudis Ilerdencs, 2010 (Les Talúries Award); *Dotze Treballs*, Pagès, 2011 (Benet Ribas Award; Recull Award); *Medi Aquàtic*, Pagès, 2011 (Màrius Torres Award); *Poemes d'una Embarassada*, Pagès, 2012 (Jordi Pàmias Award); *Vida Imitada*, Món dels llibres, 2013 (Miquel Àngel Riera Award); *Animals d'Hivern*, Edicions 62, 2016 (Gabriel Ferrater Award); *Neutre*, Bromera, 2017 (Ibn Jafadja Award) i *Invertida*, Lleonard Muntaner, 2017 (Mallorca Award).

2 Translated into English as *Permafrost* by Julia Sanches.

The second volume in the triptych is *Boulder* (2020), winner of the 2020 Premi Omnium (Omium Prize) for the best novel of the year written in Catalan, and will be completed with the (upcoming) publication of *Mamut (Mammouth)*.[3]

In this essay, I will explore Baltasar's protagonists and their lives in the novels *Permafrost* and *Boulder*. These characters, though different in many ways, share an important and interesting similarity: they are lonely, lesbian women with a particular experience of, and relationship to, motherhood. Their non-standard experience invites us to critically reflect on various cultural imperatives and gender norms associated with the institution and practice of motherhood. To bring out the distinctness of their perspective, I will analyze the protagonists by focusing on five characterial elements: name, social isolation, lesbian sexuality, the appearance of the unexpected, and, lastly, the child's restoration.

Before proceeding with my analysis, a few remarks are in order. It is important that note that lesbian desire, motherhood, and/or situational contradictions are recurrent themes in Baltasar's poetry. Ironic figuration or the use of the first-person voice are resources that can be found all over her poetry, too. I mention this partly to highlight that there is no radical change between her poetry production and her fiction, so that there are thematic and formal continuities. In this sense, her choice for extra-homodiegetic narrative voices reflects the author's choice of poetic masks, not the traditional rules associated with the genre of autobiography. Permafrost and Boulder, the names given to the two protagonists – albeit given through different procedures –, are, for Baltasar, enunciation *loci*.[4] Moreover, her prose beats with characteristic poetic effects (and affects) evinced in her treatment of language, her use and choice of metaphors, or a succinct and forceful rhythm. In this analysis, I am particularly interested in her use of estrangement, a technique described by the Russian formalists, which accompanies the perspective of both protagonists: it is a gaze that 'disautomatizes' the perception of that which is naturalized and/or institutionalized; that is to say, of that which is not perceived. Both *Permafrost* and *Boulder* impel us to submit to critical reflection certain life conceptions and structures often considered as unquestionable and self-evident – e.g. life's pulsion, maternal instinct, romantic love, need for social interrelation, or the institution of family and its ties.

The Name Shapes the Thing (and viceversa): Permafrost and Boulder

The legal names of the main characters in Baltasar's published novels are never mentioned. Instead, they each receive an alias name with a physical, geological ref-

3 *Mamut*'s initial release date was April 23, 2021, Book Day in Catalonia. According to a recent report in the newspaper *Ara*, the book's release has been postponed until February 2022.

4 'I rely on the protagonists' voices to say things that I think and feel', explained Baltasar in an interview for *VilaWeb* on 26 March 2020.

erence meant to serve as a symbol for distance and coldness; namely: Permafrost and Boulder. In *Boulder*, the protagonist falls madly in love with Samsa, a Swedish geologist, who will later on become her life partner and mother to their child and who decides to call her 'Boulder'. The protagonist tells the story behind her nick name:

> She doesn't like my name and so she gives me a new one. She says I resemble the lonely large rocks just south of Patagonia, world parts that were left over after creation, isolated, exposed to everything. No one knows where they come from. They don't understand why they don't wear away and why they stand. I tell her that I've seen similar rocks in the middle of the ocean. Ships go around them in silence, as if they presumed the presence of a mythological being ready to rise up and attack. They are not always alone, sometimes there are other rocks nearby. They are capable of forming labyrinths one ought rather not enter. Samsa lets her hair down and dusts off my forehead, eyelashes, my neck. She calls me Boulder and we laugh not precisely knowing why. I guess love flourishes over us as a giant branch that bends down and touches the sensitive, reluctant folds. (Baltasar 2020: 27-28)[5]

The concept of boulder, defined in the passage, serves as a metaphor for the main character. Indeed, Boulder will often times, in her use of the narrative voice, will tell us about herself and her lived experience drawing on analogies with rocks[6] as well as other isolated elements, especially maritime ones: 'Staying firm like a large rock in the middle of the ocean, deteriorated to the extent that, seen from afar, it is no longer clear whether it is a dead being left adrift or the desperate rock striving to breathe' (Baltasar 2020: 84).[7]

In contrast with Boulder, Permafrost is not an alias name given to her by a lover. It is neither given to her by her family, by whom she feels overwhelmed, especially her little sister Cristina and her controlling, overbearing mother. Her father, as Permafrost recounts in first person, though rather disengaged and passive, remains always by his wife's side: 'I guess Mom thought of Dad as an extension of herself, a sort of infra-ego that formed an indivisible part of her.' (Baltasar 2021: 32-33). Permafrost refers to the permanently frozen layers found in cold regions of the planet. It acts as a container of greenhouse gases – e.g. carbon dioxide and methane – that are likely to be released into the atmosphere as warming temperatures gradually thaw permafrost. This imagery pervades Permafrost's story: heat accumulation causes the thawing of ice and this is precisely how the protagonist is identified. This image is

5 An English translation of Baltasar's *Boulder* has not been published yet. I am grateful to Cristina Carrillo for her translation of the passages in *Boulder*. In my paper, I cite various articles in Spanish or Catalan. She has translated the original quotes into English, too.

6 See, for example: 'Smoke leaves my body like the natural steam of a huge and perforated rock' (Baltasar 2020: 45-46) or '[…] they reach me like the rustling tide reaches the lonely rocks […]' (Baltasar 2020: 66).

7 As will be discussed later on, Boulder's deterioration is connected with an institutionalized life that sucks always her happiness.

often invoked in connection with the experience of doubt,[8] which involves the loss of the female protagonist's hard and compact condition. Interestingly, as a suicidal woman, who contemplates the meaning of life, doubt will paradoxically become her peculiar way of affirming life.

> That's me: the stranger everyone knows by sight, the one who appears fake beneath her layer of low and carefully mown grass. I have a decent covering, waterlight like a ship's hull. It's true: This icy firmness stores a world that is habitable, yet dormant. (Baltasar 2021: 31)

The name shapes the thing and the thing shapes the name. Furthermore, the noun used to name the main characters in each novel highlights an important characterial element: their struggle with relationships and their search for solitude.

Loneliness

'A lonely individual is nowadays quite a radical character', mentioned Eva Baltasar in a recent interview with Montserrat Serra (Serra 2020: n.p.). Both Permafrost and Boulder are radically lonely women who seek solitude in order to grow and practice self-care (even though, in Permafrost's case, growth and self-care involve the possibility of taking one's life). The radicalness of their lifestyle is further exacerbated by the fact that they are women. On the traditional dominant construction of femininity, women must fear loneliness; they must avoid loneliness at all costs as a gender imperative. But both Permafrost and Boulder's defy these stereotypes and norms by embracing loneliness.[9] 'It's not that I want to die, but that I have to. It's my truth. Life belongs to others, it always.' (Baltasar 2021: 76).

As someone with vocational suicidal tendencies, as well as with strong misanthropic convictions, Permafrost struggles to relate to others. Indeed, she is neither interested in forming emotional ties with her lovers, nor in deepening ties with the individual members of her family of origin. To this effect, the protagonist says: 'Family, a first-rate solvent!' (Baltasar 2021: 30). Since lesbian relationships will

8 See: 'Doubt: the first chink in the permafrost' (Baltasar 2021: 20), or 'Sure, maybe. Doubt: the rift through which the world's heat slips in, a brazen violation of permafrost' (Baltasar 2021: 25).

9 The perverse paradox is that patriarchy, which constructs women as incapable of being alone, demands simultaneously their isolation from other women. Permafrost and Boulder are radical, too, because they desire and need loneliness. As we will see, while their loneliness does not entail a feminist articulation, political and collective, of their personal experience, particular and unique, will lead them to restore, what I will refer to as, the link with the child. This event will represent, in turn, their own personal restoration understood as the recognition of oneself in another. In this context, it may be tempting to understand all of this as a rewriting of Michel Foucault's notion of 'care of the self'. For, insofar as care is dissociated from individuality, it allows, implies, and even requires, in Baltasar, a dependent 'other' in conjunction with a non-isolated form of loneliness. However, in order to defend this reading, information on the further development of Permafrost and Boulder's stories would be necessary.

be the object of analysis in the next section, here I will focus on Baltasar's deconstruction of family as an institution. Baltasar resorts to estrangement and irony to challenge the practices, values and beliefs lying at the core of the traditional concept of family, all of which we typically accept as natural. This is evinced, for instance, in the scene where Permafrost receives the news from her sister that she is pregnant with her second child:

> "You're going to be an auntie again!" she exclaims. No matter how hard I try, I can't seem to detect a single emotion capable of shaking loose my interior bedrock of family relations. "That's great", I say. Then I talk. I rattle on for a minute straight, hoping to shortcut any attempts plumb my emotional compost pile (Baltasar 2021: 16)

This is followed by a particularly hilarious monologue, which the main character closes as follows: 'A colossal effort that leaves me dead tired. Seriously, this is the sort of behavior that drives people to medicate' (Baltasar 2021: 17).[10]

The aforementioned notion of family as a solvent reappears in Boulder:

> Samsa pronounced the words *the strength of family ties* yesterday. She was speaking on the phone by the entrance. I was mopping the hallway's floor with the window half open and I heard her clearly pronounce *the strengths of family ties*. I kept pushing the mop down the hallway to attenuate the conversation and liberate myself from that syntagm that described something atrocious. But *the strength of family ties* had already entered home, like a curse capable of dismantling everything. (Baltasar 2020: 129)

It is the tight knot of family ties that suffocates Boulder. For her, it is the very solitude she sacrifices for her love to Samsa that brought her closer to happiness. But it is now invaded. Constrained by imposed social roles, and the norms and predetermined action imperatives that come with it, she is incapable of recognizing herself. Later on, I will analyse how, for Boulder, the experience of falling in love ends up establishing a *modus vivendi* on firm ground – including motherhood – that truncates the freedom she found in her lonely yet happy existence earning a living as a cook on a merchant ship. She despises the dominant capitalist lifestyle, and embraces frugality, steering away from consumerist culture. To see this, consider the following moment in the story: as she gets paid for her work as a cook for the first time, she begins to feel constrained and subdued: 'I'm not sure why, I begin to earn a salary. It's nothing extraordinary, but it entails a change in my relationship to work, I cease to feel it mine, it is owned by someone who values it and hands it over to me'

10 In chapter 15, a retrospective chapter that continues in chapter 17 and 23, the narrator supports her sister who has broken up with her partner: 'A considerate sister is like an information leaflet for contraceptives, with a list of contradictions and side effects as dangerous as a Gorgon' (Baltasar 2021: 45). In the entire episode, Baltasar's 'disautomatization' of common places revealed in various ordinary situations is effectively accomplished through the corrosive and shaking irony of her story's narrator.

(Baltasar 2020: 23). Prior to this, Baltasar, through her narrator, ironically criticizes a particular type of tourist; namely, the tourist who, seeking unique experiences, books tickets to travel on cargo ships in the stormy waters off the coast of the island of Chiloé.[11] Likewise, in *Permafrost* we find the narrative voice fervently mocking her sister Cristina's obsession with organic healthful food.[12] Both protagonists, being hard and impenetrable, practice a remarkable form of austerity which prevents them from participating in, or empathizing with, what they consider as, superficial and ridiculous mainstream practices.[13]

Lesbian Sexual Practices and the Ideal of Romantic Love

Both Permafrost and Boulder feed their sexual desire, a homoerotic one, and masturbation is a habitual practice to satisfy their impulses: 'Some women make me feel wholly lesbian', states Permafrost (Baltasar 2021: 39). In both novels, we find a raw depiction of sexuality, one affirmative of an agential lesbian desire and which moves away from traditional stereotypes about women as essentially passive and dependent beings. In the present of the first narrative, Permafrost is not in a relationship. Moreover, she very rarely falls in love, so that she has neither has she ever had much interest in being in an official relationship; more specifically, in a conventional relationship governed by norms of exclusivity and monogamy:

> Now and then, a lover would fall in love with me and I'd have the impression that life was staring me dead in the eye in its most unflattering wig. There's nothing worse than feeling like you belong entirely to someone else, having to hear that you're key to their happiness or unhappiness, reduced to a Lego block. Have we lost our minds? (Baltasar 2021: 19)

Through the use of analepsis, the narrator introduces to us her relationship to two important women in her life: Veronika, the Belgian woman who proposed marriage

11 'They left home ready to turn the holidays into an expedition, a route towards some inner truth. They find out about the ships that take in passengers and buy tickets on a stormy evening, feeling more alive than ever, more in love with their adventure than with the children they already have or will have. Three hours later, they're pallid and need a lavatory. Theirs is on the deck. Two stretches of stairs, the hold-upstairs stretch, and the last stretch to the toilet room. The wind spits their faces, blinds them with the bullets of austral rainstorms. The waves scream, they would eat everything. I don't understand why they don't die.' (Baltasar 2020: 22).

12 'Maybe she'll let me make coffee, which she never drinks. Coffee is to her what pork is to Jews. She doesn't eat pork either, not because she's Jewish, but because her catechism is exceedingly strict about food. The one meat she tolerates is white meat, but only organic and in very small quantities […] I'll have to convince her that the Chinese chicken is actually organic. No intensive poultry farming in the suburbs, no antibiotics, no fast-growth hormones –this Chinese chicken is one hundred percent homemade' (Baltasar 2021: 46-47).

13 See Marta Pasqua Canelo (2020) for more on this idea and its connection with the concept of *crisis novel*.

to her, but Permafrost turns her down, which triggers the end of their relationship;[14] Roxanne, who, following the traumatic breakup with the protagonist, attempts to commit suicide. Surely, there are reasons why these relationships were doomed to failure, such as the (im)possibility to sustain such relationships over time. However, it is important to bring out that, as someone with suicidal tendencies, Permafrost is unable to invest her energy in future, long-term intimate partnerships. Permafrost ascribes sex a different meaning than lovers. She explains:

> Sex distances me from death, though it doesn't bring me closer to life. What, then? For what? Having thought it over for a few minutes, I arrive at the conclusion that sex keeps me present and safe in a space both uncertain and comforting. Why do I feel the need to be there? I don't know (Baltasar 2021: 76)

Thus, she avoids love but embraces sex: 'Death requires solitude to exert power, but love and solitude are mutually exclusive relations' (Baltasar 2021: 49). Permafrost's conduct reveals her endeavour to keep sex separate from the fantasies of the institutionalized concept of romantic love. For Permafrost, it is the unexpected that will lead her to betray her own avowed principles, which, as I will explain below, will result in two events, the death (though not her own) and love (though not sexual), both of which will play a critical role in reshaping her worldview. Boulder, in contrast, betrays herself by sacrificing her much needed loneliness for the sake of love for Samsa. While their relationship does not involve marriage, it increasingly becomes more standardized to the protagonist up to the point where the relationship no longer feels liveable to her. To put it differently: Boulder falls in love and relinquishes her agency to someone else by choosing her lover's choice. This leads her to abide a by a foreign set of rules, that is, a set of rules that prescribes how romantic relationships ought to *evolve*. Thus, she comes to be situated at the crossroads of two tendencies pulling in opposite directions:

> I'm surprised by this lack of guilt where love, which always pushes outward, and loneliness which stretches inward, come together. Love is not leaving with Samsa, but neither is it with me, it belongs to wanting. And loving is precisely this, wanting her to be present with every body tissue and thought, deep in your bones. Wanting her to be present with all your forces. With hunger, fever, and desperation. When Samsa leaves, it is love at home that possesses her, not me. It is powerful love that grows like a hedge and suffocates the furniture and ties together the walls. It is thorny love that watches over me when I fall asleep, with red eyes, always vigilant, sharp clutches nailed in the night (Baltasar 2020: 43-44)

The myth of romantic love, in its lesbian variant, does not dominate Permafrost's identity. However, its associated interpersonal dynamics do pervade her life. She

14 'Like coral snakes, not all marriages are poisonous – though it's best to keep your distance, just in case. For the sake of precision, a non-poisonous coral snake is called a false coral, which says it all.' (Baltasar 2021: 48).

cannot help but comply with the sequence of steps in the development of a romantic relationship, including living together, buying a house, and motherhood. Furthemore, she cannot escape the impact of Samsa's pregnancy and the arrival of Tinna on her couple relationship: the significant decline in the frequency of sexual activity, cheating, and ultimately separation. I will return to this point in the next section. Let me close this section with a couple of thoughts regarding the depiction of lesbian sexuality in Baltasar's novels, since it has been controversial and the subject of much discussion among literary critics.

Vicenç Pagès, who was one of the first to take issue with Baltasar's treatment of sex in his review of the book, 'Boulder: The Child's Interference' featured in *El Periódico.* He boldly asserts: '[…] in her hands [Baltasar's] new femininity evokes old masculinity'. In a similar vein, Xavier Aliaga's review of Boulder in *El Temps* characterizes Baltasar's sexuality as masculinized. Nevertheless, it is Elizabeth Duval's 'La Líbido Masculina y Baltasar' ['Male Libido and Eva Baltasar'] featured in the magazine *ctxt.es* who most forcefully puts this point. According to Duval, Baltasar's protagonists embody a male role and operate in a patriarchal male sexual economy insofar as they fail to reject the exercise of structural symbolic violence against women. In her own words:

> […] Baltasar's new lesbian femininity strangely resembles the old hetero masculinity, centered around notions like dog in heat and morning erection […] The essential in Baltasar's novels is the sensitivity of her protagonists, which is the same in both cases. What an amazing sensitivity! Giant phalluses! Someone should measure them, or, instead, they should measure each others' phalluses! (Duval 2020: n.p.)

Duvals's critique was published together with Luna Miguel's review 'La Última Escritura de Este Sexo' ['This Sex's Last Writing']. Miguel offers a very different take on Baltasar's depiction of lesbian sexuality. She argues that Baltasar is best understood as practising *bodily writing* – the very same kind of writing that female authors Cristina Morales, Marta Sanz, Elvira Navarro, Aixa de la Cruz and Gabriela Wiener are thought to practice. In Baltasar's work, this takes the form of critical and ironic resistance.

> This adds further pressure on, puts a new end to, the idea of what women literature *ought to be,* or what some *want* women literature to be. In Baltasar's hands, body-writing involves humor and spell. As if she wrote about lesbian sexuality thinking not about what she wishes to vindicate, but about all the common places around it that ought to be pulverized. (Miguel 2020: n.p.)

I am inclined to agree with Miguel on this question. In my view, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that we are in the territory of fiction. Indeed, Baltasar imagines worlds and conflicts; she does not prescribe norms for approaching sex. As such, the debate, as Miguel points out, takes place in the territory of writing. Duval's discomfort is understandable if we consider the fact that she is looking to

find in Baltasar's protagonists what cannot be found by the very nature the characters: the feminist political articulation that these lonely and misanthropic women is able to enact given their frigid and hard character constitution – personality features which serve as reference for their name.[15] Nevertheless, although Permafrost and Boulder undergo a process of personal transformation, they fail to 'inversely' embody and embrace old stereotypes. I will insist on this later on.

As readers, we not only recognize growth in Boulder's slow and gradual mutation but also in Permafrost: the abrupt ending of her story puts before our eyes a transformed character. And, as will be seen next, the lessons each character learns within their respective stories are, in my view, far from the norms of old cisheteropatriarchal masculinity.[16]

The Appearance of the Unexpected

The experience of the unexpected, understood as that which is irruptive, unforeseen in one's horizon, features centrally in both story plots. It connects the protagonists, albeit in different ways, with the experience of motherhood, thereby annihilating their coherence in life. As mentioned earlier, the key conflict guiding *Permafrost*'s narrative structure is the protagonist's decision to commit suicide, which animates the first narrative (or first level of story), on which second level narratives depend. These fundamentally take the form of retrospective narrative (analepsis),[17] and reveal two salient aspects of the protagonist. On the one hand, her difficulty in relating to others, especially in conventional relationships that require the fulfilment of socially established norms – e.g. romantic relationships, family, and so on; and, on the other hand, her tendency to challenge what she takes to be instances of empty institutionalization of emotions through the use of caustic and corrosive irony. Permafrost's family of origin is particularly under attack here. In particular, her mother, whose frequent critical rants and categorical judgments make her hard to engage. On the other hand, her sister, married and mother of two children, to whom Permafrost is aunt. Clàudia, a six-year old child, and Arlet, who is born during the first narrative

15 If Baltasar's characters were cis masculine men we would be perhaps more inclined to applaud their self-determination and their conception of freedom (including sexual freedom) as non-possession: they neither want to possess anyone nor want to be possessed by anyone. We would also praise their wisdom for being able to find joy and happiness in the small and simple things of life.

16 There are various theoretical approaches to the notion of *hegemonic masculinity*. Michael Kimmel in *Guyland. The Perilous World where Boys Become Men* discusses four attributes or rules required for the performance of hegemonic masculinity; namely: (1) '¡No Sissy Stuff!', (2) 'Be a Big Wheel', (3) 'Be a Sturdy Oak', and (4) 'Give 'em Hell' (Kimmel 2008: 45-46). In my view, the masculinities of Permafrost and Boulder respectively do not fit this traditional model: they neither present themselves nor wish or choose to be emotionally castrated characters.

17 Imaginary prolepses anticipating the outcome of possible methods to commit suicide are frequent, too.

and becomes Permafrost's goddaughter. Cristina gives Permafrost the news that she will become godmother to her child in this way:

> "It's a girl! Her name is Arlet and you're going to be her godmother". My sister, seconds after my mother passes her the phone. Out of the question. "Aren't godparents meant to look after the kid if the parents die?" I ask. No newborn deserves a suicidal godmother. […] "No, dumbass, the godmother's the one who bakes La Mona de Pascua. And it's a girl. Also, we're not planning on dying, do you think we'd leave you the kids? You? They need the stability of a marriage." (Baltasar 2021: 72)

The narrator closes the chapter reacting in her, by now already familiar, tone:

> "What if I meet the woman of my dreams and get married?" I ask. "Even if you get married, children need the stability of two parents. A mother and a father. I don't want you to take this the wrong way, but…do you see what I'm saying?" The miserable cow. It's easier than she thinks to see what she's saying. But trying to understand her is about as attractive as the thought of breeding worms in an ulcer. As far as my sister is concerned, the only stability a lesbian can offer is baking La Mona de Pascua cake for Easter[18]. (Baltasar 2021: 72-73)

The exchange between Permafrost and her sister has a premonitory nature: at the end of the novel Cristina and her husband suffer a fatal accident which results in Permafrost becoming the4 legal guardian of her nieces.

> My sister has left her daughters in the care of their aunt. She's left them in *my* care. Even though I'm single, even though I'm gay, even though I'm suicidal. Auntie is a responsible person now. This morning, I made myself some fresh orange juice and washed it down with pills. I smile without crying. Smiling like this thaws the permafrost. The violin plays on. Families huddle like villages under siege. But the savagery that stalks and besieges us–is life. (Baltasar 2021: 104)

This is how the novel ends. Thus, the arrival of the unexpected brings closure to the plot by reconnecting Permafrost with life and its conflicts. The protagonist's change can be seen in small life style changes, such as the fact that she drinks orange juice and takes her medication. Furthermore, Permafrost seems to have entirely abandoned her suicidal intentions. This can be inferred from the comparison between families and 'villages under siege' in the passage above, which suggests that something like family has been recovered. Permafrost's reunion with her two nieces gives rise to a new family configuration. Far from replicating a traditional ideal of family, it represents not only a chosen affective space for them but also a space of resistance, one which remains paradoxically vital during life's siege.

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18 In Julia Sanches' translation, the Catalan '*fer la mona'* is rendered in English as 'baking La Mona de Pascua cake for Easter'. It is worth noting, though, that *fer la mona* is polysemic in Catalan. It refers not only to the expectation on the part of godparents to give the traditional *mona de Pasqua* cake to their godchildren, but also to the idea of acting silly or in a stupid or grotesque way.

In Boulder, by contrast, the unexpected shows up way earlier in the plot, with Boulder's infatuation with Samsa. It is this very element that drives her away from her core values and threatens her sense of life coherence. She moves to land and starts a new life with Samsa with whom she leads a conventional life style, one that she would definitely not choose: 'She insists on buying a house. I tell her no way, I haven't gone with her to play building games, I stay in my apartment' (Baltasar 2020: 33). Despite Boulder's reservations, Samsa goes ahead and buys a house. While the house is initially rented out, inertia in the relationship is already present, so that the next step in the relation is not hard to predict:

> It does happen. Something entirely foreign to my life, something outside the large perimeter protecting me from the permanent, timeless laws of contigency. It arrives home as a deadly guest. Unexpected and fateful. The illness that afflicted only other people. I want a child, says Samsa, a child of ours. Yours. As she says it, I don't feel anything, almost as if I had drunk arsenic. At this point, I only know that I'm frozen. (Baltasar 2020: 51)

Yet again, the protagonist will end up surrendering to her partner's wishes: 'She's nervous, she's receptive, she needs to carry the baby she's already found out in her head' (Baltasar 2020: 53). The path towards motherhood starts with the decision to have a child, but continues with Tinna's birth, or her omnipresence at home – home being now the house Samsa had originally bought). It is told in terms of a process of colonization fraught with, what Boulder considers, ridiculous practices. These will generate a progressive alienation in her relationship with her partner on a physical and emotional level, and, ultimately, will result in Boulder's forced exile. Her effective transformation[19] occurs in a gradual and steady manner throughout the protagonist's telling of the story. But several events are particularly forceful in bringing out the irreversible breakthrough the protagonist undergoes:

> It's been over ten years, the woman who asks me out for dinner does not retain a single cell in her of the woman who ate lemoncake when I met her. Time became infatuated with us and kept wearing us out, it has sharpened its teeth against us. And I'm not sure what we are. My body strength lies uniquely in the body, it's been reduced, I no longer find her in everything I want, say and need […] Impossible routes seem so because of their danger. Lonely one are paid with life. (Baltasar 2020: 69)

Or, later on, as the end of Samsa's pregnancy approaches:

> I could trade Samsa for anyone else. She's seven months pregnant. I don't know where she ran away to. I touch her but I can't find her. She's reduced to container, she's become plastic, she's undergoing a constant elaboration process that overwhelms and unravels her. (Baltasar 2020: 83)

19 Samsa is not her real name. The name is a clear reference to Franz Kafka's character Gregor Samsa in *The Metamorphosis*.

Boulder's perspective reveals a deep feeling of estrangement. Baltasar exploits it in order to criticize insemination process or prenatal classes[20]. I wish to focus here on a different aspect: the threat that the experience of pregnancy and childbirth poses to a couple's relationship. In *Boulder*, such experience represents a transformative event in the (lesbian) relationship between Boulder and Samsa. Indeed, Boulder, the non-biological mother in the lesbian couple, ends up being expelled into a sort of exile. The narrator describes it in these words: 'Samsa's motherhood is exclusive, it does not affect me; it has made me an exile. She and Tinna are one same being, just like when Samsa was pregnant with her' (Baltasar 2020: 93).

Samsa's fusional practice of motherhood expels Boulder by forcing her to assume a subservient role[21]. The upshot of this is the end of relationship between the two women. Qua narrator of the story, Boulder mediates the voices of others and, consequently, the possible subjective perspectives of the story, so that we know one side of the story. We are left in the dark as to what Samsa's arguments are and her view on the transformative process they undergo as a couple following the decision to have a child. However, to cast further light on this issue, we may consider Beatriz Gimeno's views on mother-child love and relationships in her 'El Nuevo Amor Romántico ['The New Romantic Love']. Gimeno claims that the ideal romantic love as a normative principle in couple relationships has been transferred to mother-child relationships: '[…] the values of romantic love, key values in the configuration of female subjectivity, have been moved to a romanticized motherhood so as to […] keep playing the same role'. (Gimeno 2016: 23). She argues that the ideal of romantic love, deeply challenged and critiqued by feminists as an instrument of oppression, is present in mother-child love, too. While the kind of love that governs mother-child relationships differs from couple love by being presumably instinctive, natural and unshakable, they both make the same demands on women; namely: unconditional and eternal devotion for the beloved. In the case of motherhood, devotion for the beloved means, of course, devotion for the child. In my view, Baltasar's trilogy of novels is best understood as a reaction against these oppressive ideals. Permafrost and Boulder exemplify a kind of motherhood that is in tension with social roles and norms that demand of women, lesbian or not, unconditional devotion for their children and self-sacrifice.[22]

20 Baltasar admits in several interviews that her characters' approach to these issues is influenced by her own personal lived experience.

21 'I don't want to think. I feel used, I feel isolated, I feel expired. I don't like myself. I don't like this life, it's the life of a Chinese woman, of a slave woman. I'd rather not think. Under the present conditions, thinking is not only dangerous, it's an idiocy. (2020: 95). Interestingly, the reference to slavery appears in Permafrost's reflections, too: 'Deep down, I'm a slave to myself. But the day will come when I can't take it anymore, and on that day the slave will die, not the other woman but the one everybody knows, the one who isn't me and yet seems openly to live my life' (Baltasar 2021: 48).

22 In her interview with Montserrat Serra, Baltasar clarifies 'I talk about a woman' in response to the question whether we can find in *Boulder* a reflection about the isolation some men feel in motherhood.

In Boulder and Samsa's story, the inflection point is the protagonist's involuntary witnessing of a sex scene between Samsa and another breastfeeding mother. The scene is a lesbian rewriting of the *Caritas Romana*:

> She's asleep. Tina is asleep. But there's another baby with a nipple in her mouth and sucks on it with closed eyes, completely drugged. She sucks and swallows. She sucks and swallows. A white thread runs down her chin and gets lost in her neck-folds. A disgusting thread of milky drool. It's not Samsa's nipple because Samsa is down on her knees between two legs and puts her face inside. She sucks and swallows. Her breasts are hanging over a pillow. The pillow is there to offer in a perfect angle the open-mouthed pussy that Samsa is eating. (Baltasar 2020: 135-136)

Clearly, Samsa's condition of mother serves in the passage as the symbolic and material articulation of sex and desire. Motherhood, however, receives a very different construction for Boulder, the very same construction we see in Permafrost. Indeed, they perform a mothering role, one which is of their own, even though the circumstances that lead each of them to motherhood are certainly different. For Permafrost, motherhood arrives as an unexpected event, though affective closeness between them grows while her niece is in hospital. Boulder, on the other hand, endeavours to consciously construct motherhood without reference to any previously existing motherhood models.[23]

The Child's Restoration

In both plots, and prior to the appearance of motherhood, we learn about the protagonists' explicit reluctance to reproduce and have children. After a conversation in which Permafrost's sister keeps acting as a self-blaming mother, the protagonist says: 'I swear to every god that exists that I will never have kids. I swear it a hundred thousand time. I have to' (Baltasar 2021: 96). Boulder, on the other hand, offers a priceless description of how she feels about children:

> Children are not for me. Above all, I find them disturbing. I see them as unpredictable variables, and, when they run into hurdles, they get stuck with the force of their inborn madness. They are surly, uncontrolled, intermittent. They are drawn to me in the same perverse manner that cats chase those whose who are allergic to them. (Baltasar 2020: 38).

23 Note that I use the term 'mothering' in contradistinction to 'motherhood'. The distinction between these two terms is often construed along these lines: motherhood refers to the biological experience of reproduction, while mothering refers to the female-defined experience of child-rearing. Motherhood is culturally specific and, as such, it includes multiple cultural and political practices. I use 'mothering' to highlight the culturally differentiated and creative dimension of Boulder and Permafrost's motherhood: it does not fit any socially preestablished roles.

While neither Permafrost nor Boulder gestate a child, they both will end up assuming a parenting role and will do so in a coherent way and without regrets because they do it on their own terms. Even though they temporarily abandon – or perhaps wholly transform – some of their priorities (in particular, the desire for solitude), Permafrost and Boulder seem to see it as a choice, rather than a sacrifice. *Boulder* comes to an end precisely with Boulder choosing Tinna and a comparative reflection on the relationship that she and Samsa have each with their daughter as two different, yet equally valid, approaches to motherhood.

> I see Tinna four or five days a month, and that's enough for me. It's true, it's enough for me. I don't need to be a mother to her, at least not in the same way that Samsa takes herself to be a mother. I don't think about the vast logistics network that Tinna involves; I'm only interested in being with her, in having a relationship with her. For Samsa, that's perfect. My choice confirms the meaning of her choice. I look at her and see a woman who has made her own worth dependent on a child's well-being. […] Tinna loves her with the sort of love that's consolidated by cohabitation. She prefers her and that makes me feel good. I feel that it saves me. (Baltasar 2020: 144).

Boulder decides, at least for the moment, not to embark on any other ship that takes her far away from her daughter. In *Permafrost,* the affective closeness between the protagonist and her niece Clàudia begins when she suffers vision loss due to a severe uveitis. The girl is hospitalized and Permafrost becomes Clàudia's primary caregiver as her parents are not able to be with her: Permafrost's sister is busy with the demands of three-month-old Arlet and Clàudia's father is away on a business trip. 'Do you want me to tell you a story, Auntie? asks my niece from her hospital bed. Her name is Clàudia and I found out three days ago that she is exceptional' (Baltasar 2021: 95). Clàudia will be *key* in Permafrost's transformation.[24] A later event will confirm its irreversibility. Over the course of chapter 34, we learn about their shared daily life in hospital, and their connection and good communication between aunt and niece becomes evident. The girl's vision gradually improves and, in the end, she recovers sight shortly before her parent's mortal accident. The protagonist reflects: 'She's an odd girl. She reminds me of me, except the polar opposite' (Baltasar 2021: 102). Moreover, earlier in the chapter she has come to an important realization, which she expresses: 'I've realized that I know myself by heart – I know myself to the point of recognizing people who don't exist and yet complement me' (Baltasar 2021: 100). This manifests a paradoxical conscious awareness of a recognized feeling of estrangement along the lines of that vividly described by Boulder in the final scene of the novel: 'In the evening, when I undress, the turtle neck of my sweater catches my skull to remind me that being born is nothing, that the danger is being reborn' (Baltasar 2020: 143-144).

The mirroring figures present in *Permafrost* or rebirth in *Boulder* are configurations that serve as reminders to the protagonists that they also love life, because life

24 The name 'Clàudia' contains '*clau*' which in Catalan means 'key'.

turns out to be quite different from what they initially expected. And both figures concern a, somewhat spectral, kind of, recognition of oneself as another, made possible by a process of *reconnaissance*[25]through children. Clàudia and Tinna provide Baltasar's protagonists with an authentic communication space and restore their original sense of freedom as a genuine ingenuousness. Though inhabiting a less lonely room because of the presence of the echo of others, neither Permafrost nor Boulder is willing to abandon their freedom.

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25 The French equivalent of the verb 'to recognize', *reconnaître,* contains the term *naître* (to be born). While it is questionable that *naître* is etymologically the stem word of *reconnaître*, I focus on *naître* because it enables us to construe recognition as being-re-born-with, thereby highlighting a central aspect of the process of recognition: birth that is, at the same, time re-birth made possible by the mediation of someone or something.