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“‘Staying with the Trouble’: Feminism, Biopolitics, and Making Kin

in Julie Taymor’s *Tempest*”

[W]ho shall measure the heat and violence

Of the poet’s heart tangled in a woman’s body?

--Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*

In this question, Virginia Woolf invokes the precarious ontology of Judith, Shakespeare’s hypothetical sister, who was born with the same gifts as her brother but denied the opportunity to express them. Judith, Woolf concludes, “would surely have gone crazed, shot herself, or ended her days in some lonely cottage outside the village, half witch, half wizard, feared and mocked at.” Julie Taymor’s 2010 film adaptation of *The Tempest* epitomizes Judith’s dilemma in the figure of Prospera, who is at once king of the island as well as a mother, alleged witch, and scientist who, in the end, sacrifices her cherished autonomy to secure a better future for her daughter in Milan. Although the two directors—both women—who have produced adaptations that feature a female Prospero tend to minimize the gender politics of this conversion, there is no denying the fact that changing Prospero to “Prospera” reveals the precarity of the female biopolitical subject in ways that are unthinkable with a male protagonist.

In this respect, Julie Taymor’s adaptation of *The Tempest* offers a compelling blueprint for the process that Donna Haraway describes as “staying with the trouble,” or, the conviction to live within and against the undulating terms of a “thick present,” rife with the scars of the Anthropocene—the age of the man-made disaster. Characterized by climate change, mass extinctions, forever wars, and the reduction of life itself to information, the Anthropocene, as Haraway describes it in her 2016 book, *Staying with the Trouble*, is “a tragic story with only one real actor, one real world-maker, the hero, this is the Man-making tale of the hunter on a quest to kill and bring back the terrible bounty.”

It is therefore the “precarity,” as Judith Butler characterizes it, and not the potency, of Prospera’s power with which I am chiefly concerned here. For what I see in Taymor’s complex portrait of Prospera as a female head-of-state are many of the same challenges that trouble feminist politics as well as female politicians of both liberal and conservative persuasions, from Hillary Clinton to Theresa May. In fact, Taymor’s *Tempest*, I shall argue, stages a crisis of the female body politic, as Prospera’s “two bodies”—played out through her surrogate progeny, Ariel and Caliban—exist in constant and, often, violent tension throughout the film. As a female ruler who lacks the automatic legitimacy of her male counterpart, passively inheriting her power from her dead husband according to Taymor’s invented backstory, Prospera pursues strategic relationships with Ariel and Caliban, who represent the realms of *zoe*, or nonhuman life, and *bios*, or organic life, respectively. Rather unusually, Ariel will become more monstrous while Caliban becomes, paradoxically, more human—a process that culminates in Prospera’s decision to identify, in the end, more with “this thing of darkness” than with her “diligen[t]” spirit. Hence, I will also explore the intersection of gender politics and critical race theory as it applies to the post-Anthropocentric feminism toward which Taymor’s film gestures, while ultimately arguing that the final articulation of the film’s relationship between Prospera and Caliban suggests that the most insidious form of racism, in the Foucauldian sense of the term, is, in fact, sexism.