UNIVERSITY OF MURCIA

International Journal of English Studies

IJES

http://revistas.um.es/ijes

Dehumanist resilience in Tracy Sorensen's *The vitals*

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Received: 30/04/2025. Accepted: 18/12/2025.

ABSTRACT

This paper looks to Tracy Sorensen's 2023 novel, *The vitals*, to help answer the question: what do we hope for –which bodies, which worlds– when we hope for resilience? *The vitals* narrates the experience of cancer from the perspective of the author's abdominal organs and tumours. It is also, less obviously, an intervention into the cultural politics of climate change, informed by Sorensen's many years as a climate activist. The book also reflects Sorensen's recognition that climate change, like cancer, represents a challenge to the imagination that is partly attributable to myths of a hierarchical distinction between brain and body and between human and non-human modes of being. This paper reads *The vitals* as an experiment in dehumanism (Singh, 2018) that counters myths of humanist mastery with an emphasis on place-based imagination, organization and laughter.

KEYWORDS: Resilience, dehumanism, place, organizing, novel, cancer, climate change, laughter

1. INTRODUCTION

Tracy Sorensen's 2023 novel, *The vitals*, was born from an epiphany. Lying in a hospital bed, following her 2014 surgery to treat advanced peritoneal cancer, she saw a tree out the window and marvelled at its leaves, which were "vibrating with life" (2024a, p. 276). Shortly afterwards, her surgeon and a group of medical students came into the room to check on her incisions. They noted that the fluids draining through abdominal tubes were clear, indicating normal pancreatic function—information that Sorensen receives with relief and gratitude. "All this time", she realized, "through chemotherapy, anaesthetic and the surgery that had removed its tail, my pancreas had been getting on with life. It had been making enzymes, secreting hormones. It struck

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Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

doi: 10.6018/ijes.660851

me for the first time as creaturely, a thing with its own habits and ways of being. I understood that it was not working for me, it was just doing its work. If this benefitted me, this was a bonus, not an intention" (2024a, p. 276). Looking around the room and out the window again, she went on to observe: "Tree, leaf, nurse, vase of cut flowers. Life ran through me and around me. It supported me but it was not about me. My usual social self—vaguely embarrassed, eager to please or impress—dropped away, leaving something more lively, open and gracious" (2024a, pp. 276–277). The feeling did not last, proving "too soft to withstand the rigours of the everyday world". But Sorensen held on to the memory (2023, p. 277), which informed her creation of *The vitals*.

Sorensen describes *The vitals*, which she completed as part of her PhD thesis in Social Work and Arts, as "an experiment in posthuman praxis that eventually took the form of a novel" (2024a, p. 265). Specifically, it narrates the experience of cancer from the perspective of the author's abdominal organs and tumours. The book is also, less obviously, an intervention into the cultural politics of climate change, informed by Sorensen's many years as a climate activist. Noting that climate change, like cancer, tends to "arouse terror and helplessness, anger and denial" (2024a, p. 269), Sorensen observes an additional obstacle to thinking about either clearly: "the dualism that splits mind from body and 'Man' from nature, in ways that justify and normalize ecological destruction and social injustice" (2024a, pp. 269–270). Her momentary glimpse into the vibrancy of the leaves outside her hospital window and her pancreas, "getting on with life" (2024a, p. 276) inside her abdomen, illuminated an imaginary path beyond that split, which she set out to explore in *The vitals*. The novel describes the struggle of its characters to maintain their function and existence in the face of catastrophic disruption. We might say, then, that it is a story about resilience –not in the sense of a testimony but a critical exploration of the idea, engaging questions including: what do we hope for –which bodies, which worlds– when we hope for resilience? *The vitals* approaches these questions from the perspectives of place-based imagination, organization, and laughter.

2. RE-PLACING THE SUBJECT

Sorensen's dissertation locates her novel within the framework of the "critical posthumanities" (2024a, p. 304), citing Rosi Braidotti, Val Plumwood, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari as guides to a mode of thought that "returns us, conceptually, to our fleshy, animal selves that are situated in a web of life that is in turn continuous with the dynamic biosphere of planet Earth" (2024a, p. 274). She also notes that, as "the child of Humanist parents" born of the Western philosophical tradition", posthumanism "has an unfortunate tendency to universalise" (2024a, p. 301), an observation that resonates with geographer Juanita Sundberg's observation that posthumanist theory "continuously refers to a foundational ontological split between nature and culture *as if it is universal*" (2014, p. 35). Hallmarks of posthumanism's modern European parentage include both its "silence about location" (Sundberg, 2014, p. 35), in the sense of geohistorical place and communities of affiliation (Sundberg, 2014, p. 36), and its failure to engage seriously with Indigenous ontologies (Sundberg, 2014, p. 37). By contrast, as detailed below, Sorensen attends to place with respect to multifaceted determinants of her identity as a white settler Australian and, more concretely, as Country, animating the knowledge of the Wiradyuri Elders with whom she works on local environmental issues (2024a, p. 285). These elements of Sorensen's work warrant supplementing the interpretive framework of posthumanism with the lens of what Julietta Singh calls "dehumanism", a concept whose "de-" expresses both the "'de' of decolonial ethico-politics" (2018, p. 5) and the 'de' of deconstruction, crucially foregrounding the particular force of narrative in the making and

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

unmaking of subjects" (2018, p. 5). The deconstructive energy of dehumanism (in which "de" also notably signifies deliberate movement, vs. the fixity of "post") carries over to "the act of reading [that] is vital to this process of imagining otherwise and dwelling elsewhere" (Singh, 2018, p. 6).

Dehumanism in Singh's formulation counters myths of mastery that inform colonialism and patriarchy and that are also quietly present in the biopolitical currents of resilience thinking. In contemporary life, Singh notes that "the politics of mastery shift from a focus on overcoming an opponent or adversary toward skillful management of the self and its others. At the surface a less violent and coercive set of practices, skillful management becomes mastery's dominant mode in the biopolitical moment" (Singh, 2018, p. 11). Sorensen detects a strain of the will-to-mastery in the genre of the cancer memoir, which she categorizes as "non-fiction stories told by a unified, individual human Subject [that] holds fast until the end (death or remission). This is the transcendent Subject, more than the sum of its failing parts" (2024a, p. 375). Acknowledging that she is drawn to these stories and their promise of happy resolution, Sorensen aims to unravel the transcendent cancer-patient Subject and the expectations that are placed on her[iii]. These expectations reflect what Lucía López Serrano identifies as "a resilience imperative that is particularly powerful in the clinical context. Cultivating resilience … in the face of potential illness becomes inextricably linked to the neoliberal optimization of health in order to become peak productive subjects under the dynamics of capitalism", she states (2024a, p. 17). Sorensen is wary of the humanist narrative of the "peak productive subject" because of its implication in the destruction of the planet but also because of the particular perniciousness of that narrative for those living with cancer, for whom the resilience imperative is adjacent to the wellness mantra that "it's all down to me to take control of my own destiny and 'win'" (Sorensen, 2024b, para. 9). *The vitals* rejects that premise in its structure, which distributes the role of narrator amongst the organs, after an ominous first chapter narrated by an outside character, Somatom, whose CT scan captures the image of "two extra organs growing among the usual ones … —never a good sign" (2023, p. 2). One of those "extra" organs, Baby (the peritoneal tumour) has her own chapter.

The vitals decentres the individual subject in favour of the materiality of bodily processes and what Sorensen calls "co-creation with the more-than-human world" (2024a, p. 376). That means that "Tracy", the putative autobiographical subject of the story, has a weird spectral place in it. The question of her existence is a matter of intense debate amongst the organs. Inspired by his reading of *The communist manifesto*, Rage (spleen) proposes that "Tracy is the opiate of the organs" (2023, p. 66) conjured up by Queen Bee (brain), aka, the "ruling class" (p. 68). The other, less politically-minded organs are not so sure. Doubt about the substance of Tracy extends to the production of the book itself, as Sorensen muses: "For me, the 'author' of The vitals is actually a vast, interconnected multiplicity: my parents' skilled hands, the English language, the technique of crochet, the creation of bile in the liver. Evolution. The biosphere. Stars. It is a polyphonous voice emerging from the world, not from 'me'" (2024, p. 376).

The novel's materialist framework does not preclude its characters from having egotistical aspirations. Rage, for example, is preoccupied with "doing something original, making some special contribution that nobody else could supply" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 61). He is upset to learn that many of his capacities –making macrophages, for example– are shared by other organs. He is forced reluctantly to admit:

> I am, of course, a lump of meat, just as you are. But we tend not to think of ourselves this way. If you're at a party, and someone asks you what you *do*, do you say that you produce bile or shit or piss? …. No. Your meat self-recedes into the background and you talk about the books you've read or the rivers of blood you have seen, or your adventures mining for copper or gold, calcium or

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

> phosphorous. You are meat, but you're *much more* than meat. Or maybe this is just me…. I found out early that my meat-self was not particularly interesting, and that it was more-or-less inessential. Or, in the words of one of my fellow organs, who shall remain nameless, I discovered that I was totally fucken pointless. This fellow organ was (and is) a close friend, and I have forgiven them. But it hurt. (Sorensen, 2023, p. 59)

The fights between the organs –and their friendship– is a significant dynamic in the novel to which I will return. But I want to pause on Rage's obsession with learning, "the point of *me*, the *special* point of me" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 61) –a concern all his fellow organs share to some extent. Though each of them comes to terms with their lack of singularity, there are two characters in the novel whose primary characteristic is their conviction, extending to their way of acting in the world, as though they were special and original –transcendent Subjects.

The first is Queen Bee, who has claimed supremacy over all the other organs. What they call the "Estrangement" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 12) dates back to their childhood, when the other organs attended "the Organ School of the Peritoneal Cavity" while "Bee went to a posh academy" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 6). There, according to Gaster [stomach], she "started to get ideas, which I'm told is quite normal for a brain" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 6). He recalls that, when Bee began offering pronouncements like "'one and one is two'", and "all green things [are] "plants"'" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 6), "We organs of the Peritoneal Cavity looked at each other and shrugged. Whatever. It was just Bee, off on her own trip" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 6). Queen Bee is imperious, but also a stodgy and eminently mockable character. Her claims to supremacy are transparent and suspect; however, it is impossible to sever connections from her, and it eventually turns out that she has a role to play in the resilience of the whole assemblage. Baby (tumour) is a different story. So-named because she arrived following what Peri (peritoneum) mistook as pregnancy symptoms, she is also the character who most clearly embodies the ideal of individual resilience. She initially behaves with hapless charm, prone to misunderstandings and accidents for which she is forgiven, thanks to her coding as a cute, if odd-looking and bizarrely fast-growing child. Over time, she becomes increasingly deliberate in her quest for territorial and organizational dominance. Though she lacks the organization and knowledge possessed by the other characters, she is focused on seizing opportunities and resources directed towards the goal of endless growth. She achieves this via charm and flattery at first and then by violent expansion. Rage confesses that "Baby energised me … I saw a kindred spirit: an individualist, a *Lebenskünstler*, a life-artist" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 69). The figure of the *Lebenkünstler*, a life artist, resonates with the stereotype of the resilient individual, who creatively deploys experiences as resources for personal growth. Baby takes this principle to an extreme, ingratiating herself with the organs, then pumping them for information about their functions so that she can exploit and eventually take them over.

Kelly (the gallbladder) is especially keen to befriend Baby and becomes confused when, after a series of texts gushing over each other's outfits, Baby abruptly asks her to "explain the common bile duct" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 191). After getting details from Kelly about her own and other organ functions, Baby stops texting her, leaving Kelly hurt and with "the niggling feeling I was betraying a confidence or crossing some sort of line" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 192). Other organs fare less well. Baby seduces Panno, tying him up in what seems at first to be a fun sex game and eventually almost killing him. She starts siphoning off Gaster's food supply and crowds him and other organs via renovations to expand her loft studio. She is a model of entrepreneurial energy, whose skill at mimicry and adaptation, her resilience, eventually risks the destruction of her own and everyone else's environment.

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

Baby also starts breeding rabbits, who have begun proliferating and embarking on their own path of destruction at the Pouch of Douglas. The rabbits/tumours have a particular resonance in Australia, as an invasive species that accompanied, then threatened to destroy, settler colonial society along with Indigenous lifeways, highlighting that while this is a story about the peritoneal cavity and its inhabitants, it also has other place-significant resonances. What Sorensen calls the "great estrangement between the brain and the abdominal organs" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 359) plays out on a larger scale in the estrangement between European humans and nature that, as Australian philosopher Val Plumwood (a key influence on Sorensen's work) has shown, informs patriarchy and colonialism (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 274). Sorensen highlights the connection between her own physicality and the more-than-human environment in her description of the "vastly altered landscape" of her post-surgical body with its scars, missing organs and colostomy bag (2016, p. 438). She observes (2016, p. 438): "The landscape around Bathurst, where my body lives, is also altered. Like my intestines, the vessels that hold and carry moisture—the rivers and creeks—have been rerouted. There's a dam, a water filtration plant and a sewage treatment plant. Water and waterborne solids do not flow the way they did in the past, but, like my bodily organs, they are still working, still carrying and processing biological matter" (Sorensen 2016, pp. 438–439). Like Sorensen's body, the landscape around Bathurst is an assemblage of organic and inorganic relations and processes that has suffered damage, is still working but is not infinitely resilient. The environmental work to which Sorensen is committed is devoted not to restoring nature, but to sustaining the functional ecology of the landscape for its human and non-human inhabitants.

In addressing itself simultaneously to problems of human health and ecology, *The vitals* undercuts the myth of the autonomous humanist self as an agent of resilience. But it does not simply shift the focus of resilience from the individual to system. The relations that Sorensen is describing are grounded in place; the connections between her body and the land and water are not just metaphorical, but contiguous and concrete[iv]. She cites Wiradyuri Elder Uncle Dinawan Dyirribang's (also known as Bill Allan) address to a land care meeting at Napoleon Reef (Walang), NSW, which amplifies the relationality of people and land: "We've got to learn to live on this planet with everything else, not think that we control it. And that's why when Europeans first came here in 1788, they didn't understand how our culture lived. They saw all this land, all these trees and thought oh yeah, we'd better knock all these trees down. But our people had managed all that for thousands and thousands of years. They want to conquer everything, even conquering the environment, Mother Nature. You'll never conquer her" (as cited in Sorensen, 2024a, p. 286).

Sorensen notes that the signification of Dyirribang's pronouns changes: "Sometimes he uses 'we' to include himself as part of the broader Bathurst population; at other times, 'we' refers to his Wiradyuri kin and ancestors" (2024a, p. 286). Sorensen situates herself in this place and history as "a white, middle class, heterosexual cisgender woman who lives on Wiradyuri land in the NSW town of Bathurst, a regional Australian town, about three hours by car from Sydney" (2024a, p. 267). She elaborates that she "grew up in Carnarvon, a small, remote town in the north of Western Australia where the Gascoyne River meets the Indian Ocean. This area includes the lands of the Bayungu, Inggarda, Thalanji, Thudgarri and Malgana peoples" (Sorensen, 2024ap. 267). These auto-ethnographical details serve not to give credence to the figure of "Tracy", who may or may not exist, nor to offer a coherent story of herself as author[v]. Instead, they highlight Sorensen's commitment to forging good relations with the land and its Indigenous custodians –a commitment that informs her activism and her art.

Of all the noxious things that Baby does in the novel, actions committed separately but in service to her seizing the functions and territory of the other organs, the seizure of knowledge

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

without regard for the protocols that manage their delicate sharing of duties stands out. The novel does not draw any simple parallels between the genetic accident of cancer and the agential violence of colonialism. Sorensen notes in a blog post that "DNA mutation ('errors' in copying genetic information)" is a "job lot" facilitating both evolution and cancer. Cancer, she reminds us, is "as natural as a sea sponge" (2024b, para. 10). Baby's actions are the result of what she calls "the voices" that tell her and Bunny [the first secondary tumour] "to grow and deceive and grow. We can't stop them, we can't switch them off" (2023, p. 262). The novel does not moralize about genetics, but it does critically highlight habits of belief that draw hierarchical lines between body and mind, human and nature –habits that legitimate practices of colonial extraction, including the theft of knowledge from its collectively held place. Following on from Sorensen's articulation of relations of obligation and interdependence, *The vitals* is not just a story of an endangered assemblage of organs from which we can infer a story of an endangered planetary system; it lives in, and its meaning derives from, its specific cultural, social, geographical, ecological place in settler-colonial Australia.

3. BEYOND INFRASTRUCTURE AND COMMUNITY –RESILIENCE AS AN ENDLESS MEETING

In illuminating relations of belonging, the novel also invites us to reflect on conventional objects of resilience-thinking: infrastructure and community. In one sense, we might read *The vitals* in sympathy with calls by scholars like Caroline Levine to focus our literary critical attention on "the physical structures and pathways that allow a society to function" (2023, p. 54). These forms, which include buildings, roads, bridges, seaports and sewer systems, "afford the accommodation and movement of bodies, goods, energy, and information" (Levine, 2023, p. 54). Levine convincingly highlights the connection between attending to infrastructure and recognizing the "unglamorous work of keeping life going" (2023, p. 56). *The vitals* evinces a similar interest, piqued by Sorensen's early reading of the 1970s *Reader's digest* series, featuring articles written from the point of view of different body parts, with titles like "I Am Joe's Ear" and "I Am Joe's Intestine". Noting that Joe's greater momentum, peritoneum, or mesentery were never featured, she muses: "To me this lack of interest in the connective tissue of the human body is somehow illustrative of the Humanist impulse: things seem to stand alone, as individuals, represented in such a way as to make us forget about all the scaffolding and feeding going on around the feted star (or pancreas, or intestine)" (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 366).

The vitals centres infrastructure but also stretches the concept to the point of unravelling, as can be seen with the character of Peri. Peri explains her role in this way: "I wrap the walls, floor and ceiling of the abdominal cavity … I coat, I wrap, I cling, exuding a small amount of fluid from my cells as I go. This fluid lubricates the organs, allowing them to slide against each other without snags … Because of me, we can all slither together, pack close … We are perfectly comfortable with, have only ever known, high-density living (Sorensen, 2023, p. 26). Peri's self-description refuses neatly to conform to distinctions between container and contained, space and place, process and organ. The image of the organs living in close but comfortable proximity to one another is less evocative of infrastructure than of community, another key site both of resilience discourse and climate activism. Sorensen stresses the community foundations of the projects she is involved in, but also expresses wariness about the term community. She draws on sociologist Martin Mulligan's work on climate action, which acknowledges the role of "communicative communities" in fostering climate resilience (Mulligan, 2014, p. 173) while cautioning against what he calls

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

essentialist and exclusive conceptions of community (p. 171, p. 174). Mulligan defines community as "something that might be formed in the process of taking action, rather than something that is ready to take action" (2014, p. 174). Chris Zebrowski and Daniel Sage express similar circumspection about the emergence of "community" as a key node in resilience thinking in the field of disaster and response and recovery, where it denotes a "natural object, endowed with certain inherent capacities of self-organisation, which must be identified, enabled and encouraged through the exercise of good governance" (2019, p. 64). Like Mulligan, Zebrowski and Sage resist the idea of community as a readymade set of relations that evokes nostalgia, even as it is harnessed to neoliberal ends[vi]. They call instead for organizing, which they define, following Martin Parker et. al., as "politics made durable … a way of working through the complex ways of being human with other humans and hence a responsibility and possibility for us all" (2013, p. 39, as cited in Zebrowski & Sage, 2019, p. 63).

The vitals offers us a distinctly post- or *de*humanist vision of this mode of "politics made durable" that helps us to think about the *who* and the *what*, as well as the *how* of resilience. Part of the *how* –the means by which the organs respond to the challenge of their increasingly dire situation– is through the banal mechanism of meetings. Regular Organ Board meetings (conducted via Zoom because of the distance between some of the fixed organs) serve a variety of functions in the sustenance of the group. Most obviously, they are a vital bureaucratic structure that enables organs to exchange routine reports on their activities and address any disruption. They also serve as an index of the wellness of the participants, with the increasing appearance of squares with cameras turned off highlighting the casualties of Baby's destruction. With some significant adaptations the meetings also eventually become the vehicle by which the organs organize to take Baby down. The importance of these meetings to their resistance evokes the only half-jokey title of Francesca Polletta's 2002 book, *Freedom is an endless meeting*. Subtitled "democracy in American social movements", Polletta's book is a case-study based analysis of participatory democracy experiments throughout the US over the course of the twentieth century. The book's title is based on a comment by a member of Students for a Democratic Society (SDS) in 1965 that serves as the epigraph to Chapter 1: "Talk helps people consider the possibilities open for social change … One person said, "freedom is an endless meeting" (Polletta, 2002, p. 11). Though the book is not romantic about the efficacy of participatory democracy, it highlights in the movements it describes "the solidary, innovatory, and developmental benefits of participatory democracy—benefits that are practical and political" (Polletta, 2002, p. 12).

On the solidarity side, Polletta emphasizes the importance of ritual (2002, pp. 243–244), which appears in the novel in the form of the Song of Homeostasis the organs sing together at the end of each meeting. The significance of the song, which Liv [liver] describes as "ethereal, ancient, contemporary". It is the song that holds us together. It is the song I live for" (2023, p. 125), is solidified by Baby's disruptive presence in Organ Board Meetings. She never learns the words to the song, and though she initially sits silently through the meetings, she eventually starts interrupting, first with "random shrieks and wails" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 136), and then with a song of her own, with lyrics calling for "infinite growth", self-belief" and "calculated risks" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 206). More of a cheer than a song, it is sung, at Baby's insistence, in unison, without harmony, and ends "in a screeching crescendo" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 207). By contrast, the Song of Homeostasis, which the organs continue to sing even as their circumstances worsen, is, as Kelly describes it "rich in polyphony, restraint, beauty and hope. It soars over the top of Baby's off-key wails. By the end of it", she reports after one meeting, "tears are running down my cheeks" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 125). The importance of the song from the perspective of organizing resilience

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

is its formal function as a collaborative ritual. Homeostasis is not a natural given, nor is it a matter of individual choice; rather, it requires active, repeated, collective consent. And the song exceeds its political function to embody beauty and inspire emotion –a point to which I will return.

The importance of solidarity cannot eclipse the role of innovation and development, both of which become especially important in "conditions of uncertainty and relative powerlessness" (Polletta, 2002, p. 13), which can be said to characterize both climate change and cancer. Unsurprisingly, the Song of Homeostasis and regular meetings are not enough to throw off Baby's game. Alongside their traditional modes of meaning-making, the organs soon need to adapt and improvise other forms of communication, organizing under the new rubric of the Anti-Tumour Alliance. Their methods include the use of Pig Latin, which Baby and the organs she has co-opted cannot understand, and –because Baby's exponentially growing body means that she is everywhere– innovative forms of communication like Kelly's creation of gall stones, which she throws strategically into the Sphincter of Oddi, with enough strength "to get Panno down to the sphincter to investigate … but not so strong that it causes more widespread upset" (Sorensen, 2023b, p. 218).

Perhaps the most significant negotiation is the one between Rage, Panno, Kelly, and Liv [liver], to deal with the growing emergency of Baby's necessary destruction. It requires Rage to set aside his obsession with originality and come to terms with the unpalatable reality of homeostasis as explained by Liv, that, "in some cases if one organ were to *go down* (an ominous phrase), then, theoretically (because we all hoped this would never happen), other organs might take over some of their functions. Then she gave an example. If the spleen (she said, 'the spleen' rather than using my name) were to stop functioning for some reason, then she, Liv, could take over most of his functions" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 63–64). This is what actually happens when, following the revelation that Rage is dying, the organs organize an "early unorthodox transfer" of the "special", "dangerous" attribute of rage (Sorensen, 2023, p. 230) to Liv, via Kelly. Kelly's momentary confusion about what's happening –she wonders "How am I going to carry Rage? … He'd be twice or three times my body weight" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 230)– is resolved by Panno's explanation that they mean "'[n]ot capital R rage, but small R rage. His *rage*'" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 231). The transfer is initiated, via the hijacking of several ducts and arteries, Kelly swallowing the "hot and viscous" purple liquid (Sorensen, 2023, pp. 231–232) and spitting it into Liv's coffee. Before Kelly's eyes, Liv transforms into a superhero-like figure, larger and darker blue than usual, with eyes "red with pure rage" and holding in her multiple, muscular arms holding the dripping severed head of a rabbit, a dish to catch the blood, and a long, sharp dagger. Noting that she is naked except for a skirt made of rabbit legs and a necklace garland of rabbit heads" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 234), Kelly compliments her appearance and then gets to work, typing "AGENDA FOR INAUGURAL MEETING OF THE ANTI-TUMOUR ALLIANCE" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 236). The quick jump from Liv decked out as a goddess of destruction to the typing out of a meeting agenda highlights the role of meetings as a necessary but insufficient condition for political action.

4. FEELING AND KNOWING: ART, SCIENCE & LAUGHTER

It might seem odd to talk about political action in relation to a set of organs that are presumably governed by the laws of human physiology. But Sorensen's creative imagination allows us to see and take inspiration from that possibility, as the range of her characters' activities is overdetermined by their physical function but also open to experimentation and play. Rage is angry, but he is not only angry, and productive rage turns out to be an elixir that is shareable to

Print ISSN: 1578-7044; Online ISSN: 1989-6131

communal ends. The characters all embody complex feelings, sometimes associated with physiological stereotypes, but not reducible to them. For example, prior to ingesting rage, Liv, normally a workaholic, has been reduced to lying listlessly on the floor playing Candy Crush. She has found herself anxiously incapable of fulfilling the moral imperative of enjoying her job: "Resentments, bewilderments and confusions seem to be piling up, never entirely metabolised, no matter how hard I try" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 123). In keeping with the novel's materialist frame, feelings are substantial, as real as bile, blood, and pancreatic fluid. They are physiological as well as public and political, in a way that makes them thinkable together with meeting agendas, as well as other more radical movements.

One of the most anatomically implausible actions in the novel is the trip that Ute [Uterus] takes up to the cranial cavity to bring Queen Bee into the Alliance (Sorensen, 2023, p. 239). Some of her fellow organs try to discourage her from going, pointing out that "[Queen Bee] hates us and thinks we're gross" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 238). And indeed, Queen Bee is at first dismissive, writing off the symptoms Ute describes as "just a bit of indigestion and constipation" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 254). That the message has gotten through becomes clear when Queen Bee shows up at the next Organ meeting with the results of a CT scan confirming what the organs have told her –Baby and the bunnies are tumours. She apologizes:

> "You'd been trying to tell me about Bunny and Baby for a long time. Even before the letter, I knew there was something wrong. But I was busy. I had eighty hours of marking! Eighty hours! I got through it, though!"
> We all applaud, the way we always do in Organ Board meetings for special achievements." (Sorensen, 2023, p. 264)

The late introduction of Queen Bee (fittingly figured as a self-important, beleaguered academic) supports the novel's dehumanist theme. Her belatedness gives the lie to her perceived singularity and superiority (in fact, not only was she not helpful from the beginning, but her dismissal of the other organs also wasted time, leading to their further endangerment). Moreover, her proclivity for definitive pronouncements –"'one and one is two'" and "'all green things [are] "plants"'" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 6) – is of no use in addressing the novelty of the situation the organs find themselves in. More significant is her own acknowledgment of the emptiness of the myth of her exceptionalism. She asks the other organs to please stop calling her "'your majesty'" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 260), reasoning: "'I'm just another organ. Just call me Bee'" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 260). It turns out that the brain is capable of learning and humility, much as Sorensen describes her own newly recognized capacity, following her surgery, to recognize the independent workings of the world inside and outside what she had previously regarded as her sovereign self.

Bee's capacity to learn is clear from her surprising participation in the Organ Board Meeting (along with her reading skills: only she can read the medical report). However, this capacity emerges even more clearly at an event that occurs just before surgery, for which one organ has been undergoing quiet, if often fraught, preparation throughout the narrative. The event revolves around Ute who, even before her daring expedition to the cranial cavity, does not conform to her expected role; in fact, she is actively uninterested in what she is told is her ordained duty of reproduction. Instead, and to the consternation of her DNA teachers, she prefers to see herself as a "ute, the colloquial name for an Australian utility vehicle", complete with barking kelpies riding on the back. She is, she explains, a "*wandering womb*. For me, it's all about the open road" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 40). With this claim, Ute flips the gendered myth of hysteria from a condition to an identification. Her wandering spirit leads her to travel, for pleasure –taking "long Sunday

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drives, even when it wasn't Sunday (Sorensen, 2023, p. 48)– and eventually for urgent business. It also leads her to create art, in the form of fibroids, which is unappreciated and even mocked by the other characters. That is, until the occasion of her exhibition, at which Bee delivers opening remarks: "'Ute has asked me to launch this exhibition tonight", she begins. "It is my honour and privilege to do so. I am in awe of her creativity" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 270).

Bee, it is noted, "hasn't made any particular effort with her clothes. She has probably just sprung from her desk and run downstairs at the last minute. Her ordinariness continues to surprise" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 270). Everyone else is dressed to the nines, with Kelly in a "shimmering green cocktail dress" and Baby "tower[ing] over all of us in her high heels, all jiggling side-boob and tumbling blonde hair" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 267). They admire the carefully prepared gallery space and Ute's work: "three pedunculated fibroids sprouting like fungi in shades of pink … They chime like the music of the spheres. Each is printed with flowers and smiley faces and rainbows and clouds and the words GET WELL SOON" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 270). Maureen (Greater Omentum) pronounces them "beautiful", and Ute modestly says, "I think I've evolved as an artist" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 270). There are many weird things about this scene, including the representation of fibroids as art and the presence at the event of the tumours that are endangering the very existence of the other organs. Both the strangeness of the scene and its occurrence before surgery convey something of Sorensen's take on the importance of creative imagination.

In her capacity as an activist, Sorensen acknowledges that "attempts at ethical posthuman praxis" are fraught with "competing impulses and imperatives" (2024a, p. 312). Speaking to the capacity of art to entertain these in a spirit of what Milan Kundera identifies as "'play and hypotheses'" (1988, p. 78; as cited in Sorensen, 2024a, p. 312), she explains:

> For me, Bunny, the pelvic tumour in *The vitals*, characterised as a feral European rabbit in the Australian landscape, is a sympathetic character (others may not agree). In attempting to tell their story from a radically different point of view from that of my own, I grew to love and be fascinated by them. I still chose to kill them (in life and in the novel), in order to preserve "Tracy". For me, posthuman praxis is not necessarily about policy details (kill rabbits or not?) but about working toward an overarching ethic of respect and consideration for the more-than-human world. Creative works can help us to think through the myriad competing imperatives of the Anthropocene. (2024a, p. 312)

The conjoining of art and science in the service of personal or climate resilience is not new; what is notable in *The vitals* is the exuberance and uncontainability of the dialogue. *The vitals* is grounded in scientific research, reflecting Sorensen's concern about the "unravelling of trust in post-Enlightenment scientific method and evidence-based thinking" (2024a, p. 400)[vii], and her hope that "understanding more of the science—how life and death actually works, materially—may help to tone down some of the stigma" around cancer (2024a, p. 400). However, the science in *The vitals* is shot through with subjectivity, interest, and humour in a way that might offend purists who see the role of the arts vis-à-vis science as simply making data more accessible to non-scientists.

Sorensen's perspective resonates with Isabelle Stengers's 2000 article, "Relearning to Laugh", which is a meditation on how to practice feminist science in a way that challenges the assumption, held both by conservative scientists and some feminist critics, that science has a singular, serious, objective identity –one that must either be defended or destroyed, depending on the perspective. Against this view of science, Stengers revives the explicit and positive role of *interest* as a motivating force in science that creates a forgotten bridge with the arts. Capital "S"

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Science needs to get over itself, not in order to renounce the scientific process, currently under sustained fascist attack, but to open the way to collaboration with diverse ways of engaging with the world, including art. "What is learning to laugh again" (Stengers, 2000, p. 52)? Stengers writes: "It is relearning a laugh which would not be the irony and derision which always avoids risk-taking, going beyond the differences to recognize the same. It is, instead, the laughter of humor. It is comprehending and appreciative without expecting to find a secure position" (pp. 52–53). Laughing breaks apart calcified, aggressive identities, not in a way that invites chaos or complacency, but in one that works alongside and might even be a tool for organization, even as it seems on the surface to be the opposite. *The vitals* embraces laughter, not just because the book is very funny, but also because it leans into uncertainty. It may in this way be akin to the "bouncing awkward" that Michael Basseler, drawing on Báyò Akómólafé, theorizes as part of a move towards post-resilience[viii].

To flesh out this analogy, we can look to a creative practice that Sorensen engages in outside of and prior to her writing, which informed her hospital-bed epiphany. Before her surgery, she had begun to crochet models of all her affected organs and tumours, initially as therapy, and then with broader aims. So, "[i]t was a crochet-flavoured, educated, epiphany" (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 319). Sorensen describes crochet as an "enzyme" (2024a, p. 264) and as "compost" (2024a, p. 354) for her novel, invisibly nourishing it, then disappearing. It is also a humble, feminized practice that informed several projects of collective "craftivism" Sorensen participated in, including The Yarned River (2015-present), a more than 100-meter-long crochet model of the Macquarie/Wambool River, initially undertaken by a coalition of residents, farmers, fishers, environmentalists, nuns and Wiradyuri Elders, to protest a gold mining project that threatened to extract water from the Macquarie/Wambool River (2024a, p. 333). Crediting her as an inspiration for both The Yarned River and another ongoing project, The Crochet Coral Reef, Sorensen cites Donna Haraway (who has written extensively about that work) in her assertion that: "'craftivist' crochet is how I make kin with the more-than-human world in my local area and help to build a caring public through material play" (Haraway, 2016 p. 70, as cited in Sorensen, 2024a, p. 339). The Crochet Coral Reef further inspired Sorensen's subsequent crochet project, *Listen to your body* (2020), which explicitly linked cancer and climate change. Created as an installation for the *Listening to the anthropocene* exhibit, *Listen to your body* envisioned an "ecosystem" consisting of bleaching coral reefs and bleaching (i.e., cancer-affected) organs on top of a hospital bed[ix]. "As I stitched", Sorensen recalls, "I felt I was embodying something fundamental about how the world is made. Like other coral reef craftivists, I sensed the companionship between the way "I" crocheted hyperbolic planes and the way evolution makes hyperbolic planes in coral, lettuce, and seaweed. A crochet pattern is a form of code, just as DNA is a code. Mistakes are like mutations, opening the door to catastrophe or serendipity" (2024a, p. 349). On multiple scales, this stitching can be seen as resilience work and as a form of dehumanist organizing.

The crocheted organs also fulfilled a more mundane function. Seeing them laid out on the kitchen table allowed Sorensen's mother to understand and be curious about her illness and not just terrified (2024a, p. 331). It also enabled an unexpectedly powerful and cathartic moment in her gynaecological oncologist's office where the doctor laid out the organs, then proceeded to throw the tumours and the organs to be removed across the room. "It seemed", Sorensen observes, that the organs' lightness and harmlessness (they would not break anything they bumped in to) invited the act of tossing them about" (2024a, p. 331). Though it paled in comparison with the successful surgery, Sorensen notes that "that gleeful moment stayed with me. I followed its golden thread all the way through doctoral studies, more material play, and the writing of *The vitals*"

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(2024a, p. 332). She went on to throw her organs at formal meetings and presentations, including one where, partway through a PowerPoint presentation, "I reached into my bag, pulled out an organ, and threw it directly at a particular person in the audience. This person had no choice but to catch it, and then everyone wanted one. It was a mini uproar … The organs broke the ice, relieved tension, got people laughing" (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 361–362). A visceral instance of "bouncing awkward!"

The vitals ends on an equally awkward, soberer note. The organs, or what remains of them, are at their first post-surgical meeting. Some are gone (Ute and Rage), others (Col [colon], Gaster, and Panno) dramatically reduced. After translating the discharge report, Bee announces shyly that she'd like to read a poem she has written. The poem consists of the words Sorensen wrote on her iPhone after the surgical team's visit –the gist of her epiphany:

> *The first place is this body,*
> *made up of the descendants*
> *of ancient bacteria, fish parts.*
>
> *This temple, made of fish parts.* (2023, p. 278)

The organs find it "odd" but applaud anyway "as [they] always do for special accomplishments" (Sorensen, 2023, p. 278). The poem might also be an odd thing to enlist in a discussion of resilience; it contains –the novel contains– no assurance of ongoing survival, no reference to the future at all. But in its expansive embrace of a motley collection of organisms extending into the deep past, Bee's poem is ambivalently reassuring. It resonates with the observation of Tyson Yunkaporta, writer and scholar from the Apalech Clan in northern Queensland, that: "It is strangely liberating to realise your true status as a single node in a cooperative network" (2019, p. 98). *The vitals* is Tracy Sorensen's effort as a writer, yarner, cancer survivor, and climate activist to put that realization into words, which we in turn can channel into dehumanist organizing, to confront the challenges within, around, and ahead of us.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article is dedicated to the memory of Tracy Sorensen, whose remarkable openness and kindness I experienced in correspondence, although I never met her in person. Many thanks to participants in the third International Research Workshop on Narratives of Happiness and Resilience for helpful feedback on an earlier draft of this article.

NOTES

[i] For detailed critiques of the Eurocentric limitations of posthumanist critique, see Jackson (2019); Mignolo and Walsh (2018).

[ii] Following her 2010 diagnosis with the BRCA1 gene and subsequent preventative surgery, Tracy Sorensen was diagnosed with and treated for peritoneal cancer in 2014. She remained in remission until a recurrence of cancer just before the publication of *The vitals* in 2023. She died on May 5, 2025.

[iii] Sorensen's discussion of her body in the context of landscape resonates in some ways with Rupa Marya and Raj Patel's book, *Inflamed: Deep medicine and the anatomy of injustice*, which frames environmental damage through "the language of the body". They explain:

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> We sometimes proceed by simile: dams are like vascular obstructions. We're not above metaphor. Trade routes, for example, are colonialisms arteries, moving people, capital, goods and disease around the world system, and connecting bodies, societies, geographies, and ecologies. The metaphor helps us to show that inflammation is systemic and that the systems are linked. But we aren't making a literary argument so much as a medical one. The inflammation in your arteries and the inflammation of the planet are linked, and the causal connections are becoming increasingly clear; your physiological state is a reaction to social and environmental factors. Racial violence, economic precarity, industrial pollution, poor diet, and even the water you drink can inflame you. (5)

Sorensen is similarly not averse to metaphor, but her materialist approach is more granular, interested less in saying something about health/ecology/justice in general than illuminating a specific, local set of relations and processes.

[iv] She says in the exegesis: "I acknowledge that the very idea of 'myself' is problematic. I also acknowledge that most of what is 'going on' with me is a mystery to me. Uncountable biological, historical, neurological and social processes co-create 'me' in every moment. Any story I tell about myself must therefore remain a tiny selection from a vast array of possibilities" (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 267).

[v] Zebrowski and Sage follow Nikolas Rose in tracing the emergence of current iterations of "community" as a site of action that emerged in the context of neoliberalism as a replacement for "society" and associated social welfare programmes (2019, p. 65), wherein "community is …reinterpreted through market managerial and economic discourses. Community relations are, in turn, understood as a form of capital requiring sustained investment while market relations are naturalised as the authentic basis of human sociality" (Zebrowski & Sage, 2019, p. 75).

[vi] Sorensen has written at length in her blog about the worrying rise in so-called "lifestyle medicine" unsupported by peer-reviewed scientific evidence (2024b).

[vii] See also Basseler and O'Brien (2025).

[viii] Unfortunately, Covid-19 necessitated significant adaptations, including the abandonment of the hospital bed and the switch to a virtual exhibition that just featured photos of the organs and corals against a black velvet background (Sorensen, 2024a, p. 351).

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