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BEYOND ANTHROPOCENTRIC MESSIANISM: BRAIDOTTIAN POSTHUMANISM AND ETHICS OF HOPE IN DUNE, DUNE MESSIAH, AND CHILDREN OF DUNE

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ABSTRACT

The *Dune* trilogy builds up a long-term argument against anthropocentric messianism, revealing the ways in which heroic exceptionalism and charismatic leadership are construed as tools of ecological and political subjugation instead of liberation. This paper builds on the concept of critical posthumanism, particularly the description by Rosi Braidotti of relational and embedded subjectivity and an affirmative ethics based on transversal horizons of hope, to re-read Paul Atreides and Leto II as experimental spaces of imagining non-anthropocentric futures. The analysis follows the progress of the shift in the trilogy, from the idea of a redemptive human messiah to more and more uncomfortable forms of posthuman rule, ecological entrapment, and group insecurity, by a comparative close reading of *Dune, Dune Messiah, and Children of Dune*. It suggests that even though the jihad of Paul dramatizes the disastrous results of investing planetary change upon a singular and unique subject, the spice, the long reign of Leto II reconfigures messiahhood as an ambivalent posthuman guardianship terminating human and nonhuman life into a precarious, coercive life of survival. Through this tragectory the trilogy slowly replaces anthropocentric salvation with the posthuman ethics of sustainability, a non-redemptive and a non-innocent hope. Here, futures now open not by a utopian fulfillment but by bargaining of common precarity. The article reframes *Dune* as a warning on the dangerousness of charismatic leaders but also as a future laboratory of posthuman imaginaries and political ecology in science fiction studies through foregrounding of these dynamics.

Keywords: Anthropocentrism, Frank Herbert, Posthumanism, Rosi Braidotti, Science Fiction

1. INTRODUCTION

Paul Atreides has circulated on numerous popular and fan reception lists as an epic hero, the long-awaited savior, the one who dethrones the imperial decadence and reinstates justice to Arrakis in *Dune*. However, the sequel of *Dune Messiah* and *Children of Dune* drastically inverts the image: the assent of Paul as the messiah, unleashes a jihad killing tens of billions of people of the world, and the desire of Leto II to accept the Golden Path compels the metamorphosis of the human body into a human-sandworm form and the establishment of a millennia-long despotism in the name of the survival of the species. From genocide and ecological re-engineering to biopolitical regulation of human populations, the messiahs of Herbert are in charge of the planetary managerial forms that make the straight story of heroic deliverance difficult.

In this paper, the term anthropocentricity has been described as the assumption that history, value, and agency are essentially human-centered (that is, centered on some exemplary human beings), which causes nonhuman life and nonhuman environments to be mostly described as tools or surroundings to human initiatives. Incorporating religious and secular traditions, messianic personalities are theorized as special agents of redemption that have an unparalleled duty to save a community or the world and whose morally grounded role is traditionally conceived as that of protecting the weak and bringing back justice, not endangering the many by hypothetical futures. Herbert's trilogy unsettles this very assumption because his messiahs are portrayed as executors of mass murder, ecological re-engineering, and imperial order instead of being purely liberating forces.

Currently available scholarship has convincingly identified *Dune* as an anti-messianic text, as well as an ecological science fiction text that prefigures water politics, resource exploitation, and planetary susceptibility. Zamfir, for instance, in *Identity, Politics, and the Postmodern Hero in Frank Herbert's Dune and Dune Messiah,* reads *Dune* and *Dune Messiah* as a modern critique of right-wing heroism in which messianic heroism exalts singular great men and argues that Herbert deconstructs the messianic hero by showing the fallout of the messianic narratives that surround Paul Atreides (Zamfir 32-40). From an ecocritical angle, Trexler's work *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, together with subsequent discussions of Anthropocene narratives, regularly cites *Dune* as an early example of the climate fiction genre because of its engagement in ecology, environmentalism, and resource politics Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011) . Nevertheless, it is the argument of this article that such a critical posthumanity as that of Rosi Braidotti has not yet been read through, especially her narrative of posthuman, relational subjectivity and a positive ethics that is committed to generative futures and transversal horizons of hope. The productive approach to reconsidering the messiah figures in Herbert, according to the framework proposed by Braidotti in terms of embedded, more-than-human networks of care, responsibility, and shared vulnerability, will be the ideas of a messiah who is neither a heroic savior nor a failed or corrupt leader.

The article, therefore, poses three research questions, which are interrelated. First, in what ways do the messiah figures of Herbert centralize and deconstruct the human exceptionalism, taking up the sites of almost absolute power and unwindingly exposing the boundaries and the expenditures of the anthropocentrism domination? The prescient sight and charismatic attractiveness of Paul appear simultaneously to validate the fantasy of the unique subject capable of seeing and influencing history, and to dramatize the effect of an agency concentration that is bound to result in systemic violence. Second, how do Paul and Leto II display and or not display Braidotti's posthuman, relational subject, someone who is not characterized by sovereign autonomy but by constitutive involvement with human and nonhuman othernesses, such as environments, technologies, and many times? Third, is Herbert's long game of empire, ecology, and sacrificial politics by staging an ethics of hope that neither demands nor accepts humanist redemption nor pure dystopian closure?

The first trilogy discussed in the paper anthropomorphizes a shift in anthropocentric, teleological salvation - represented in the early construction of Paul-as-Messiah as the centre of Fremen prophecy and imperial crisis - towards a posthuman, ecologically enshrined ethic of hope that radically decentres the individual savior. The failure of Paul to completely commit to the Golden Path and his horror of the jihad reveal how disastrous the commitment to transforming the planet through this one human subject, whose visionary ability is still enslaved to the anthropocentric fantasies of mastery. Leto II performs a drastic restructuring of messiahhood: his hybrid body, temporal lengthening, and geopolitical project of forced peace and subsequent dispersion reassigns futurity not to the prospect of immediate redemption but to the duration-long, forceful breeding of species-scale and species-level resilience. The trilogy gradually redefines messianic agency as a kind of posthuman stewardship based on our mutual precarity, non-innocence, and generative, non-redemptive hope, even though it does not absolve the tremendous violence that is necessary to bring it to life.

The article has four sections. Part one recreates the commercial and critical response to Paul Atreides as messianic hero, then anti-hero, and places the Herbert trilogy in ecocritical and anti-messianic arguments regarding charisma, jihad, and environmental politics. The second segment describes the critical posthumanism put forward by Braidotti with her ideas of relational subjectivity, post-anthropocentrism, and affirmative ethics, and explains how science fiction can be analyzed through these instruments. The third part provides a comparative reading of Paul and Leto II, as how their respective trajectories negotiate the concepts of sovereignty, embodiment, and ecological entanglement in the trilogy *Dune*, *Dune Messiah*, and *Children of Dune*. The conclusion concludes implications of reading the trilogy as an experiment in posthuman imaginaries and political ecology, that the messiah narrative of Herbert not only relieves us of

the danger of charismatic leaders but also incites science fiction studies to envision other ethical and hopeful futures out of anthropocentric redemption.

2. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This section describes the theoretical framework of the article. It begins with the explanation of the anthropocentrism of subjectivity as criticized by Rosi Braidotti, its focus on a zoe relational ontology, and its promotion of a positive ethics of hope. The paper then briefly presents the concept of necropolitics by Achille Mbemba, the theorisation of bare life by Giorgio Agamben, and the description of sympoietic and multispecies worlding of Donna Haraway. All these views allow recognizing sovereign power relations and ecological entrapment that apply to the messianic constructs of Herbert.

Braidotti's posthumanism begins from a critique of classical humanism and its universal "Man," a category that has historically depended on racialised, sexualised, and naturalised "structural others" to stabilise itself as norm Braidotti (2019). In this respect, she converges with Wolfe's argument that posthumanism is less a celebration of technological enhancement than a critical scrutiny of how "the human" has been constructed through species, race, and ability hierarchies. Glasson (2020) . For Braidotti, the humanist subject is a regulatory image of sameness that decides who counts as fully human while relegating others—women, racialised and colonised populations, the disabled, nonhuman animals, even entire environments—to subordinate, instrumentalised positions Braidotti (2019). Her move "beyond Man" is articulated as post-anthropocentrism: an expanded, relational, zoe-centred subject in which zoe names the generative vitality of life itself and in which humans, animals, technologies, and environments co-constitute one another in complex assemblages rather than lining up under a human apex. Gemuend (2021)

Within this framework, posthuman ethics is first defined as "embodied and embedded, relational and affective," arising from concrete "situated, accountable" relations and shared vulnerability rather than from abstract, universal rules Braidotti (2019). On this basis, Braidotti insists that ethical practice must be oriented toward sustainability, transversal solidarity, and what she elsewhere calls "social horizons of hope" and "generative futures," in which critique and creation are inseparable Braidotti (2013) . At the same time, she sharply distinguishes this project from Silicon-Valley-style transhumanism, which tends to reassert a disembodied, hyper-individualised, technologically enhanced version of Man, and from apocalyptic pessimism or necropolitical imaginaries that fixate on "thanatological narratives of extinction" Braidotti (2013). In both these cases, the human persists as a privileged endpoint: either perfected through technology or dramatised as the tragic subject of planetary collapse. Against this, Braidotti calls for "affirmative, non-innocent" alternatives that acknowledge complicity with existing regimes of power while nonetheless constructing more liveable, non-anthropocentric futures Braidotti (2019) .

To sharpen the darker side of sovereignty that Braidotti's vocabulary sometimes only gestures towards, this article also draws on Achille Mbembe's account of necropolitics and Giorgio Agamben's theorisation of bare life. For Mbembe, necropolitics designates forms of sovereignty whose "ultimate expression resides… in the power and the capacity to dictate who may live and who must die," a power that produces "death-worlds" where populations are exposed to death as a condition of rule. Mbembé (2003) . Agamben, re-reading Roman law and modern biopolitics, describes homo sacer as the figure of a life that "may be killed but not sacrificed," a life placed in a zone of indistinction between law and violence Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1999) . Bare life, in this sense, is the primary "content" of sovereign power, and the production of such exposed life is the originary activity of sovereignty Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life (1999). Mbembe explicitly builds on both Foucault and Agamben to argue that late-modern regimes extend the state of exception spatially, creating enduring formations—colonies, occupied territories, militarised frontiers—in which death becomes a routine instrument of governance Mbembé (2003).

Haraway's work on science fiction (SF), sympoiesis, and the Chthulucene provides a complementary, though distinct, model of situated, multispecies ethics. In Staying with the Trouble, she rejects both techno-euphoric fantasies of escape and "Hero stories" of salvation, proposing instead a practice of "making kin" and co-worlding with "oddkin"—human and nonhuman partners in "sympoiesis," or making-with (Haraway (2016) Sympoietic thinking, as she describes it, begins from relational ontology—"the partners do not preexist their relating"—and from the recognition that living and dying unfold through recursive, entangled processes across species and scales Haraway (2016). While Braidotti's terms (zoe, geo, techno-assemblages, affirmative ethics) are not identical, both thinkers insist that any viable posthuman project

must refuse apocalyptic resignation and instead cultivate practices of situated, more-than-human care and responsibility.

Herbert's Dune trilogy has increasingly been read as a landmark of ecological and posthuman science fiction, staging a post-technological feudal order in which advanced computation is banned, planetary ecologies are engineered over centuries, and human survival is inseparable from nonhuman systems such as sandworms, spice, and desert climates Dune and Philosophy (2022) . Critics argue that the sequence anticipates "ecologic posthumanism" by foregrounding the systemic interdependence of culture, politics, and environment, even as it often remains tethered to anthropocentric projects of mastery and terraforming Viberg and Eskandari (2019) . In this article, Braidotti's concepts are mobilised as the main interpretive lens, supplemented by Agamben, Mbembe, and Haraway, to read messiahhood in the trilogy not only as political theology—prophecy, charisma, sovereignty—but as a site where humanist and posthuman ethics of hope clash. Paul Atreides and Leto II are approached as nodal figures in zoe/geo/techno assemblages whose bodies, affects, and decisions redistribute vulnerability and futurity across human and nonhuman actors. By tracking when their projects reproduce the exclusions of Man and when they gesture toward a zoe-centred, relational ethics, the article explores how Herbert's messiah narrative negotiates the possibility of affirmative, non-anthropocentric hope within a violently unequal imperial ecology.

3. HISTORICAL / GENERIC CONTEXT

Frank Herbert's Dune(1965) and its sequels Dune Messiah(1969) and Children of Dune(1976) emerge at a pivotal moment in postwar Anglophone science fiction, consolidating the space-opera and planetary-romance traditions while decisively reorienting them toward ecological and religious-political speculation. First serialised in Analog as "Dune World" (1963–64) and "The Prophet of Dune" (1965), Dune entered a magazine culture associated with technoscientific extrapolation even as it displaced the conventional engineering novum onto planetary ecology, resource scarcity, and imperial governance, before becoming a best-selling novel anchoring a multi-volume franchise.

Within science fiction's generic history, the first trilogy sits at the crossroads of space opera, epic planetary romance, and what later criticism has identified as early climate fiction, given its preoccupation with desertification, environmental engineering, and water politics Trexler and Johns-Putra (2011) Using Suvin's concept of "cognitive estrangement," Herbert's detailed world-building—the desert planet Arrakis, spice-based economy, ban on "thinking machines," and Fremen ecological religion—forms a web of novums that make everyday issues of empire, resource extraction, and religious charisma feel alien Letkemann (2022). Herbert's construction of invented ecologies, institutions, and rituals thus fuses technoscientific imagination with anthropological, ecological, and theological speculation, extending science fiction's repertoire beyond gadgetry toward systemic "world-making". Kennedy (n.d.).

At the same time, the trilogy participates in what is called "Orientalism," a Western "style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (Said 3). Herbert's deployment of Islamicate, Middle Eastern, and "tribal" motifs—Fremen jihad, messiah prophecies, desert asceticism—constructs Arrakis as a thinly veiled, romanticised "East," even as the texts criticise imperial extraction and religious manipulation (Said 120–23). This ambivalence renders the Fremen and their ecologies "structural others" within the Atreides project: reservoirs of labour, belief, and environmental knowledge indispensable to messianic power yet consistently exposed to death and sacrifice. As such, the trilogy becomes a key site for postcolonial and ecological science fiction debates, in which genre forms mediate shifting imaginaries of race, empire, environment, and futurity Immerwahr (2021) . Indeed, Herbert himself recognized the allegorical connection between the contemporary oil crises of the 1970s and the galactic imperative for spice, overtly stating, "CHOAM is OPEC" Pop (2022) .

4. SECTION I: MYTH AND IMPERIAL ECOLOGY

Herbert's trilogy first materialises the tension between anthropocentric salvation and posthuman ecology through the formal construction of Paul's prophetic visions of jihad. Messiah personalities are traditionally supposed to transform crisis into redemption: ethically, they are supposed to bring together a community, to end oppression, and to establish a more just world, which is often done through sacrifice on their behalf. The structure of narrative adopted by Herbert is very critical in reversing that trajectory by evidencing the deliverance of Paul and later Leto as something that cannot exist independently of vast scales of deaths, displacement, and ecological coercion. Interior focalisation repeatedly

plunges the reader into a temporality that is no longer linear but branching, multi-scalar, and planetary. In Dune Messiah, Paul admits his kill count to Stilgar and Korba:

> "He killed perhaps four million."
>
> "He didn't kill them himself, Stil. He killed the way I kill, by sending out his legions."
>
> […]
>
> "At a conservative estimate, I have killed sixty-one billion, sterilized ninety planets, and completely demoralised five hundred others. I've wiped out the followers of forty religions that had existed since." Herbert (2005)

This dispersed, more-than-human temporality approximates what Braidotti calls a post-anthropocentric awareness, a perception stretched across populations, worlds, and generations. Braidotti (2013)

In Mbembe's terms, Paul's prescience visualises a necropolitical order in which sovereignty defines itself above all through decisions over life and death, composing "death-worlds" where entire populations can be rendered disposable for the sake of a future configuration of power (11–13). Yet Herbert recentres this vast field in the figure of an exceptional "chooser," so that the formal novum of posthuman vision is recaptured by the humanist fantasy of a singular messiah who might avert or unleash catastrophe. At the level of narrative form, ecological "liberation" (Fremen ascendancy, terraforming, imperial overthrow) is rendered indistinguishable from genocidal holy war, indicating that any ethics of hope grounded in a solitary anthropocentric saviour will necessarily collapse into necropolitics. This scene thus supports the article's overarching claim by marking the limit-point of humanist messiahhood: Paul's prophetic consciousness exposes the need for a more relational, zoe-centred ethic it cannot itself inhabit.

If Paul's visions dramatise the catastrophic consequences of monopolising posthuman perception, the Missionaria Protectiva reveals that messiahhood is already embedded in an imperial ecology of myth. Expository entries and dialogues describe the Sisterhood's "black arm of superstition" as sowing "infectious superstitions" and the Panoplia Prophetica across "primitive" worlds so that any stranded Bene Gesserit might activate pre-fabricated legends and rise as a local saviour. In Dune, Jessica, while discussing the knife with Mapes, calls it a "Death Maker", a keyword only known to those who lived with prophecy for so long. Thus, she thinks about prophecy:

> "the Shari-a and all the panoplia prophecticus, a Bene Gesserit of the Missionaria Protectiva dropped here long centuries ago—long dead, no doubt, but her purpose accomplished: the protective legends implanted in these people against the day of a Bene Gesserit's need." Herbert and Herbert (2020).

The cool, taxonomic tone of these passages, part bureaucratic definition, part ethnographic aside, presents religion not as spontaneous charisma but as infrastructural world-building: myths are distributed like irrigation systems or seed banks, designed to open regions to exploitation and to channel affect, labour, and ecological resources toward imperial centres Dune and Philosophy (2022). Read through Mbembe, the Missionaria Protectiva functions as an infrastructure of necropolitical rule, preparing populations who can later be mobilised and exposed to death in jihads and crusades long before any concrete sovereign appears Mbembé (2003) .

Agamben's analysis of homo sacer—life "that may be killed but not sacrificed"—helps name the status of those planetary subjects whom these myths silently designate as killable in advance: sacred lives captured in a sovereign ban that renders their exposure to death juridically and theologically unremarkable (Agamben 82–85). At the same time, Herbert's narrative shows how these myths can be détourned: Paul and Jessica seize the Mahdi legend to secure their survival among the Fremen, only to unleash forces beyond both Bene Gesserit and Atreides control :

> Jessica sighed, thinking: So our Missionaria Protectiva
>
> *even planted religious safety valves all through this hellhole. Ah, well . . . it'll help, and that's what it was meant to do. Dune and Philosophy (2022).*

Missionaria Protectiva, therefore, functions as a structural counterpoint in the argument: by laying bare the designed, exploitative ecology of imperial myth, it clarifies what a Braidottian ethics of hope must refuse and what the trilogy will attempt, unevenly, to reconfigure through Leto II. Rudd et al. (2016). This reconfiguration, however, often

entails a further expansion of imperial ambition, as evidenced by the destructive capacity of Paul's legions and the subsequent degeneration of the Fremen who abandon their traditional land ethic for imperial pursuits Young (2024) .

Children of Dune radicalises this reconfiguration in the figure of Leto II, whose hybrid body and expanded temporality literalise the zoe/geo/techno assemblage Braidotti theorises. Descriptive passages of Leto's metamorphosis foreground metaphors in which skin hardens "into a carapace", muscles "ripple like dunes", and perception moves with the rhythms of sandworms and storms, so that his physiology becomes continuous with the desert itself (God Emperor of Dune 116). The first stage of worm-human symbiosis is depicted in Children of Dune, which implies the beginning of Leto's posthuman metamorphosis:

> And at the same time, he blended himself with the sandtrout, feeding on it, feeding it, learning it. His trance vision provided the template, and he followed it precisely. Leto felt the sandtrout grow thin, spreading itself over more and more of his hand, reaching up his arm. He located another and placed it over the first one. Contact ignited a frenzied squirming in the creatures. Their cilia locked, and they became a single membrane which enclosed him to the elbow. Herbert (2005)

Leto believed that the Golden Path can not be sustained by any ordinary human leadership and requires something other than humans; thus, through Leto's metamorphosis, Herbert links posthuman embodiment with a long term species survival. Focalisation from Leto's perspective stretches across millennia, compressing his 3,500-year Golden Path into a sustained ethical present in which every decision is oriented toward the long-term survival of the species, not the glory or redemption of a single subject Dune and Philosophy (2022). In Braidotti's terms, Leto approximates a zoe-centred posthuman subject: an embodied knot of human, animal, planetary, and technoscientific forces who takes shared vulnerability—humanity's susceptibility to extinction—as the ground for action Braidotti (2019). Yet the narrative never permits this configuration to become simply utopian; it insists on the coercive violence of Leto's tyranny and on the suffering it produces. By holding these affirmative and necropolitical dimensions together, Herbert presents Leto as an ambivalent experiment in posthuman guardianship rather than a redeemed saviour. This third reading anchors the article's main argument: where Paul's arc reveals the fatal impasse of anthropocentric, teleological salvation, Leto's monstrous embodiment of imperial ecology sketches a fragile "we-are-in-this-together" ethics of hope that decisively decentres the individual messiah while refusing to disavow the costs of securing a livable future.

5. SECTION II: POSTHUMAN SOVEREIGNTY AND THE LONG GAME OF GOVERNANCE

In this paper, Section I traces how myth and imperial ecology turn messiahhood into a necropolitical management site. Section II turns to sovereignty and governance, comparing Paul's brief, catastrophic reign with Leto II's millennia-long rule to show how Herbert experiments with posthuman forms of authority that both realise and betray Braidotti's ethics of hope.

The comparison first emerges in Dune Messiah, in the post-Jihad period, where Paul rules as Emperor after having killed tens of billions during war and turning the Imperium into a theocratic war machine. Narration and dialogue constantly remind the readers about the hollowness of his sovereignty: he has unparalleled prescient abilities and religious authority, yet he experiences himself as the captive of historical momentum and of the very mythic infrastructure that put him on the throne. During a scene in Dune Messiah, where blind Paul speaks to Duncan Idaho, Paul confesses:

> "I have no eyes, Duncan."
>
> "But . . ."
>
> "I've only my vision," Paul said, "and wish I didn't have it.
>
> I'm dying of prescience, did you know that, Duncan?" Herbert and Herbert (2020).

Formally, Herbert represents this through scenes in which layers of ritual, prophecy, and conspiracy wrap up Paul. His interior monologue is more about paralysis and resignation rather than decisive agency. Agamben's reading of Schmitt conceptualises this structure: the sovereign is "he who decides on the exception," suspending the law to protect it, yet in modernity, the state of exception is more likely to become a technique of permanent reign.(Agamben 15–18).

This paradox is exemplified during Paul's reign. He often breaks norms in the name of survival and exhibits the ability to choose the Golden Path, yet his subjective experience is one of being overrun by a quasi-automatic chain of causes and effects for which

"completely accurate and total prediction is lethal" Herbert (2005)

Braidottian perspective suggests that Paul enters a posthuman scale of knowledge but remains enslaved to the humanist figure of the autonomous lawgiver; his power is conceived as emerging from a centred "I" who must either will or renounce the future. His eventual abdication, where he refuses the messianic sovereignty by walking blind into the desert, to be performed as per Fremen custom, is morally powerful but strategically catastrophic, leaving the necropolitical apparatus of jihad and empire intact in large parts of it. This reading complicates the Section I emphasis on myth and ecology by showing that in Herbert's universe, rejecting anthropocentric saviourhood without reworking modes of governance simply displaces violence rather than revealing a posthuman horizon of hope.

The trajectory of Leto II in Children of Dune restructures the sovereignty itself as a long-term experiment in the posthuman rule. After connecting with the sandtrout and surviving multiple assassination attempts, Leto takes the Lion Throne and places humanity on the Golden Path. A 3,500-year regime, in which he monopolises spice trades, forbids large-scale wars, and disciplines the empire into a state of constant but contained tension:

> Paul's voice was old then and filled with hidden protests.
> There was a reserve of defiance in him, though. He said, "I'll
> take the vision away from you if I can."
> "Thousands of peaceful years," Leto said. "That's what I'll give them.
> "Dormancy! Stagnation!"
> "Of course. And those forms of violence which I permit.
> It'll be a lesson which humankind will never forget." Herbert and Herbert (2020).

The diegesis and subsequent commentary give external descriptions of his rule as an "iron fist", a willfully totalitarian-theocratic structure intended to ensure species extinction by inhibiting stagnation and technological exuberance.

As per Agamben arguement about the camp, the state of exception in this case is no longer a suspension of the law but a permanent spatial arrangement, a "continually outside the normal state of law" (Agamben 166–68). Mbembe also observes the ways in which the late modern versions of sovereignty establish enduring spaces where people live within the specter of death Mbembé (2003). The Golden Path transforms the Imperium into such a space, justified not by racial purity or national security but by the abstraction of "humanity's" survival. Herbert signals this transition with the dispersion of agency of Leto into deep time and enormous networks; in God Emperor of Dune, Leto speaks of possessing "at [his] internal demand every expertise known to our history," representing what Braidotti might call a distributed, multi-temporal subject of knowledge Braidotti (2019). Yet this subject is not at all emancipatory for those who live under it. The sovereignty of Leto is explicitly anti-democratic, based on surveillance, coercion, and the rational withholding of resources influencing desire, migration, and even thought (Herbert, God Emperor of Dune 180).

It is worth reading these two arcs simultaneously through the prism of Braidotti, who anticipates a core conflict in Herbert's imaging of posthuman sovereignty. On the one hand, the long game of the Leto is in line with a zoe-centred ethics of sustainability: he is prepared to become a monster himself and to be hated by billions of people so that humanity disperses, diversifies, and is resistant to destruction, which is also the reiteration of Braidotti in her insistence on thinking life beyond the bounded individual and beyond the present Braidotti (2013). However, on the other side, the very form that ethics takes is an all-knowing, near-immortal ruler whose body fuses human, animal, planetary, and technoscientific forces, reiterating the logic of Man, at a more comprehensive level. Herbert, instead of abandoning the fantasy of a single subject guaranteeing the future, redefines the posthuman god-emperor whose legitimacy is based on the prescient possession of the only timeline that can survive.

Section II thus clarifies the claim from Section I: where myth and imperial ecology revealed the necropolitical underside of anthropocentric salvation, a comparison of Paul and Leto demonstrates that even an apparently zoe-oriented, long-term ethics of hope slips back into authoritarian control when this is vested in a lone, exceptional

individual. This tension is important for the article's larger argument. By juxtaposing the tragic impotence of Paul's abdication against the tyranny of the Golden Path of Leto, Herbert is rejecting both the liberal fantasy that relinquishing power is enough and the technocratic fantasy that benevolent expertise can rightfully rule the future.

Both findings, however, are weakly posthuman from a Braidottian perspective: they either cleave to the moral drama of individual conscience or to that of a sovereign on the planetary-scale who takes life in its name Braidotti (2019). What is lacking, which Haraway and Braidotti (in different registers) call for, are collective, situated, distributed practices of hope that do not entail a messiah at all Haraway (2016), Braidotti (2013). Thus, Section II complicates the earlier suggestion that Leto straightforwardly realizes an ethics of "we-are-in-this-together" hope. Rather, it illustrates that Herbert's trilogy presents an unresolved problem of posthuman sovereignty: inseparable from the need to avert extinction within the fictional horizon but structurally incongruent with the affirmative, non-totalising posthuman futures Braidotti imagines.

6. DISCUSSION

The close readings demonstrate that Herbert's messiah narrative answers the research questions by enacting a progressive unravelling of anthropocentric salvation and a conflicted, partial turn toward posthuman, zoe-centred hope. Paul's prescient focalisation in Dune and Dune Messiah installs a posthuman scale of perception—branching futures, planetary ecologies, billions of lives—but keeps that perceptual novum locked inside the figure of a singular, heroic chooser. The result is precisely the catastrophe at issue in the first research question: ecological "liberation" and jihad become formally inseparable, suggesting that human exceptionalism, even when maximally endowed with knowledge and good intentions, cannot guarantee non-destructive futures. Leto II's hybrid body and long-duration rule then address the second and third questions in a doubled way: he enacts something closer to Braidotti's zoe/geo/techno assemblage and long-term, species-level care, yet he realises it through authoritarian sovereignty that reproduces the very centralisation of power a posthuman ethics of hope would seek to distribute Braidotti (2019).

Situating this argument within science fiction studies highlights how it extends ongoing debates about messianic narratives, technoscience, and imperial ecology. Critics already treat Dune as a key text for thinking about charismatic heroes and the "messianic impulse" in science fiction (SF), emphasising how even the most ostensibly "ideal" leader produces catastrophe under conditions of empire and religious mobilisation Wander (2022) . By bringing Braidotti, Mbembe, and Agamben into this conversation, the article shifts the focus from individual morality or the slogan that Dune "warns against charismatic leaders" toward the structural problem of how genre form imagines agency and futurity: Herbert's estranged worlds dramatise the lure and danger of investing planetary-scale technoscientific and ecological management in single, exceptional bodies. Likewise, the emphasis on the Missionaria Protectiva and imperial ecology engages SF debates about capital and technoscience by showing myth as an infrastructure that manages life, belief, and environment together, aligning Herbert's saga with discussions of posthumanism as a response to the exploitative "genetic and neural capital" of late modernity Mbembé (2003).

At the same time, the readings intersect with work on race, empire, and global SF. Scholarship has underscored how Dune appropriates and reworks Islamic, Middle Eastern, and Indigenous motifs, embedding its messiah story within a history of colonial extraction and frontier mythologies. The analysis of myth and imperial ecology here shows that these appropriations are not merely thematic but structural: the Fremen, their ecologies, and their prophetic traditions become "structural others" that enable the rise of Atreides messiah figures, making Herbert's critique of imperial messiahhood inseparable from the racialised distribution of risk and sacrifice Braidotti (2013), Mbembé (2003). This strengthens the posthuman reading by insisting that any zoe-centred ethics of hope must register how some lives and environments are consistently positioned as expendable in the name of humanity's future.

A robust account must also acknowledge counter-arguments. Some readers insist that the series ultimately vindicates Paul and Leto II: Paul is "right about everything," a fundamentally decent hero trapped by circumstance, and Leto II "saves humanity" from extinction, which might suggest that Herbert endorses messianic sovereignty as tragic necessity rather than problem (Reddit threads "Is Dune really a warning…"; "Dune goes beyond warning…"). Others emphasise political theology, treating the books primarily as reflections on faith, prophecy, and secularisation, without foregrounding posthuman ethics Schmitt (1988). . The reading developed here does not deny that within the diegesis Paul's visions are accurate or that Leto's Golden Path "works"; rather, it shows that the narrative form persistently frames these "correct" messiahs as structurally bound to mass death, coercion, and the foreclosure of alternative futures, and

that this framing resonates more closely with Braidotti's critique of Man and with Mbembe's necropolitics than with a simple endorsement of benevolent theocracy Braidotti (2013), Mbembé (2003). By keeping the double movement in view—efficacy plus unacceptability—the article argues that Dune's posthuman messiahs function less as models to emulate than as limit-figures that expose what SF can and cannot imagine about non-anthropocentric governance.

The broader stakes are twofold. For SF's cultural work, the article suggests that epic, messiah-centred space opera can be repurposed as a laboratory for thinking posthuman ethics, but only by making visible the violence and exclusions that heroic form usually disavows. In this sense, Herbert's trilogy both participates in and critiques SF's long-standing tendency to resolve systemic crises through exceptional individuals, offering instead a vision of futures grounded in shared vulnerability, ecological entanglement, and the unsettling recognition that "some problems have no answers" at the level of the solitary saviour Gemuend (2021). For Braidotti's conceptual project, the reading demonstrates how her account of post-anthropocentrism, relational subjectivity, and affirmative "social horizons of hope" can be sharpened by encounters with genre fiction that refuses neat resolutions: Dune's posthuman sovereigns dramatise the difficulty of imagining hopeful, sustainable futures without slipping back into totalising control, thereby underscoring the urgency of developing genuinely collective, non-messianic forms of posthuman politics Braidotti (2019), Haraway (2016).

7. CONCLUSION

Read through Braidotti's critical posthumanism and in dialogue with Agamben's bare life and Mbembe's necropolitics, Herbert's first Dune trilogy appears as a sustained movement from anthropocentric, teleological messiahhood toward a partial and deeply ambivalent posthuman ethics of hope. Paul's catastrophic sovereignty demonstrates how investing planetary-scale ecological and political transformation in a singular "Man" inevitably entangles liberation with the necropolitical production of bare life, while Leto II's hybrid, long-duration rule experiments with a zoe-centred, relational guardianship that secures species survival at the cost of renewed authoritarianism (Agamben 82–85, Mbembé (2003), Braidotti (2013). Across these arcs, the trilogy exposes both the necessity and the dangers of posthuman sovereignty, insisting that genuinely affirmative, non-messianic futures remain structurally difficult to imagine. To begin with, First, the analysis establishes that both Paul Atreides and Leto II radicalize and at the same time destabilize the concept of human exceptionalism: both accumulate unequalled heaps of power and visionary scales within exclusive corporeal forms, but the respective reigns of both men are revealing the disastrous constraints and paternity violences of anthropocentric sovereignty. Second, Paul only has a glimpse and rejects a more fully relational, zoe-centred subjectivity, whereas the hybrid embodied being, combined with his long-range ecological plan, is a provisional expression of the posthuman, more than human, subject, the one, however, that Braidotti suggests, but in an authoritarian, coercive form of modality. Third, the trilogy's long game of empire, of attending to nature, and of sacrifice can be understood as creating a hopeful ethic beyond the narratives of human redemption; the future is not a fixed utopia, but a horizon of common vulnerability, where the very survival of the species is only a precarious means of getting to a possible future.

For Herbert studies, this reading encourages future work to move beyond the now-familiar slogan that Dune "warns against charismatic leaders" by attending to how formal features—focalisation, temporality, world-building—stage conflicts between humanist and posthuman logics at the level of narrative structure, and by tracing how these conflicts intersect with questions of empire, race, disability, and ecology already being explored in recent criticism. In SF studies more broadly, bringing Braidotti's critical posthumanism into dialogue with messiah-centred space opera opens new avenues for analysing how genre texts mediate tensions between capital, technoscience, environmental crisis, and the dream of a single decisive saviour Glasson (2020). The framework developed here could be productively extended to other SF messiah narratives—from climate-fiction and biopunk novels to film and game franchises that centre chosen ones or godlike AIs—testing whether and how they, like Dune, both rely on and interrogate the cultural desire for redemptive figures in the face of planetary precarity. Ultimately, such analyses reveal Dune's enduring provocation: in an Anthropocene marked by socio-technical transformations and environmental erosion, posthuman messiah narratives compel us to confront the philosophical urgency of transcending anthropocentric governance toward truly collective, ecologically entangled alternatives.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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