GOING FERAL: THE UTOPIAN HORROR OF HUMAN-ANIMAL HYBRIDS

by

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THESIS ABSTRACT

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According to the material feminist corpus, namely Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, material flows and interconnectivity between humans and their environment insists that the human body has never been atomistic, but rather a porous figure that continually interacts/intra-acts with its environment. The recent biotechnological boom allowing for the production of human-animal hybrids (chimeras) provides the kind of visualization of these interconnectivities that can help instigate a reconception of the human—as not human at all, but rather *post*human. This study looks at the presence of these human-animal hybrids in popular art media, specifically: the horror film, *Splice* (Dir. Natali 2009); the YA novel, *Inhuman* (Falls 2013); and the comic, *Sweet Tooth* (Lemire 2009-2013). This thesis argues that the human-animal hybrid figure exhibits *utopian horror*, or the use of horror to produce new, better, ways of conceptualizing human-animal relationships, ones that acknowledge our already posthuman plurality of self.

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INTRODUCTION

> Monsters are our children. They can be pushed to the farthest margins of geography and discourse, hidden away at the edges of the world and in the forbidden recesses of our mind, but they always return. And when they come back, they bring not just a fuller knowledge of our place in history and the history of knowing our place, but they bear self-knowledge, *human* knowledge—and a discourse all the more sacred as it arises from the Outside. (Cohen 20)

Folk Essentialism and the Trans-corporeal Posthuman

The boundaries between humans and animals have long been fraught with anxiety. In the Western epistemic tradition, we have a near obsessive need to distinguish ourselves as different from the "brute" natures of animals, a need that triggers fears of boundary crossing or blurring. These anxieties have redoubled in recent years due to the rapid progression of biotechnology and the seemingly limitless horizons made possible through ongoing developments in genetic engineering. These biotechnologies include the potential combination of human and non-human animal[1] genetics to create hybrid species. Such phenomena, commonly referred to as "chimeras," are received with extremely mixed responses. Some countries, including the UK, see the potential these hybrids have for medical research and have legalized them for this purpose, while many others remain vehemently opposed to these kinds of experiments (Sample; Snyder). And the debate over the acceptability of these hybrids seems to have less to do with biologically based arguments and more to do with folk essentialist conceptions of species.

[1] For brevity's sake I will from here on refer to non-human animals as simply animals.

In Jason Scott Robert and Francoise Baylis's influential and oft-cited 2003 article "Crossing Species Boundaries," they note that despite essentialism being "vanishingly rare" in contemporary biological practice, it is established in us long before we are introduced to scientific biology (5). The human is thus popularly perceived to possess essential qualities that make it *Homo sapiens* and not any other species—a conception that ignores the inherent fluidity of species, as made evident by Darwinian evolution, as well as the extreme genetic relatedness of humans and other animals.[2] And this misconception is notably evident in public opinion despite its disavowal by biologists. As Robert and Baylis observe:

> [N]otwithstanding the claim that biologically species are fluid, people believe that species identities and boundaries are indeed fixed and in fact make everyday moral decisions on the basis of this belief. (6)

Thus, despite developments in biology that have expanded the boundaries of the human, it seems "that the possible permeability of species boundaries is not open to public debate insofar as novel part-human beings are concerned" (6).

By solidifying the boundaries of the human, folk essentialism helps construct and maintain the nature/culture divide, and produces an intensified fear of crossing these boundaries—including the boundary between the human and animal. As Stacy Alaimo observes, "[g]enetic engineering, like Darwinism, evokes tremendous anxiety about the fact that humans are inextricably bound to nature" ("Discomforting Creatures" 238). That our genes can be tinkered with just as easily, and the mysteries of the human body can be unraveled just as readily, as those of other animals, negates conceptions of the human as

[2] Humans share a considerable amount of their DNA with other animals, and in some cases, such as with chimpanzees, the human genome only differs by 1.2-1.6% (Robert & Baylis 4).

apart from, and superior to, other creatures. And even before genetic engineering, Darwinism had already established these connections by placing humans within a community of descent, and thus denying their exceptionalism. Stacy Alaimo and other scholars have taken up Darwin's theory to argue for a different perception of the human as one in constant flux and embedded in its environment:

> Demonstrating that the structure of the human body is comparable to that of animals and that animal behavior is comparable to that of the human, Darwin forges a scientific and philosophical 'posthumanism' in which there are no solid demarcations between human and animal and in which the human is coextensive with the emergent natural/cultural world. (*Bodily Natures* 151)

She goes on to argue that, by "exposing the human as a corporeal amalgamation of creatures both at hand and across vast temporal distances, [Darwin] may have given us our first glimpse of the always already 'posthuman,' a stance that insists upon our immersion within worldly material agencies" (158).

It can thus be argued, that through an approach that acknowledges both biological and theoretical conceptions of the human, we can establish an understanding of the human as not human at all, but rather *post*human. The material flows and interconnectivity between humans and their environment (including the bodies of other animals), what Alaimo calls trans-corporeality, insists that the human body has never been a unit unto itself, but rather a porous one that continually interacts/intra-acts with the world around it. This conception of the human not only overthrows essentialism, but also necessitates we "radically rethink materiality, the very 'stuff' of bodies and natures"

("Trans-Corporeal Feminisms" 242). And while working through this interconnectivity with the environment and inherent relatedness to other animals is clearly an essential project for accepting a posthuman reality, these flows lack the kind of direct visual cues that humans tend to rely on. How do you accept connectivity with your environment when you can't see the intra-action taking place? This problem has been particularly felt in the context of pollutants and toxins—even though they might be impossible to see with the naked eye, this does not change the way they can affect your body. And these visual cues become doubly important when you are working against ingrained folk essentialist epistemologies. The evidence for an alternative approach must have more than a scholar's support to alter this kind of perspective.

I argue that the recent biotechnological boom allowing the production of human-animal hybrids provides the kind of visualization of these interconnectivities that can help instigate this project. While Alaimo observes that Darwin's work underscored the physical similarities between humans and animals to demonstrate their relatedness, I believe these similarities may be helpful for understanding relatedness, but ultimately are too distant for layman consideration. The huge temporal separation between a common ancestor and the present-day species weakens the potential for robust, and far-reaching, perceptions of kinship. This appeal to physical similarities could generate moral interest in a particular species, but it does not *demand* consideration in the way a human-animal hybrid can. The visions of boundary-blurring represented in these creatures are so frightening and unsettling for a public still clinging to folk essentialist conceptions of species, that they will force us to reconsider the lines of the human. Our fear can thus be

used as a tool to draw us in to reconsider what we are actually afraid of and if these fears can be sustained once interrogated.

Fear: The Hybrid in Horror

Born of a generation where biotechnology has seemed to race ahead of our ethical frameworks, leaving us uncertain and afraid of what scientists might cook up next, the human-animal hybrid is undoubtedly a monster of our time. As Jeffrey Jerome Cohen notes, "[t]he monstrous body is pure culture. A construct and a projection, the monster exists only to be read: the *monstrum* is etymologically 'that which reveals,' 'that which warns'" (4). These figures certainly necessitate discussions of what alterations to living creatures is acceptable—what level of tampering with "natural" forces is acceptable—and they can serve as not only an embodiment of moral quandaries over such biotechnologies, but also about our moral understanding of other animals. Robert and Baylis observed the ways these novel organisms unearth our current lack of consensus on moral obligations to even some of those "among us who are undeniably biologically human, as well as … to a range of nonhuman animals" (Robert & Baylis 9). The human-animal hybrid figure is thus a monstrous embodiment of both our fears of relatedness to animals as well as our uncertainties about the limitations of our current ethical frameworks.

But these monsters can also provide a "pleasurable sense of identification" ("Discomforting Creatures" 294). The success of horror narratives featuring such monstrous figures often relies on this connection with the monstrous—"a visceral identification in which the boundaries of [the audience's] own bodies seem to dissolve," allowing the viewer to experience connection with a figure that operates beyond

categorization (294). As Alaimo notes in her analysis of monstrous natures in contemporary horror, "[p]erhaps the horrific but pleasurable sense of the 'melting of corporeal boundaries' … can catalyze some sort of resistance to the desire to demarcate, discipline, and eradicate monstrous natures" (294). Thus, the monster can also operate as a desirable representation of a move beyond categorization and separation of humans from nature, to a state of connectivity. And the human-animal hybrid can help reestablish the human into Darwin's community of descent—into a community of kinship with other animals. This grapples with the human existential fears of isolation and insignificance. As Deborah Bird Rose observes in *Wild Dog Dreaming*: "If we are like [animals], do we lose our sense of having a unique origin and destiny? If we are not like them, are we isolated? If we do not belong with them, with whom do we belong?" (48). There is a fear here of both disconnect and connection that must be grappled with, as the converging fear and desire complicate the potentiality for acknowledging and incorporating these narratives of interrelatedness into our conceptions of self. As philosopher Mary Midgley observes in *The Myths We Live By*: "To think of ourselves seriously as animals is to regard the other animals as our kin; it inevitably leads us in some degree to welcome them, to identify with them, to see their cause as our own. That, indeed, is just what people find both attractive and frightening about this way of thinking" (138).

In response to these fears, Deborah Bird Rose developed what she calls *ecological existentialism*, which "pulls together two major shifts in worldview: the end of certainty and the end of atomism. From certainty the shift is to uncertainty. From atomism the shift is to connectivity" (2-3). Identifying with the human-animal "monster" would require both of these shifts. The dissolution of boundaries between the human and the animal (the

human and the environment) instigates uncertainty and produces connectivity—both vital changes that must foreground the acceptance of the human as an already posthuman being. In Stacy Alaimo's book *Bodily Natures*, she argues for a similar "posthuman environmental ethics in which the flows, interchanges, and interrelations between human corporeality and the more-than-human world resist the ideological forces of disconnection" (*Bodily Natures* 142). I contend that the visually compelling human-animal hybrid invokes an acknowledgement of inherent relatedness, and thus interconnectivity between the human and its environment. It is the uncertainty that comes with this dissolution of boundaries (and production of connectivity) that ultimately becomes the most challenging, and frightening, aspect of this shift.

Desire: The Utopian Hybrid

This fear of uncertainty is evident even within the context of biotechnology's utopian driving force, and the idealistic goals of human-animal hybrid research—many of which find their roots in evolutionary theory. In Brian Stableford's article "Biotechnology and Utopia," he asserts that in the aftermath of Charles Darwin's publication of *The Origin of Species*, many speculative writers were convinced that "no ideal state could possibly be attained until the current limitations of the human body could be conclusively set aside" (Stableford 189). While at the time it was mere speculation that evolutionary forces would make the necessary changes, as biotechnology advanced, "it was widely realized that human biology was a given that did not necessarily have to be accepted" (189). What was once considered science fiction is now not only possible, but is actually in practice. This is especially true within the Transhumanism

movement, whose primary goal is to overcome human mortality, which some believe could be possible as soon as 2045 (Istvan). In some contemporary circles, however, humans themselves are often seen as the "greatest obstacle to utopia," where only our genetic alteration to more closely resemble other, humbler, species, or our annihilation altogether will restore the planet to a kind of eco-utopian state (Jendrysik 36). In the 1996 film adaptation of *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, Moreau explains that "in order to eradicate the 'monstrous elements of the human psyche,' we must accept a 'snout or hoof here or there'" (qtd. in "Discomforting Creatures" 293). Here, the limitations of the human are seen as surmountable through a reintegration of animal genetics, a move that aims not to elevate the human further above nature, but rather reestablish its place within it.

While these assertions may or may not be true, the potential for bio-engineered fixes for human health, food shortages, and energy crises are undoubtedly real and currently in use. From Genetically Modified Organisms (GMOs), to vaccines, biofuels, and medical treatments, biotechnology has reached into many different controversial areas, but many of these controversies have been (largely) overturned and the technology naturalized. Even technologies that cross the human-animal divide have been widely adopted—where the use of pig heart valves for human heart repair was once perceived as monstrous, it is now commonplace. But as Stableford observes, despite the "awe and gratitude" we may have for the biotechnological advancements of the past, "we are [still] bound … to regard the biotechnological anticipations and discoveries of our own day with the profoundest anxiety and suspicion" (194). And while there *are* many human-animal xenotransplantation procedures that have been naturalized, these species blends are relatively superficial. Even projects that inject human genetic material into pig

kidneys to improve transplant success do not exhibit outward alterations to a person's appearance[3] that indicate this species crossover. Nor do they significantly alter the individual's genome, making their initial controversy less unavoidably contentious than that of the more visually evident contemporary hybrids. And these controversies are often characterized by what Stableford calls, "a reflexive tidal wave of neurotic anxiety and blind, unreasoning terror" (200). And this terror is most readily felt when these biotechnologies can be clearly and visually demarcated from the "norm."

Visualizing the Posthuman in Popular Culture

Because these human-animal hybrids provide such a visually compelling locus for conceptualizing the Darwinian posthuman discussed above, they can become a key figure in the shift in public consciousness from folk essentialism to a more fluid conception of the human, and other species. These biotechnological developments necessitate we rethink the bounds of the human and acknowledge our own inherent posthumanity and interrelatedness with other animals. It was much easier to ignore the similarities between humans and other animals when visual and linguistic boundaries could be easily drawn—these obviously hybrid figures complicate that. And while significant shifts have been made in academic and research fields, the broader public has maintained its hold on folk essentialism, which is why for this project I am intentionally turning my focus to the "low" art forms of popular culture texts, rather than "high" literary or art culture. I find the best indicators of these shifts are more likely to be found in low arts, as the audience they are working to please is the broader populous, thus its themes are anchored in what interests the public most and what messages they would like most to hear.

[3] Nor do they alter the outward appearance of the pig donor.

This is not to say that popular arts can't question the status quo and push cultural perceptions in new directions, far from it. I find them to be in a better place to enact these changes, as they approach the general public on common ground—in the pages of an easy-read comic, at a horror film, or through a page-turning young adult adventure. From this common ground, they can then push their readers or viewers a step farther into unknown territory. The presence of the human-animal hybrids in popular art forms indicates the broader public's need to respond to developments in the scientific and academic realms—it is an acknowledgement that the human/animal and self/other distinctions that folk essentialism puts so much stock in need to be reconceived.

And the ethical debate of the human-animal chimeras in the scientific world is a key place to engage with these concepts, in part, simply because its *visually* hybrid figures can easily translate and establish themselves into pop culture narratives. Certainly there are other places for grappling with these issues in popular culture, but I find this undeniable blend of the human and animal to be particularly fruitful for this kind of work. With the contentious debate over chimera research so firmly focused within the material body of the hybrid, it opens a door for discussing the ways the human is already posthuman—a co-constitutive intra-actor of its environment. As Donna Haraway remarks in the context of companion species: "it is a mistake to see the alterations of dogs' bodies and minds as biological and the changes in human bodies and lives, for example in the emergence of herding or agricultural societies, as cultural, and so not about co-evolution" (Haraway 31). The body is a key place of this turmoil over self/other distinctions, as to acknowledge that the "other" influences your physical self, is to acknowledge that you

have never been in control and thus your "self" is just as much a product of "external" environmental actors as your own actions.

This movement supports the challenge of Deborah Bird Rose's *ecological existentialism* with its combined shifts towards the threatening, but freeing, embrace of uncertainty, and the welcoming, but potentially deflating, expansion to connectivity. The human-animal hybrid craze can be thus used as a tool to build towards a new posthuman hybrid consciousness that interacts with these shifts towards connectivity and uncertainty. Without this visualization, I contend, we are unlikely to make the radical shifts in our conceptions of the human that are necessary. These human-animal visions of boundary-blurring are so shocking they force us to reconsider the lines of the "human," and enable us to move towards a new hybrid consciousness that simultaneously dissolves boundaries between the self/other and acknowledges and honors difference. We need to work through the initial horror of these figures in order to move towards an acceptance and embrace of the posthuman.

The Utopian Horror of the Human-Animal Hybrid

In my selection of primary narratives for this work, the posthuman's challenge to Western notions of the human-animal binary necessitated I keep my range within Western narratives. All the narratives chosen are by Canadian or American artists grappling with present-day or near-future *intentional* constructions of the human-animal hybrid. I do not look at narratives in which human-animal hybrids are results of magic or supernatural causes (like werewolves), but rather stay within the tradition of science-fiction and the potentiality of current science. While I think future analyses of these

fantastical works could be valuable to understandings of the posthuman, the place of the science-fiction hybrid figures as "extraordinary" figures in an "ordinary" world means they "breach the norms of ontological propriety" (Carroll 16). The "ordinary" nature of fantasy hybrids in their "extraordinary" world makes them less shocking and thus, potentially, less immediately compelling and provocative. I also intentionally spread my selected narratives from across key popular culture media: film, YA fiction, and comics. This spread allows for a broader reach in the popular consciousness, thus indicating the ways these narratives are pervasive in many different arenas. In regards to this media variety, I have endeavored to conduct my analyses of each narrative within each respective genre's own tradition of criticism, paying particular attention to the unique aesthetic qualities—both productive and potentially hindering—for each.

Chapter II, "'We Crossed a line—things got confused.' Meeting the Monster in the Horror Film, *Splice*," explores the role of fear and shock in Vincenzo Natali's 2009 monster movie to instigate discussion about broadly unexamined conceptions of human-animal interrelationships. Employing Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's seven theses of monster theory, I look at the ways the film itself toys with monstrous hybridity through its genre-blending, and the role its human-animal hybrid monster, Dren, serves to complicate and confuse the seemingly arbitrary demarcations between spaces and identities. I look particularly at Natali's use of the aesthetics of color to first demarcate between these categories, and then to complicate them, further collapsing the differences and distances between them.

Chapter III, "Feral or Free? Uncaging the Posthuman in the YA novel *Inhuman*" builds off of this foundation of horror to indicate the ways individuals can work through

these fears to come to an understanding of connectivity and an acceptance of uncertainty in life more broadly. The "ferals" of Kat Falls's 2013 YA novel provide a key visual rendition of the posthuman hybrid—one constructed through a viral transduction of genetic material which thus reinforces both the vulnerability of uninfected characters, as well as the material embeddedness of these figures in an agential world. This vulnerability instigates the acceptance of uncertainty and the embrace of language and stories that are materially situated, reinforcing connection between the individuals and the material reality around (and within) them. The feral also provides a lens for interrogating the ways we are already posthuman—that the human-animal binary is truly arbitrary—as the uninfected characters find their own inherent "wildness" without the use of the virus.

In Chapter IV, "'Man's time was done.' The Posthuman Ecotopia of Jeff Lemire's *Sweet Tooth*," the posthuman hybrid figure is explored as the foundation for a new ecotopian society. The unique hybrid form of the comic book is used to construct material continuity between the humans and animals (and hybrids) within the narrative. The format also provides a place to look at the materiality of language and symbolism, where bodies become messages and language is expressed through flesh. The hybridity of form and body become key components of the hybrid utopian society, where individuals adhere to a posthuman consciousness that recognizes a plurality of perspective and self. The multiplicity of this consciousness both materially and historically situates the characters, allowing them to more readily navigate the uncertainties of a posthuman world, and indicating ways we can embrace this posthumanity even without sprouting spines or tails.

The arc of this work will thus provide an indication of the ways the human-animal hybrid figure exhibits *utopian horror*, or the use of horror or fear to instigate new, better, ways of conceptualizing human-animal and human-environmental relationships. This utopian horror of the hybrids can therefore be a very productive way of invoking recognition of interrelatedness and embeddedness: of our already posthuman plurality of self. These narratives force us to acknowledge the ways in which we have *never* been "human" as we understand the term, that humanity is merely a construction that atomizes us from the living, breathing earth, and thus to be fully alive, we must embrace our posthumanity.

CHAPTER II

"WE CROSSED A LINE—THINGS GOT CONFUSED" MEETING THE MONSTER IN THE HORROR FILM *SPLICE*

> The horizon where the monsters dwell might well be imagined as the visible edge of the hermeneutic circle itself: the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world. In the face of the monster, scientific inquiry and its ordered rationality crumble. (Cohen 7)

Vincenzo Natali's 2009 sci-fi horror monster movie *Splice* serves as a particularly fruitful place for instigating discussion about human and animal interrelatedness and inherent interconnectivity through its careful use of horror and the tropes of the monster movie. Natali pulls no punches, and takes his audience above and beyond their comfort zones to exhibit the real consideration we must give both these relationships and the practice of science. Set in contemporary Canada, *Splice* stresses the immediacy of these issues by refusing the temporal leap to the future many science fiction narratives employ. The film toys with the lines between the monstrous and the human, leaving the audience uneasy and somewhat disturbed at its finale—unsure if there is any character worth truly rooting for. Is the film's so-called monster truly monstrous? Are its human scientists humane? This uncertainty leaves the story open-ended, a fitting "conclusion" for concepts as unsettled as those it portrays.

Splice follows the story of geneticists (and couple) Clive (played by Adrien Brody) and Elsa (Sarah Polley), who create animal hybrids to produce proteins for the research and development arm of a pharmaceutical company called N.E.R.D. (Nucleic

Exchange Research and Development). Wishing to take their research to the next level and believing in their ability to revolutionize science, Clive and Elsa request permission to incorporate human DNA into the mix. The ethical gamble, however, is too great for the company to risk—particularly as it is uncertain the project will produce lucrative results. After being denied the autonomy to incorporate human genes, Clive and Elsa continue their work in secret and eventually produce a human-animal hybrid they name Dren (Delphine Chenéac). Dren comes complete with amphibious lungs, retractable wings, a poisonous stinger-tipped tail, and, unbeknownst to Clive, human DNA from Elsa herself. And as Dren grows (at an accelerated rate), her monstrous boundary-crossing nature, which moves not only across species boundaries, but also between the roles of specimen, child, and lover, begins to reveal Elsa and Clive's own monstrous natures, just as she reveals her own humanity.

Instigating Discussion with Horror

> What's interesting is that you're [Vincenzo Natali] part of popular culture that gets these things to be talked about.
> --Ira Flatow in interview with Natali ("Man Meets Animal)

The idea for the story, Natali says, initially came from the infamous "Vacanti mouse:"

> [I]t was a very special mouse, because it appeared to have a human ear growing out of its back. … While it wasn't strictly a genetic experiment, it really looked like one. It's just an incredibly shocking image, and I knew instantly that there was a movie in that mouse. ("Interview: Cube and Splice Director…")

The “shocking” nature of the Vacanti mouse’s seeming blend of human and animal genetics was something Natali knew he could develop into a provocative and unsettling monster movie. Though certain this level of shocking fare would polarize his audience, Natali was unconcerned, saying, “the only reaction I don't want is an indifferent one. If that's the reaction, then I have failed” (“Man Meets Animal”). And the reactions were certainly strong. In response to a particularly long-winded critique of the film by commenter natenineten Nate in the comments on blogger Michael A. Charles’s post “Dren/Not Dren: The unsatisfying ending of Splice,” fellow commenter Sam observed that “[f]or a terrible sci-fi movie, splice sure seems to have upset you [natenineten Nate] quite a bit.” Sam’s casual comment indicates the exact response director Natali had intended—whether or not the film was “enjoyed,” it certainly instigated passionate conversations about its topics.

It was Natali’s intention to push boundaries with this film, and to instigate these discussions as he says,

> I actually think that the best horror films do exactly that. That’s what the horror genre is really all about, is to try, in the sort of safe context of a horror story, a fantasy story, is taking the audience somewhere where they’re not comfortable. (“SPLICE Interview”)

And the film certainly does that. Aside from the ethical complexities inherent in tinkering with human genetics, and even aside from their marriage with animal DNA, the film unflinchingly renders sexual encounters between the human scientists and their “experiment.” And it is these encounters, in fact, that garnered the most attention among avid horror film fans and other moviegoers. Some responses registered disgust, such as a

review done for *The Washington Post* that began with: “The yuck factor spins off the charts in ‘Splice,’ a thoroughly repulsive science fiction-horror flick…” (Hornaday), or a disturbed uncertainty, such as this snippet from a piece at *screencrush.com*: “Adrien Brody [film character, Clive] having sex with the Dren creature from 'Splice' is definitely awkward—she's kind of like his daughter and she's also pretty much an animal, which makes this scene some terrifying combo of bestiality and incest” (Hayes). This “terrifying” interspecies sex scene also appears to be the most commonly reposted (based on a quick Google search of “Splice movie scenes”) and small snippets of it have been commonly converted into GIFs.

The sex scene was also one of the primary reasons for *Splice*’s release as an independent film during the Sundance Film Festival in 2009. Despite nearly 5 years trying to jumpstart the project, it wasn’t until Natali gained the support of well-known (and successful) horror writer, director, and producer Guillermo del Torro that he attracted investors:

> It was just a very challenging film. Because of Dren, it was always going to be costly for an independent film, but it also had the sexual side, which made it quite controversial and potentially dangerous. And I think that Guillermo's seal of approval kind of legitimized it and made it, in the eyes of investors, something that could be commercial. (Natali, “Interview: Cube and Splice Director…”)

Del Torro’s role as the film’s executive producer thus allowed Natali to go ahead with *Splice* the way he had originally imagined it—with the “disturbing” sexual encounter between Dren and Clive:

> It was [a crucial scene] and it was always there, it was kind of the raison d'être of the movie precisely because it hasn't been seen before, and I felt it tapped into the very essence of what the film is about—that we're going to watch the scientists turns [sic] into monsters and we're going to find humanity in our creature, and that scene typifies that. ("Exclusive Interview")

And it was, arguably, this blending of the frightening horror-imagery and the disturbing character drama that allowed *Splice* to capture the minds of the broader public. *Splice* is, as Natali joked, "Infecting America" ("Man Meets Animal").

A Monster of a Monster Movie

> [W]hat distinguishes "Splice" is that it is a creature film, but it's spliced with a relationship story. (Natali, "Man Meets Animal")

As Natali indicates above, *Splice* is not just a film about splicing, but is itself a spliced creation, one that could be read as a monster to rival even Dren. This blending of genres, however, is not evident in trailers released for the film—it is portrayed as purely a horror/monster movie, so first-time viewers expecting a typical horror movie might have gotten more than they bargained for ("Splice Official Trailer"). The genre-based expectations would have prepared viewers for "escapist delight":

> The monster awakens one to the pleasures of the body, to the simple and fleeting joys of being frightened, or frightening—to the experience of mortality and corporeality. We watch the monstrous spectacle of the horror film because we know that the cinema is a temporary place, that the

> jolting sensuousness of the celluloid images will be followed by reentry into the world of comfort and light. … The audience knows how the genre works. (Cohen 17)

This escapism is generally paired with themes of transcendence above the monsters depicted onscreen, with what Stacy Alaimo calls the "vertical semiotics" of monster movies. "Such plots," Alaimo says, "although they entertain the fear that humans are part of the nature they destroy, ultimately reassure us ... [by] signaling that humans are free to float above the nature of the beast" ("Discomforting Creatures" 280). These vertical movements are generally typified by the killing of, or victory over, the monster and the quintessential escape via helicopter. Natali offers no such comforting distance.

The genre-bending nature of *Splice* ensures that while viewers may be reassured by their ability to walk out of the movie theater and "into the light," any hopes of transcendence are withheld. Natali's resultant sci-fi-horror drama subverts the work of typical monster-movies by citing the monstrous in interpersonal relationships and thus enmeshing his characters and monster in intimate and complex relationships. As Natali asserts, *Splice* was "always about who these people are and their relationship to one another, and the thing they make, which is in itself more than just a creature. It is a character in the story…" ("Man Meets Animal"). This relocation of horror into the realm of relationships and family is indicative of shifts in recent postmodern ecohorror narratives. Instead of placing ecohorror in an external "nature" context, postmodern horror films "place the locus of horror squarely on humanity (particularly the family)" (Rust 551). And as Alaimo observes in her analysis of monstrous natures in recent horror, some films, such as "*Habitat* and *Safe* dramatize that the home, the sanctuary from

supposedly external threats, is itself a monstrous place. … [They] dramatize the impossibility of demarcating protected places and thus serve as potent counterpoints to prevalent kill-the-beast plots, vertical visions, and transcendent conclusions" ("Discomforting Creatures" 288-289). And *Splice*, is, undoubtedly just such a film. In an online review, reviewer Keith Phipps describes this unsettling nature of the genre-bending film:

> Any resemblance to the actual experience of parenting is, of course, not at all coincidental. … Natali keeps the film unsettling by using icky creature effects, but just as often by offering up grotesque caricatures of real-life parenting discomforts, from the exhaustion to the collapse of privacy to the difficulty of instilling a moral code in an offspring that often seems alien. The film keeps a sometimes too-clinical distance but pushes buttons from afar, including a final act that turns into a series of outrages bound to upset audiences who might have stumbled in expecting the usual monster-of-the-week horror movie instead of this thriving, disturbing, thoughtful mutant of a movie. (Phipps)

This integration of the monster into the family unit, and within deeply intimate relationships, is also, I argue, essential for *Splice*'s success. By refusing the distancing transcendence of typical monster movies, the film also refuses an easy, and forgettable, conclusion. Audience members are unable to easily identify with any one character, as moral questionability is pervasive among the primary characters, and the finale (what Phipps called a "series of outrages") is really a series of culturally contested and taboo

sex-based behavior: incest, transexuality[4], rape, and what could be deemed bestiality. At the climax of the film Dren changes sex and impregnates Elsa with a second-generation hybrid baby. While the finale does also include Dren's death (and thus the death of the most visually monstrous character) the pregnancy is representative of the inescapable closeness of the characters—a relationship that could not be more intimate. While we will return to this unsettling conclusion later in this chapter, for now it is key to note that this move not only *refuses* transcendent distance, it *collapses* all distance by embodying the monstrous hybrid within a primary character. This embodiment is a particularly compelling finale because it collapses some of the primary dualisms set up throughout the film, dualisms that we will map in the next section through an analysis of the film's aesthetic design.

Category Crisis in Color

> The too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in the freakish compilation of the monster's body. A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition… (Cohen 6-7)

Throughout the film, Natali sets up a series of parallel dualities that map onto locations—specifically on the laboratory where Clive and Elsa work, and the rural farmhouse where they retreat to raise Dren. This spaces fit easily into the quintessential Cartesian dualisms of mind and body, objectivity and subjectivity, and, one could argue, control and chaos. The messy space of the home is rife with emotional head-butting among the characters, and the clean and controlled laboratory exhibits (or, attempts to

[4] While I am hesitant to place Dren's sex change within a categorization of the "taboo," this change is certainly intended to (problematically) unsettle and frighten the audience.

exhibit) reason and clear-headedness. These dualisms are further mapped onto the characters as each navigates their own dual identities. Clive and Elsa must come to terms with their contrasting roles as scientists and parents and, correspondingly, Dren walks a similar line between child and specimen. It is key to note here as well, that Clive and Elsa's attempts to separate their two identities are already threatened by the very fact that they are a couple working together on the same research project. Even Clive's brother works under them in the lab, so the realm of the family and the domestic have already been layered onto the workplace even before Dren enters the picture, though it is her existence that demands this blurring be recognized and grappled with.

But despite the already present blending of domains and identities, Elsa and Clive still struggle to navigate the seemingly irreconcilable differences between scientific research and parenting, and achieve little real success. Elsa, at first enthralled by the pride of producing such an intelligent and remarkable child, is eventually undone by her inability to control Dren's adolescent rebellions and resorts to violent means to regain the upper hand. And Clive, initially against bringing Dren to term, is soon seduced by her humanity and goes from strictly approaching her as a "specimen" to both befriending and, eventually, sexually desiring her. To represent these struggles and to deconstruct the boundaries between these spaces and identities, Natali sets up clearly identifiable color palettes that are associated with each space—the laboratory is represented through shades of blue and the home through golds and browns. In this section we will look at the ways Natali first sets up these contrasting spaces and then uses their identifiability to strategically mingle the colors onscreen and thus deconstruct their polarity.

From the outset of the film, the scientific work place of the laboratory is defined through the color blue. The décor and props in these sets are dominated by machinery accented in blues, boxes and notebooks with blue covers, and metallic stainless steel surfaces that reflect back the blue lighting. The cast is also often dressed in blue scrubs, masks, and gloves. The iciness of color accentuates the already crisp blue-white of the fluorescent lighting used in laboratories, an effect that is intensified through post-production color saturation. In some scenes, particularly those from the beginning of the film, this color saturation allows few other colors to remain (see fig. 1).

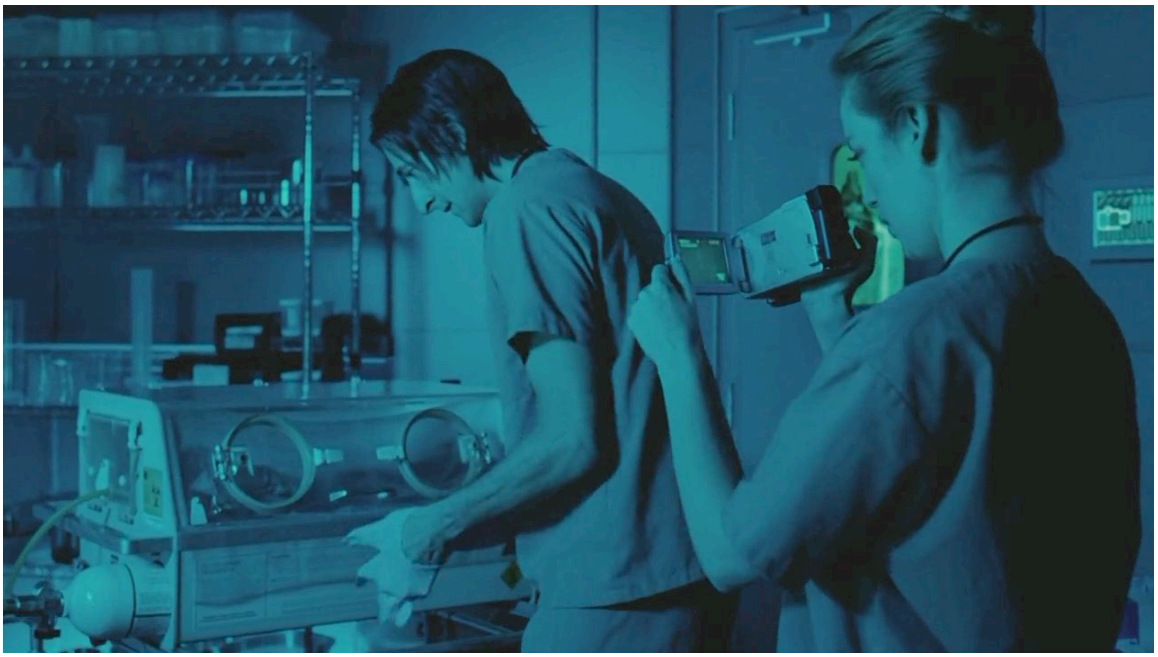

Fig. 1. Clive and Elsa in the laboratory recording one of their experiments.

The use of blue to characterize such a technology-rich setting is fitting, as most digital screens give off a blue glow, particularly familiar in the context of computer screens. The cool quality of the color also reflects the conception of science as a "cool and calculating" profession, where objectivity and logic-based thinking are celebrated. And, interestingly, this blue saturation becomes less intense as the movie progresses, with laboratory scenes in the latter half of the film exhibiting a milder blue palette, hinting at a

degradation of scientific credibility and objectivity (see fig. 2). The lessening of the blue saturation also allows for a more realistic color spectrum, making figures easier to perceive, and perhaps offering a more truthful portrayal of the characters and circumstances.

Fig. 2. Elsa at the laboratory in the latter half of the film.

This cold blue palette is contrasted with the warm golds and browns that characterize the rural domestic scenes of the farm where Clive and Elsa live with Dren (see fig. 3). The farmhouse and barn sets are dominated by wood paneling and the warm lighting reminiscent of incandescent bulbs often used in homes. Décor, costumes, and props also follow this general scheme. The deep browns and golds offer a rich and nurturing setting—reminiscent of the natural world, and encoded with its redemptive "Mother Nature" tropes. The warm colors indicate the comfort and care one expects to find in a domestic setting, which emphasizes the importance of relationships and emotive thinking and expression. The barn sets are also often lit with natural light—sunny rays beaming in through skylights and slats in the wooden walls. In addition, the natural

lighting featured in these scenes is often supplemented by high fill lighting, more fully illuminating the actors, and perhaps indicating that the domestic space reveals their "true natures."

Fig. 3. Elsa and Dren in the barn where Dren lives.

These color schemes produce a clear map to code-switching between the two locations—they differ so completely it would be nearly impossible to mistake one space for another. The additional association between space and particular traits and identities as outlined above also allows the traits themselves to become color-coded, so in moments when the characters struggle to navigate contrasting traits and identities, the two color schemes begin to appear simultaneously on screen. And these moments of struggle are often expressed through the mapping of these colors onto the physical bodies of the characters themselves—thus further mingling and embodying the seemingly irreconcilable polarities. Next we will look at two of these key moments, and while both of these "struggles" occur in the domestic space, I think it is more important to note that they both occur in the space that Dren inhabits. Dren is, after all, the physical

embodiment of the breach between the workplace and home-life—between the experiment and the family—and it is ultimately her presence that has triggered Elsa and Clive's "identity crises."

For Elsa, her primary struggle is depicted through her desire for control. She seems to feel most comfortable in the laboratory where she is surrounded by the beeps and clicks of mechanized regularity and predictability. As Clive bitterly states later in the film, "You never wanted a normal child because you were afraid of losing control. But an experiment, that's something else." Her primary struggles thus do not occur until they are forced to move Dren from the laboratory (where they are being too closely watched to hide her any longer) to the old farm Elsa inherited from her mother and where she grew up. Even in this rural space, they try to keep Dren contained by locking her away in the barn[5], which they have overhauled into a livable space, with couches, a makeshift kitchen, and even a swimming tank. Within this space, Elsa tries to maintain the exacting control over Dren that she held while in the laboratory. She continues to feed Dren a vegetarian diet (despite Dren's early escape, where she catches and eats a rabbit, revealing her omnivorous needs), confines her indoors, and even takes away a cat that Dren befriends, certain it might have a disease. Elsa's fear of losing control is linked further with the farmhouse space when the truth of her childhood abuse at the hands of her mother is revealed. Her actions while at the farm can be seen as, in part, a response to this childhood abuse, disturbingly acted out upon Dren in similar ways.

Restricting what Dren plays with is one of the primary tools that Elsa employs to maintain control. Though Elsa at first takes Dren's cat friend away from her, she gives it

[5] The placement of Dren in the barn interestingly others her beyond her roles as child and specimen, and places her in the realm of the domestic animal.

back as a "reward" for good behavior—an attempt to further exert control over Dren through this system of reward and punishment. Dren, however, is clearly able to play similar games, and retaliates by killing the cat with her stinger-tipped tail. But, it isn't until Elsa physically slaps Dren to punish her that Dren uses her full strength to overpower Elsa, steals the barn-key and attempts to flee. Elsa quickly recovers, however, and (horrifically), as Dren looks outside in wonder, knocks her out with a shovel. But this violent action was not enough for Elsa, and thus when Dren awakens, she is strapped to a table in the center of the barn. Elsa circles her, recording verbal observations of the "specimen" in her handheld recorder:

> Physically, H-50 has evolved well. However, recent violent behavior suggests dangerous psychological developments. Erratic behavior may be caused by a disproportionate species identification. Cosmetically human affectation should be eliminated wherever possible.

Once done speaking, Elsa uses surgical scissors to cut away Dren's dress, removes her necklace, and wipes away her makeup. Elsa's response, then, to her inability to control Dren, is to revert back to her scientist self, and to deny Dren the autonomy and personhood that she had before (now calling her by her specimen identification number, "H-50"). The camera angles reflect this power shift, as Elsa is viewed from low angles and Dutch-angled shots from Dren's perspective. A couple of extreme high-angle shots look down at Dren in her vulnerable state, strapped to the table in an almost crucifix-like shape, her arms stretched out from her sides, and her legs strapped together (see fig. 4). This vulnerability and Christ-like portrayal of Dren also reinforces our identification with her plight, and horror at Elsa's behavior.

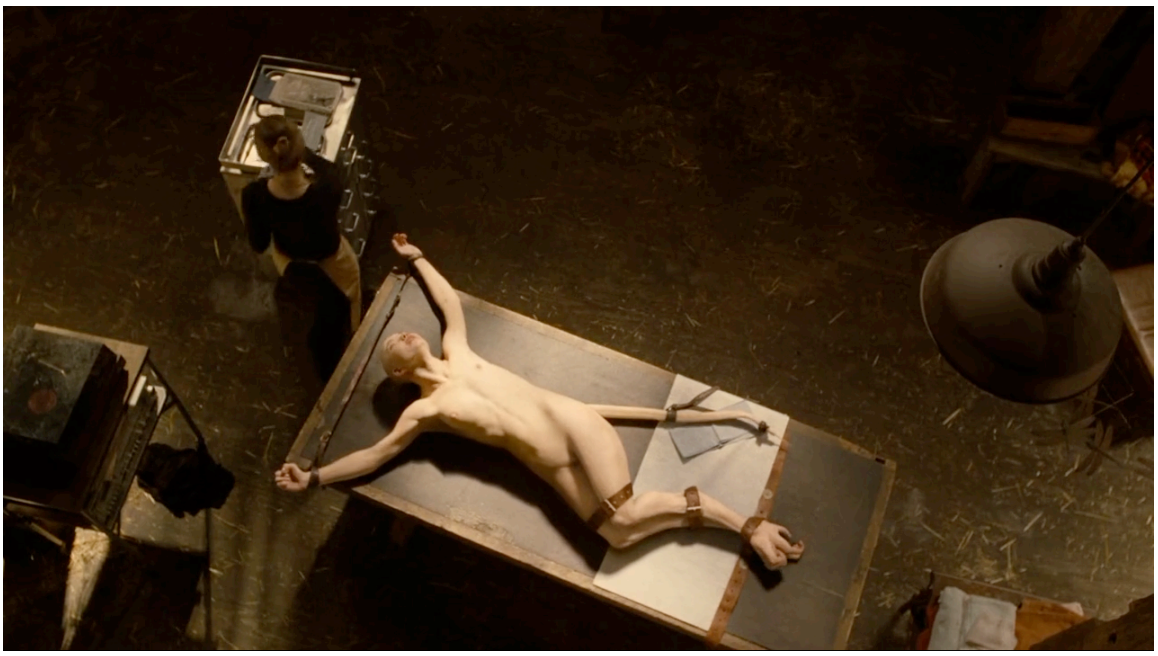

Fig. 4. Dren, strapped to the table, spotlighted, and depicted in a cross-shape.

This power shift and Elsa's reversion to her scientist-self is also visually represented by her donning of blue surgical gloves and a mask (see fig. 5). By covering her hands and lips with the blue of the laboratory, she indicates that the intimate touch and kiss of a mother have been overruled, and she will maintain her objective distance. The mask also reduces her face down to the anonymity of merely a pair of eyes, underscoring the scientific rigor of objectivity, and her need to demarcate between the objective scientist working a controlled experiment, and the subjective mother raising an unpredictable child. Of course, though the mask implies objectivity, the expression in Elsa's eyes is unmistakably that of revenge.

Fig. 5. A Dutch-angle point-of-view shot as Elsa prepares to numb Dren's tail.

When done removing Dren's clothing, she makes her final observation: "Due to her unstable condition, it has become necessary to remove her zootoxin glands and stinger." Elsa's final act with Dren strapped to the table is thus to numb and remove Dren's poison glands and stinger from her tail, further attempting to exert control over her; a scene the horrified Clive walks in on.

Walking in on this scene both horrifies *and* challenges Clive. He is unable to adequately respond to Elsa's drastic shift from the loving mother to the heartless scientist, as it brings to light both his *own* struggles to navigate that duality and the real consequences that can result from these intersections. Consequently, not long after this scene, Elsa has returned to the lab (her place of comfort and refuge) and Clive has retreated into the farmhouse, poured himself a drink, and is sitting down to monitor Dren via their security camera system. Clive and his set are color schemed in browns and warmer colors, and the surveillance footage, though seemingly "black and white" has a distinctly blue tint (see fig. 6).

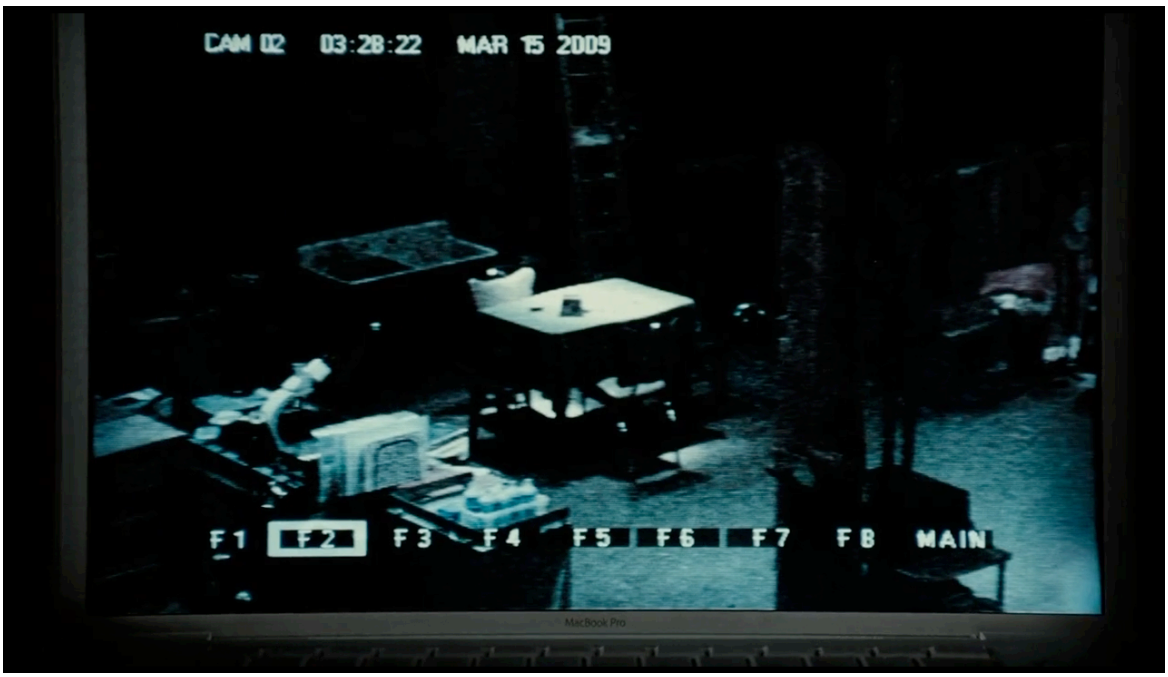

Fig. 6. One of the security camera views of Dren's barn.

As Clive stares at the computer, the close-up frames his face with a blue glow from the window over one shoulder. This adds a blue cast to the shadows across his face, which is contrasted with the warm golden glow from the lamps across his left cheek (see fig. 7). The colors identifying Clive's dual identities are thus mapped directly onto the skin of his face, underscoring the ways the two are beginning to bleed over onto one another. The placement of the domestic tones on the lit side of his face also indicates the dominance of his subjective self in this moment and the suppression of the objectivity he should be exhibiting while monitoring his "experiment."

Fig. 7. As he looks at the computer, Clive's face is partially illuminated in gold, with the shadows on his face gaining a blue tint from the window behind him.

As he clicks through the different cameras, he leans forward intently towards the computer screen. The shots flip between close-ups of Clive's face and increasingly close close-ups of the computer screen, indicating the building intensity and desire to find Dren. When Clive finally finds her swimming in her water tank, she appears ethereal, like a mermaid or siren as she moves slowly about in the half-light of the image. The effect of the underwater security camera gives the image a distinctive green tint, interesting in that these colors are the direct blending of the blue and gold color palettes that identify the two locations and identities that Dren herself blends. She seems to know Clive is watching, and faces the camera—her gaze seeming to go straight through its lens to where Clive sits. The alternating shot style used here is reminiscent of those for capturing conversations between two characters—giving the further sense that Clive is not the only one watching.

And the blending of the domestic and the technologically embedded scientific are further blended here as Clive attempts to reach out to Dren. Though he is looking at her through the blue light of the surveillance cameras, he reaches out to touch her screen-form, which temporarily illuminates his fingertips with blue—further blending and coding the colors of the two spaces onto his skin (see fig. 8).

Fig. 8. Clive touches the computer screen, illuminating his fingers in blue.

And Dren seems to intuitively recognize his gesture and gaze, as she reaches out as well, and for a moment it seems as though she will be able to touch him through the screen (see fig. 9). This movement highlights Dren's inherent power and agency that allows her to blend and navigate her multi-faceted nature (power that Elsa had tried, and failed, to control).

Fig. 9. Dren reaches out to Clive through the screen. Note the distinct green tint to her image.

Dren's agency here can be identified through Jeffrey Jerome Cohen's conception of the monstrous body:

> The monster's body quite literally incorporates fear, desire, anxiety, and fantasy (ataractic or incendiary), giving them life and an uncanny independence. … This corporeal fluidity, this simultaneity of anxiety and desire, ensures that the monster will always dangerously entice. (Cohen 4, 19)

Dren may have been set back by Elsa's controlling actions, but she can never really be controlled—it is part of her allure and the threat she poses. Here, even under the surveillance conditions of the experiment, she can physically and emotionally reach out to Clive. And it is the corporeal agency and fluidity exhibited in this boundary-crossing movement that frightens him (and also, likely, his conflicting desire for her and his fear of that desire) and he attempts to close it off by physically shutting the laptop. In contrast,

then, to Elsa's assertive smothering of her maternal instincts with a mask of scientific clarity and categories, Clive instead retreats altogether. When his desire for Dren becomes so powerful it manages to reach through the bounds of the experiment, the computer, and across space, his only ability to resist becomes the removal of temptation altogether by closing Dren's image away inside the computer. And, of course, when he meets her in person next he is completely unable to resist her physical allure—and when Elsa inadvertently witnesses the resulting sexual encounter they are forced to finally stop and reconsider their actions.

At this point in the film, Dren can be seen as not only a blending of the human and animal, and the child and specimen, but also as a combination of power and vulnerability. Her physical, sexual, intellectual, and other powers are continually (though barely) held in check through Elsa's, and sometimes Clive's, actions because of the threat this power poses. And it seems their only ability to control her relies on her "othered" identities as a child, female, animal, and specimen—all figures whose derogatory and oppressive treatment has been historically justified through their designations as "subhuman." The more power and agency Dren exhibits (the more she attempts to rise above her "otherness"), the more potent and violent the response is from Clive and Elsa. And her horrendous treatment at the hands of her makers serves to represent not only her own suffering, but also the suffering of all oppressed peoples[6]. Her hybrid body is thus a locus for identifying the power of hybridity and of the "other." This is the power that can be found in the dissolution of all boundaries and the acceptance of a place within an active and agential material world where all lives (and all matter) are valued.

[6] Here I use "peoples" to refer to not only humans, but also other animals.

Dren's disregard for and dissolution of boundaries makes her a key figure of the monstrous "Harbinger of Category Crisis:"

> The too-precise laws of nature as set forth by science are gleefully violated in the freakish compilation of the monster's body. A mixed category, the monster resists any classification built on hierarchy or a merely binary opposition, demanding instead a "system" allowing polyphony, mixed response (difference in sameness, repulsion in attraction), and resistance to integration—allowing what Hogle has called with a wonderful pun "a deeper play of differences, a nonbinary polymorphism at the 'base' of human nature." (6-7)

Dren is a material embodiment of this polyphony. She exposes suppressed sexuality and animality, and her ability to integrate so many classifications gives her powerful agency, and makes her an object of both intense fear and uncontrollable desire. In Kelly Oliver's book on Hollywood filmic pregnancies, she emphasizes that "Dren is the return of repressed otherness within, an animal monstrousness that also wants love and affection" (145).

Dren's fluidity of identity and self (including her sexuality), thus are horrifying just as they are desirable. Though, to underscore Kelly Oliver's observation, I'd contend that much of the fear that accompanies her figure is fear of the rise of the oppressed—the rise of our own "repressed otherness within." This is the fear that by allowing the oppressed equal footing we might unleash their as yet suppressed wrath—a theme evident in much ecohorror as the "revenge of nature" trope (Tidwell 538). But these figurations are misguided because they indicate an insurmountable separateness of self and other

(humans and nature), rather than acknowledging the interconnectivity that has always already been present—the otherness that is already within. Dren is a clear embodiment of the posthuman figure who moves beyond ecological existentialist fears and into the place of connectivity and uncertainty for which Deborah Bird Rose advocates. Her presence thus triggers acknowledgements of these already present uncertainties and interconnectivities that the frightened humans are unwilling to accept—resulting in their panicked and monstrous behavior.

Who is the Monster?
(Or, Which Monster Should I Fear?)

Clive: We crossed a line—things got confused.

And as noted earlier, Natali fully intended his audience to "find humanity" in Dren, while watching Clive and Elsa turn "into monsters" ("Exclusive Interview"). Ultimately, then, we are intended to see Clive and Elsa as the most monstrous figures in the film. And it is this shift in the monster-human dynamic that forces an introspective and uncomfortable look at not only the ethical practice of science, but also the, quite literally, closer to home issue of dysfunctional and damaging parenting. A discomfort that reinforces our sympathy for and identification with Dren, whose dual identity as both child and specimen places her completely at the mercy of Clive and Elsa, whether in the context of the home or the laboratory. And built into this association with the monster as innocent and the human as monstrous is a recurring theme identifying humans as the bearers of negative and dangerous traits, rather than animals. This correlation seems to

beg the question: Is it Dren's animality or humanity that makes her frightening? And the answer seems to most consistently point towards the latter.

Early in the film, as Clive and Elsa discuss whether Dren's stinger is a defensive or predatory trait, Elsa observes: "None of her animal elements had predatory characteristics;" to which Clive replies, "Well, there's always the human element." This frames Dren's negative behaviors early on as the fault of human genetics, rather than the DNA that would traditionally constitute her as "other." And in the scene discussed above, when Elsa deems Dren's "erratic behavior" as caused by "disproportionate species identification," that problem is immediately considered a matter of identification as human, and thus she continues, "Cosmetically human affectation should be eliminated wherever possible." Here Elsa marks not Dren's hybridity per se as the problem, but rather her "disproportionate species identification" as human—an association Elsa had originally encouraged. This scene reinforces the perception of human genetics as negative, particularly as we witness the horrors the scene's only "pure" human inflicts upon the part-human from the latter's perspective. Many shots in that scene are from Dren's point of view (generally Dutch-angled to reinforce this identification), so we must watch, just as helplessly as Dren, while Elsa cuts away her (our) clothing and tail. As *Splice* co-writer Doug Taylor notes, "[it's] character disturbing, [and] I think that's what really got me [interested in the project]. It wasn't a monster movie about monsters chasing people; it was about people behaving atrociously to their monster" (*A Director's Playground*). And these atrocities are all brought to the fore and examined in a later scene that toys with the line between the humane and the monstrous, underscoring the film's equation of the human (and human traits) with the negative.

After witnessing Clive and Dren having sex, Elsa flees the scene with Clive hurriedly following. They return to their apartment in the city—a location they have not returned to since their removal to the farm. The set here can be seen as a neutralization of the color palettes connected with the farmhouse and the laboratory. The décor and props are mostly cream and in shades of pale blue and green, and the light is warm enough to indicate a domestic environment, though still lacks the deep golden hues of the farm sets (see fig. 10).

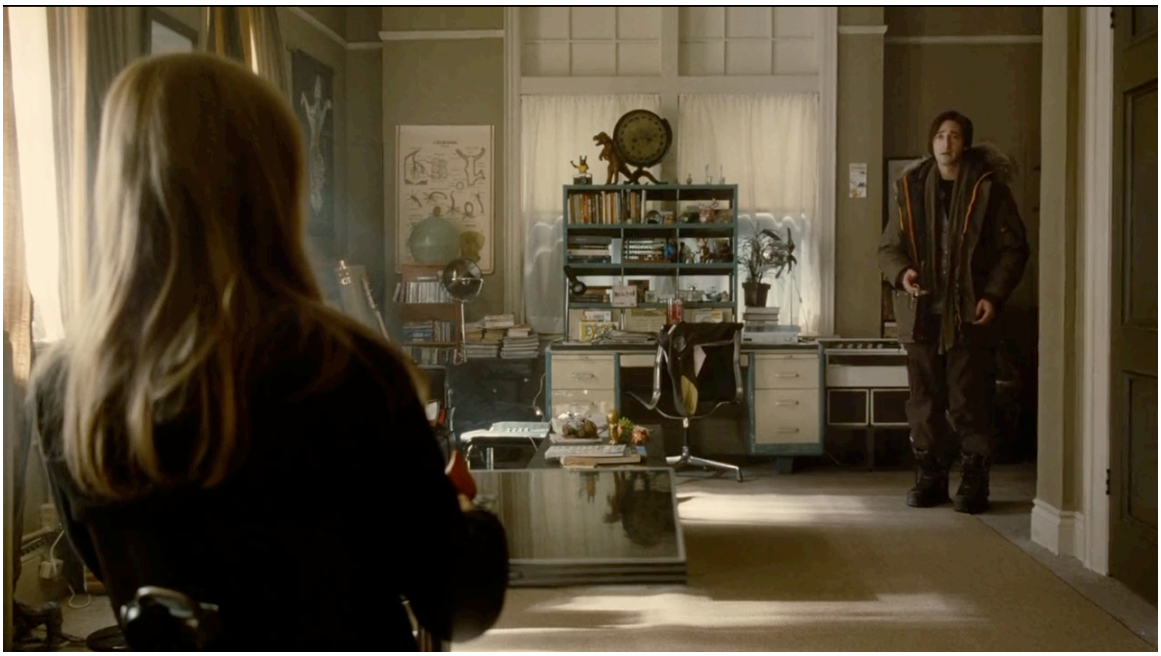

Fig 10. Elsa and Clive's apartment.

And most notably, though Clive is pacing around the room and Elsa is sitting at the table, all camera angles throughout their conversation are at eye level. This makes the interaction seem to be more equal, neutral, and diminishes the ability for either character to hold higher moral ground for long. This neutrality also seems fitting as both characters seem to be confronting their behavior and acknowledging their mistakes:

> Clive: We fucked up. Jesus Christ. We've chained her up. We locked her away from the world. We maimed her.

Elsa (crying): I maimed her.

The key turning point of the scene, however, is when Clive sadly laments: "I just wish things could go back to the way they were." At these words, Elsa wipes away her tears and informs him that she was able to synthesize a protein from Dren's stinger that they had been searching for (and failing to find) from their previous animal-hybrid specimens. This shift indicates her readiness to let things "go back to the way they were" and to try and forget what they did to Dren. At this, Clive comes to sit down at the table with Elsa, showing that Dren's fate is now "back on the table:"

Clive: We could maybe save things. I don't mean us. I mean…

Elsa: Oh God, we can't do that. I can't. We have a responsibility.

Clive: Experiment's over. Our responsibility is to end it.

Clive's haunting end to this conversation, and scene, leaves the audience very unsure what they have decided. Are they planning on killing Dren? This decision is made even more disturbing by the "levelness" of the camera angles and thus the normalcy with which they plan Dren's death around the sitting room table in their funky, bourgeois apartment. And the removal from both the farmhouse and laboratory spaces was an essential move for this discussion to provide such an uncanny and creepy feeling. Since the two other spaces are already encoded with so many traits and tainted by prior actions, the apartment offers a visual and moral clean slate from which Clive and Elsa can "neutrally" assess the situation. And, specifically, they must leave the space that Dren inhabits and go to a space she has, in fact, never physically been, in order to reestablish their world order and clean demarcations between "right and wrong." As Cohen notes, "the monstrous offers an escape from its hermetic path, an invitation to explore new

spirals, new and interconnected methods of perceiving the world" (7). Dren's embodiment of new possibility has thus flown in the face of what Elsa and Clive once conceived of as "right and wrong" and their only way to regain those distinctions is to, in turn, flee before the uncertainty she represents. In Clive's words, they had "changed the rules" and now must reestablish them. Of course, despite the disturbing solution they come to (to "end the experiment"), when they return to the farm they find Dren dying—or so they think. Though she is in fact in the early stages of metamorphoses as her body changes sex, Clive and Elsa mourn Dren's death as if they had never planned it themselves. This move, unfortunately, diminishes the potency of the apartment scene, as viewers are invited to, along with Clive and Elsa, forget it ever happened—thus lessening the viewer's identification with Dren through their mourning and reestablishing alliance with Clive and Elsa.

But, despite Dren's dramatic return in male form, killing Clive and raping Elsa, and her death at Elsa's own hands, the film still does not conclude with a victory over the monstrous and an affirmation of the human. When we cut from Elsa's sobbing form, and Clive and Dren's dead ones, Natali cleverly fades the dark scene into brilliant white-gold light, perhaps tempting us with the prospect of transcendence, but the scene we are led into inescapably re-entrenches the viewer in ethically dubious behavior. Joan Chorot, the CEO of the pharmaceutical company Elsa works for steps into the frame, saying, "Your Dren turned out to be a cauldron of unimaginable chemical mysteries." Even before we see Elsa, or the rest of the sky-rise office where the scene is set, Dren has been decontextualized, dehumanized, and reestablished as a specimen. The camera then cuts to a long shot of Elsa sitting at a desk, with Joan pacing along the windows (see fig. 11).

Fig. 11. The CEO's office.

In the shot, Elsa is isolated in the center, seated, as Joan walks around her. The framing of the shot is claustrophobic (impressively, for the size and expansiveness of the space) and the lines of the room seem to indicate that Elsa has nowhere to go but forward, and no options or choices she can make otherwise. Even Elsa's attitude, looking forward and not at Joan, reinforces this isolation and limitation. The room, though fairly neutral in color, does, however, fit within the color palette of the laboratory through the cool and steely tones of the light and carpet, particularly as these tones are in spite of the huge picture windows that should allow in warmer light. This contextualization of the space in the hues of the scientific thus reinforces the designation of Dren as a mere "specimen," and frames the interaction as one of business-like objectivity. It is Elsa's blue maternity dress, however, that most fully underscores the impossibility of this objectivity. This direct blending of the scientific and motherhood in turn sets up Joan's offering of a "generous" sum of money to Elsa in return for her carrying her hybrid baby to term in the interest of further research. It is clear through her smiling comment that because of Dren

they will be “filing patents for years,” that no matter what the ethical and moral considerations, the company will do whatever it takes to profit—making scientific objectivity even more impossible.

The move, then, to reject a transcendent conclusion by embodying the monstrous hybrid within Elsa is reinforced through the inescapably moral concerns that are being overlooked in the business transaction. This need for consideration is underscored when Joan gives Elsa the room to opt out by saying “no one would blame [her]” if she decided not to do it, to which Elsa replies, “What’s the worst that can happen?” After these words the scene fades away to the faint sound of ambulance sirens echoing from the street below. Elsa’s flippant comment is thus, of course, meant to be ironical, as clearly the consequences of *not* carefully considering her actions have the potential to be particularly horrible. Such a conclusion disallows not only a triumph over the monstrous hybrid, but also a simplification and belittlement of the consideration the hybrid figure demands—and thus it also disallows an easy break from the escapism of the theater. Dren is a monster whose questions will follow you out the door and into the light of day: “These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them” (Cohen 20).

We've met the Monster and She is Us

> I think the general audience is really interested in seeing these kinds of stories because they're really about where we're headed. And, in some way, a reflection of who we are at this particular time, at this juncture. (Vincenzo Natali, "SPLICE Interview")

Dren's refusal to stay locked behind the theater doors makes her a quintessential monster. As outlined in the introductory chapter to this thesis, the monster's body is a cultural one. Born at the crossroads of change, the monster is a concretization of the cultural fears of that historical point, thus the fears we find encoded on Dren's body are not just cinematic fears, but cultural ones. Her hybrid body exposes the interrelatedness between humans and other animals—she refuses attempts to distance the human from the animal other and demands a reintegration into a trans-corporeal and agential world. She asks us to give up our semblance of control and certainty, and to accept the inherent connectivity and uncertainty of life. She frightens and compels because these concepts do. To accept connectivity and uncertainty is to accept the need to reimagine our relationships with other animals, and even with ourselves—no easy feat. And these are demands being made by not just the fictitious monsters, but also those coming into being in laboratories across the world. As one journalist observed in regards to these chimeras, "[t]he real question isn't how we stop them from being created, it's what do we do once they get here. Because one way or another, the monsters are coming" (Saenz).

As *Splice*'s success attests, the horror film can play a key role in instigating these discussions precisely because of its basis in cultural fears. Horror-theorist Noël Carroll writes:

> Since the horror genre is, in a manner of speaking, founded upon the disturbance of cultural norms, both conceptual and moral, it provides a repertory of symbolism for those times in which the cultural order—albeit at a lower level of generality—has collapsed or is perceived to be in a state of dissolution. Thus, horror, a genre which may typically only command a limited following … can command mass attention when its iconography and structures are deployed in such a way that they articulate the widespread anxiety of times of stress. (Carroll 214)

Thus, to borrow Natali's words, this film is about who we are at this juncture in time. The massive outburst of rage, confusion, and discomfort in response to the film indicates that these fears could not be more relevant. We are coming to grips with the fact that the hierarchical and atomistic structures with which the Western tradition has historically dealt with nature are not only inadequate, but also factually incorrect. And it was these structures that initially produced our conception of the human species' uniqueness, so to acknowledge their faultiness is to acknowledge interrelatedness, interconnectedness, and integration among the wider community of life—with our, as Val Plumwood tenderly calls them, "earth others." The shock, horror, and fear initially incited by the chimera figure can thus be used to garner attention for and consideration of these difficult concepts. In the next chapter we will explore the ways in which this move from isolation to connectivity, certainty to uncertainty, and horror to utopia are explored through the posthuman hybrid bodies of the "ferals" in Kat Falls' YA novel *Inhuman*.

CHAPTER III

FERAL OR FREE?
UNCAGING THE POSTHUMAN IN THE YA NOVEL *INHUMAN*

Never let them tame you.
—*Inhuman* tagline

In the post-apocalyptic world of Kat Falls's YA novel *Inhuman* (2013), the humans must cope with the horror of categorically complex hybrids and the threat of a virus that blends one's own genetic code with that of the animal-other. Through rewriting categories, the humans attempt to reconstruct the boundaries between the human and other, an attempt that ultimately fails due to the virus's disregard for physical boundaries. Here we will look at these linguistic adaptive measures, the ways they fail to live up to material threats, and how acknowledgement of vulnerability ultimately frames their lives. I argue that the construction of the "feral" human-animal hybrid in this novel serves as a visual representation of our already trans-corporeal posthuman existence. The novel's protagonist, sixteen-year-old Lane, concludes her journey by recognizing this reality, and moving to embrace her wilder impulses and a broader conception of the "human" self.

Lane has grown up in the aftermath of an epidemic that decimated the eastern United States, killing 40 percent of the nation's population. The Ferae Naturae virus ("of a wild nature") was produced and accidently released by Titan, a chain of maze-themed parks, who, in reparation, built a quarantine wall on the western shore of the Mississippi River to keep all those infected in the eastern states, now called the "Feral Zone." Intended for producing minotaurs and other hybrids to add to their mazes, Ferae Naturae is a "bootloader" virus that carries inside it a particular animal species' DNA—50 strains

of which were produced, each carrying the genetic information of a different species. When the virus was first released, victims were rendered zombie-like and, after attacking others and spreading the disease, died soon after infection. 19 years later, the DNA are now incorporated into the victim's genetic makeup through viral transduction. This genetic corruption (or what they call "grupping") is subsequently expressed through the appearance of phenotypic traits of the viral DNA.

Lane's life on the "safe" side of the wall—where germaphobia is the norm and high school is conducted over the Internet—is interrupted when she is pulled from a rare in-person party with friends to learn her art dealer father has been working as a "fetch," illegally crossing the quarantine wall to collect paintings left behind, and is now under threat of execution for his crimes. Barely able to escape back into the Feral Zone, Lane's father Mack still has a death sentence hanging over him unless Lane can find him in time for one last fetch. Director Taryn Spurling, the Head of Biohazard Defense, has offered Lane the chance to clear Mack's name if he will fetch a photo of her daughter from her home in Chicago—and be back in five days. After over a day searching and, unable to find her father, Lane sets out on the journey to Chicago herself, with the help of line guard Everson and a path hacker from the Feral Zone, Rafe.

New Stories for a New Reality

> When had I taken a hard left out of reality and into a bedtime story? (Falls 108)

From the start, Lane's journey not only requires courage and cunning, but also the mastery of a completely new language and set of stories. Almost immediately after

crossing the wall, Lane comes to realize that the seemingly harmless fairytale stories her father used to tell her before bed were actually thinly veiled instructions about entering the Feral Zone. Every story began at the "skeleton tree, black as night" which marked the path down to the river (guarded by the "killer robots" [41]), and the careful avoidance of the explosive "harpy eggs" (39). The burnt out husk of a tree she encountered at the head of the trail was just as she'd always imagined it, and the scattered land mines across the landscape were an only too real risk. The first indication that Lane would be relying on stories to navigate this new hostile territory was Director Spurling's final remark to her:

> "One last thing,' she said. 'I'm sure you've heard that the Ferae virus isn't as lethal as it was nineteen years ago …. Then you've probably also heard that instead of dying, when people get infected now, they mutate."
>
> A cold feeling crept along my neck. "Those are just stories."
>
> "No, actually, they're not. So be careful." (32)

Everything Lane once believed to be "just stories," from the incredibly rude "wild boy" (soon revealed to be her new guide, Rafe) to the monstrous and mutated chimpacabras, are revealed to be accurate representations of the mysterious Feral Zone. These "stories" become necessary for Lane's survival, making her idly wonder if her father had really been training her as a fetch all along.

And these stories are not the only new framework Lane comes to rely on—she also must learn a whole new vocabulary. The categorical clarity of language is threatened with the boundary-blurring that occurs in the bodies of the infected. Who is "human" and who is "animal" become contested categories, and are rendered nearly irrelevant in this new world. In Rafe's words: "'Your line guard might call everyone who has Ferae a

feral, but over here, we have distinctions. Our lives depend on it'" (144). The primary distinction being between the "manimals," those in the early stages of Ferae who are physically hybridized, but their human minds remain dominant, and "ferals," those in the last stage of Ferae whose animal side is completely dominant: "'Ferals are *feral*. They've got animal brain'" (145), but there are also the "mongrels," animal-animal hybrids that are often, at this stage, "tenth-generation hybrid" and no longer infectious (122). At one point, when Rafe idly mentions his job as a "hacker" ("path hacker," essentially a hired guard that guides travellers between the new city-like compounds), Lane, exasperated, remarks "English, please," indicating these new words are not so much a new vocabulary, but rather a new language, where the failure to learn has material consequences (149).

Ultimately, however, language fails to provide a fully stable foundation for Lane's experience in the Feral Zone. Even the new, more specific, categories are unable to account for variations among manimals, and early on Lane finds herself seduced and deceived by a homicidal tiger-man named Chorda. Still new to the dangers of the Feral Zone and horrified by Rafe's violent attacks upon the helpless tiger-man, Lane frees Chorda from Rafe's trap. That region of the Zone had been recently plagued by attacks which left victims with their hearts torn out—and missing. Rafe had set traps in the hope of capturing the feral before more damage was done, but neither of them could be sure if Chorda was the one responsible. Without thinking, Lane inadvertently knocks out Rafe, and frees the tiger-man, who, once freed from the trap, is at first astounded by Lane and just watches her:

> Whatever the tiger-man was planning, I couldn't tear my eyes from him. He was a fairy-tale creature come to life. Rings glinted on his fingers and diamonds

> sparkled in his ears. He was heavily muscled, with pale orange skin and luxuriant fur covering his chest and arms. The pictures I had seen in Dr. Solis's office had made it seem like the Ferae virus deformed its victims, but this man's appearance was more alluring than horrifying. (107)

And Chorda is just as allured by Lane due to her uncommon kindness, and he remarks, certain, that she is not from the Feral Zone. "'No one here is so…human'" he says, to which Lane replies, confused, "'You mean *humane*?'" (ellipsis and emphasis original 108). Though Chorda agrees with her, Lane's assurance of clear boundaries between the "pure" human and the hybrid are misguided and will be tested the farther into the Feral Zone she goes. As Rafe remarks later, "'The Feral Zone has a way of bringing out the animal in people'" (131). The potentiality for animal-like behavior is thus not purely a characteristic of the infected, but rather part of the intrinsic nature of the human that can be circumstantially drawn to the fore of a person's consciousness. This is a key point I will return to later.

Lane's preliminary assurance that Chorda is a sane manimal is overturned when he reappears, having hunted her during the beginning of her journey to Chicago. Chorda captures Lane, deranged and certain that by eating the heart of "'the most human of humans'" he will once again be fully human himself (239). His retention of human-like logic, misguided or not, seems to indicate that it might not be his animal DNA driving his behavior, but rather could be the actions of an insane human. Or, the clear categories of "manimal" and "feral" are not as clear as first believed, as in Rafe's words: "'Some manimals go from sane to feral in a heartbeat. Others turn little by little. Sounds like cat-chow is halfway there'" (263). And though Lane is once again able to escape Chorda's

grasp, his desperate and deranged logic becomes a tool for her when they meet again in Chicago (where Chorda is "King"). She weaves a fairytale-like story that suits Chorda's perception of the virus as a "curse," indicating that without her love, stealing her heart will never break it: "'The beast has to win the girl's heart, that's how it works. How it's always worked'" (328). This tactic further indicates the import of story in the Feral Zone—it is a tool that can either create a translation of reality (like her father's bedtime stories) or can create a deceptive, and protective, alteration of reality.

Ultimately, however, while language and storytelling become tools of survival for Lane, their failure to fully hold up can be understood in the context of how the material reality of the Feral Zone must be acknowledged before all others. Survival is completely reliant on the recognition of the Ferae virus' ability to carry animal DNA across the boundaries of the physical self—thus necessitating an acknowledgement of the permeability of the self. And (as indicated by Rafe's comment above about some manimals' gradual shift to feral), language, and the new categorical framework, can only offer a cursory understanding of this new reality of material fluidity. Similarly, when Lane asks Rafe if there are a lot of ferals in Chicago, he says, "'Yeah, but I hear the humans are worse'" (132). All individuals, infected or not, must be understood on a case-by-case basis and at an interactive, material level.

The Material, Trans-corporeal Self

> "The Feral Zone has a way of bringing out the animal in people." (131)

Life in the Feral Zone is, by nature, a state of perpetual immediacy and embeddedness in the present. The terrain is not only populated by the infected, but has been abandoned by all governing and policing bodies, thus requiring a continual struggle for survival. This perpetual immediacy is coupled with the recognition that one's physical body is no longer (or never was) a contained unit, but rather a porous shape that is susceptible to flows and exchanges from other bodies and the environment itself. Living in the Feral Zone, then, is living a life that continually acknowledges and affirms Stacy Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality, as to ignore the porosity of these boundaries is to (among many things) deny the possibility of infection. One's physical vulnerability must be recognized before all else. As Rafe explained to Lane—survival in the zone relies not only on the reconstruction of discourse and language to suit the new reality, but also the recognition of language's inadequacy in the face of a virus, and an environment, that is, ultimately, unpredictable. This constant acknowledgement of vulnerability places a high value on the physical, embodied self.

Life in the Feral Zone values bodies and materiality, sees the truth and stories of individuals written on their bodies and doesn't take them for granted. And in a world where threats are so frequently physical, lessons are carved into one's body—making sure that vulnerability and the material threats of the landscape are never forgotten:

> "Lesson. You know" —[Rafe] pointed to a mottled line along his collarbone— "don't lower your weapon until you're sure the mongrel is

dead." He turned the back of his fist toward me to reveal another scar.

"Don't put a wet rock in the fire; it'll explode."

"Learn a lesson, get a scar?" I asked, brows raised. (127)

Bodies in the Feral Zone, despite their vulnerability and alteration due to Ferae, become the only semi-permanent signifiers in a "post-civilization" world. Without the Internet, computers, and flame-retardants, the idea of the written word achieving any kind of permanence is laughable. Only orally related stories that are anchored in place, like those told by Lane's father, and stories written on the skin, like Rafe's scar "lessons," have value. And this emphasis on embodied reality even flows over into more abstract concepts. For Lane, even thoughts become embodied as animals—creatures prone to evolve and grow into new forms: "Understanding crawled out of the primordial mud of my mind, tiny and grasping" (17). And when the queen of Chicago is deciding what to do with Lane and Rafe, Rafe threatens her saying, if she harms Lane or separates them, "'I will stick a steel knife in your happily-ever-after and gouge out its guts'" (291). The materiality of the Feral Zone is such that it grounds concepts like happiness and understanding in physical form—making them just as vulnerable to destruction as the physical bodies of the characters themselves.

This material embeddedness is, as I suggested above, a direct result of the trans-corporeal reality in which residents of the Feral Zone live. They have aligned most closely with their physical selves because the body is most readily at risk, but what is ultimately more frightening than mere physical harm is the genetic corruption and physical alteration of the self to resemble the ontological "other" of the animal. In

Chicago, Rafe and Lane encounter a feral hyena-man who has been captured, and the encounter finally forces Lane to admit what infection could mean:

> The feral launched himself at the handler with a snarl, only to be brought up short by the chain. I glimpsed his awful face, so inhuman and insane, I felt my own sanity slipping. Clawing at the air, the slavering thing screeched at us. I stumbled back. There was no hint of the man this feral had once been. No humanity that I could see left in him at all. He had become an *it*. My whole being flinched at the idea and my control began to splinter. Suddenly I understood Rafe so much better. The callous distance he put between himself and manimals, his choice to live alone in a prison rather than in Moline—he was terrified of becoming a creature like this. (279)

Lane's response indicates that her fear of the complete physical alteration of her body is tightly bound up with a loss of *self.* (The feral went from a "he" to an "it.") William Larkin observes similar fears in the context of zombie films: "Zombies are peculiarly scary because we think that we could be turned into one, and zombies are peculiarly tragic figures because we recognize the innocent people that these monsters once were" (Larkin 26). He argues that these fears indicate an inherent allegiance to the body over the mind as the bearer of self. The zombie is not frightening merely because it infects and kills, but because it is, ultimately, still *us* that would "rise from the dead." The individual's personhood is not diminished by infection, merely altered—just as the Ferae virus alters but does not ultimately negate the embodied self. Even when the virus has progressed past the state where reason can be exhibited in the infected's behavior, like

the hyena-man above, its personhood is still present. When, to guarantee their safety among the ruthless people of Chicago, Everson is forced to battle and kill the hyena-man, he nearly fails through his persistent acknowledgement of the man's personhood. Though he ultimately kills the hyena-man, his hesitation did not go unnoticed, and his punishment is to kill a feral every night until he does so without hesitation—Lane is devastated: "[They] couldn't have come up with a worse fate for Everson. To be forced into killing infected men night after night or get shot himself?" (Falls 313). Even after Lane's horrified encounter with the same hyena-man she watched Everson kill she is still able to see an infected *man* in him, not just a monster.

This use of the body as the focal point of self not only indicates an allegiance to the material, but also the use of material reality as an indicator of truth. As noted in the previous section, words and language can easily be inadequate, faulty, or used to deceive, and thus lived experience and the material are all that can be fully trusted. Linguistic truth can only be confirmed through material relevance, like in Mack's stories. The embodied self, then, is the *true* self, one that words and concepts cannot fully communicate. If we take, then, the polarity of the Feral Zone and the city, and the valuation of the material in the former, and the fear of the material in the latter, a framework of "truth" and "deception" can similarly be laid across these spaces. The value of the embodied self is thus what constructs the more truthful, gritty reality of the Feral Zone that is continually placed in contrast to the pristine and germaphobic city across the wall. In the city, the legacy of the Ferae virus is felt through the extreme fear of germs, dirt, and physical contact. Lane always carried a bottle of hand sanitizer in her back pocket, one that quickly runs out once in the Feral Zone. This replaces the city's faulty semblance of

cleanliness with the realistic approach of the zone: "'You can wash your hands in the river. … The only germ that matters is the one that turns you into a slobbering animal. And that you can't catch from a river'" (164). While this proposal initially horrifies her, accepting that she will "get dirty" is her first step towards accepting her surroundings and intrinsic wildness as a part of herself—accepting her *real*, material self.

And once Lane abandons her hand sanitizer, it doesn't take long before she is feeling more fully alive and in tune with the world around her. As Rafe, Everson, and Lane pause at dusk on their way to Chicago, Lane observes that, despite the miles ahead of them, she "didn't feel like a girl with an impossible task ahead of her. Instead, my body and mind were humming as if the oxygen on this side of the wall were laced with caffeine" (197). She senses a richness to the air in the Feral Zone that she had never felt before—the oxygen somehow has more to it there than in the city. The obsessive anti-bacterial cleanliness of the city is underscored as a landscape devoid of life. Though she had never understood it, Lane was lacking something on the other side of the wall, and now, in the Feral Zone, she is more fully alive—a more truthful incarnation of her real, embodied self. And this fullness of self in the Feral Zone is not limited to just Lane. As she learns about her father's visits on this side of the wall—his history with Rafe, his romance with the tough and "exotic" Hagen, the loyalty and respect given him by human and manimal alike, and even his tendency to cut loose with a mug of moonshine—she begins to feel that she had never truly known her father at all.

In the Feral Zone, the acknowledgement of trans-corporeal flows and physical vulnerability is not only necessary for survival, but also for living a rich and full life. Taken for granted features of the natural world, such as oxygen, become dynamic figures

within a person's life—ones that physically entwine with the body, leave something behind, and then return to share something of that body with the "external" world. As Alaimo observes, "…we can foster the sense of enfolding, in which the 'outside' is always already within, inhabiting and transforming what may or may not be still 'human' through continual intra-actions. … This sense of trans-corporeality may best be understood as posthuman in that material agencies reconfigure the very boundaries of the human as such" (*Bodily Natures* 154). The "humanity" of the Feral Zone, then, is one that acknowledges its own more-than-humanity—its always already *post*humanity. This flow between bodies is inevitable, and the unpredictability, lack of control, and threat of this flow and its production of a posthuman reality must thus be not only accepted, but also embraced. Ironically, then, by losing control of the boundaries of the self through this posthuman reality, one becomes more connected with their material self, and with material reality. The physical "mutations" of the Ferae virus can thus be read as a visual concretization of the posthuman reality, rather than as an invasive corruption of self.

The Posthuman Feral

> "You mean, let you infect me?"
> "Let me *uncage* you," she corrected. (Falls 365)

If we take that the reality of the posthuman is exhibited in the Feral Zone life through the acceptance of porous materiality and the embodied self, we can see the ways the posthuman is an inherently feral being. In contemporary usage, feral often implies a previous state of domestication, and thus the creature is currently returning to its former state of wildness. However, feral is more cyclical than unidirectional, indicating the

subject in question is moving between two states while still maintaining an essence of its original state of wildness. The posthuman operates in similar ways, particularly if we acknowledge the truth of Alaimo's trans-corporeality, where these flows indicate that we have always already been posthuman. The posthuman, much like the feral, indicates that the subject is moving between two states: the human and the more-than-human, where the human[7] can be read as not an actual physical state, but rather a state of consciousness that denies interactive material flows, and thus its "true" state of posthumanity. The "human" and the "tame" or "domesticated" individual can thus both be seen as states of denial—conceptual frameworks that control the self and demarcate between spaces and individuals. Lane's journey in *Inhuman* shows her movement from this state of denial to an acknowledgement of her own inherent wildness and more-than-human self.

At the outset of the novel, Lane's actions are structured by her desire to suppress wildness and maintain control over herself, both physically and mentally. She fears the intimacy of her peers (who could be carrying germs) and she is disgusted by their lack of control: "As much as I loved animals—even the strays—I hated it when boys acted like animals. Out of control. Vying for dominance. Ugh" (2). When she is pulled from a party with her classmates because of potential infection with Ferae she watches her classmates turn "wild" with anger; even a false scare over the virus means they won't be seeing each other in person again for the rest of their senior year. She doesn't resist being taken away by the "jumpsuits" from Biohazard Defense because, she says, "I would much rather be poked and prodded in a quarantine center than ripped into bloody chunks by my classmates" (13). And the "wild" impulses Lane feels, she suppresses. On her way to the

[7] What I call the "human" here is in reference to the Liberal, atomistic individual so pervasive in Western onto-epistemologies: one that relies on the designation of strict physical boundaries, and thus is by nature opposed to trans-corporeality. Thus I do *not* want to imply that all contemporary humans fall within this particular framework of denial.

quarantine center, one of the "jumpsuits" takes out a needle to draw her blood: "…and suddenly I was seized with the urge to bite his hand and free myself. But I didn't. I smothered the impulse; I'd never do something so disgusting. So feral. I relaxed my arm and looked away as he inserted the needle" (16). Despite the instinct of self-preservation that drives her wild impulse, she nonetheless suppresses it to avoid such "disgusting" and "feral" behavior.

Lane's own desire for control, and her belief that it operates along species lines, thus frames the way she approaches the Feral Zone. When she is berating Rafe for attempting to kill Chorda, she points out that he is "'still part human'" and that "'humans can control their impulses.'" To which Rafe asks, "'What humans have you been hanging around with?'" (134). Lane's assumption that humans should control themselves and act predictably, is directly contrasted on the next page when she refuses to take her eye off a coyote that watches her and Rafe: "I don't know what I expected it to do, but I wasn't taking any chances. It was a wild animal after all" (135). Though she maintains her demarcation of control and wildness along species lines, she already seems to be indicating that she isn't sure why she thinks "wild" animals will always be aggressive and violent. And though Lane clearly prefers her clean and controlled city across the wall, she acknowledges the different circumstances, and that what she calls "civilized behavior [is] a thing of the past" (135). She rapidly comes to value the wilderness survival classes her father had made her take, and she is continually trying to prove herself to be capable of surviving in the Feral Zone. Rafe, however, sees her as domesticated, and continually refers to her as a tame "silky;" Lane tries to defend herself,

"I'm not tame."

> He snorted. “Right. You’re petted and pampered and fed on demand. All you’re missing is a jeweled collar.” (128)

While she is offended by the comparison to a lapdog, she acknowledges that she is out of her depth in the Feral Zone, and Rafe, who she initially identifies as “all street dog” with eyes that “had the shine of a wild animal cornered in its den,” has the skills to help her survive (78, 110). This movement signals Lane’s shift from smothering her “wild” survival impulses to valuing the power and moral strength that comes with accepting these instincts.

However, Lane’s major shifts in acceptance of her wild instincts do not occur until they reach Chicago and witness the horrors that the humans who rule there inflict upon the infected. Not long after their arrival, Cosmo, an eight-year-old second-generation feral carrying the genetics of human, arctic fox, and chimpanzee that they befriended on the road, is brutally beaten to death by the “handlers” of the Chicago court. After the horror of watching Cosmo die, the cruelty inflicted on other infected people living in cages “was one cruelty too many. Something inside of me snapped and suddenly I knew how it must feel to go feral” (336). And once that “something inside of [her] snapped,” Lane was willing to accept her inherent wildness to achieve her goals. When Rafe is captured by Chorda and placed in his “zoo” alongside dozens of caged ferals, Lane is determined to rescue him no matter what the risk. So when Everson, ever the practical line guard, sees the futility in this rescue mission and attempts to stop her, Lane savagely bites his hand in order to flee. Her action here can be placed in direct contrast to her suppression of the same urge at the beginning of the novel. Lane has begun to see the

control that she once tightly held on her wilder impulses might not be the personal, human, strength she once believed, but rather a weakness of resolve.

It is this belief that causes her to pause when offered the chance to be infected with the lion strain of Ferae. The pack of lionesses in Chorda's zoo is, in fact, all of his previous queens that he had infected and locked away once he tired of them. Their power, and lust for revenge, is what convinces Lane to recruit them in her rescue mission. And when the fight is over, Lane has impressed them with her strength of will, so the leader, Mahari, makes her an offer:

> "You don't have to go," Mahari said, smoothing her tattered gown. She eyed me. "You could join us."
>
> I stared at her, not quite sure what she was offering.
>
> "You're a lioness. You know you are." She smiled, revealing her ivory fangs.
>
> "You mean, let you infect me?"
>
> "Let me *uncage* you," she corrected.
>
> The temptation was there, all right. To be strong … so fast … so terrifying. What would it feel like to move through the world so powerfully and with such confidence? "I want to be a lioness," I breathed.
>
> "I do. But I'm going to try doing it without the virus." (365)

Mahari's reframing of the virus as a way of *uncaging* the self rather than infecting it helps place the ferals firmly within the framework of the posthuman. If we think of the current conception of the human as not our *true* form, but rather a frame of consciousness that separates the individual from its environment and denies its fluid posthumananity,

Mahari is offering a way to free Lane from that restrictive consciousness, and thus a way to free her true self. And Lane sees the power behind Mahari's offer, but acknowledges that the power she wants doesn't require the virus, but rather an acceptance of her own posthumanity and inner wildness. So when Lane turns down the offer, Mahari is unconcerned: "'Well, if you ever decide you want the trimmings'—Mahari extended her claws—'give me a roar'" (365). For Mahari and Lane the actual lioness is not a matter of genetic corruption, it is already physically present and merely requires a conscious acknowledgement of its existence. The visually evident incarnations of the lioness are merely "trimmings" on a broader expanse of self.

As discussed in the first section of this chapter, Rafe's sly comment that "'[t]he Feral Zone has a way of bringing out the animal in people'" was not merely a jab at Lane, but an indication that the human and animal are not, and never have been, separate (131). They are merely two components of a more expansive and fluid, trans-corporeal, posthuman self. And with the truth-exposing, self-affirming nature of the Feral Zone, this space helps people acknowledge and "bring out" their always already present animal-selves. However, it is important to note here that these "animal-selves" are not to be used as an escapist tool. As Cary Wolfe observes in his book, *Animal Rites: American Culture, the Discourse of Species, and Posthumanist Theory*, we should approach "nonhuman animals not as the other-than-human but as the *infrahuman*, not as the primitive and pure other we rush to embrace as a way to cure our own existential malaise, but as part of us, *of* us…" (Wolfe 17). Similarly, the Feral Zone cannot be merely seen as a place where one can escape from the failures of humanity and replace this existence with another, but rather a place that forces one to accept their already existent posthuman plurality of self.

Feral is Free

> I could see the double image in his face, like an Escher drawing, the human beneath the tiger. (Falls 238)

Is "going feral" an infection and corruption of the self? Or an uncaging of the self? Is it "risking your humanity" (109)? Or is humanity something to be ashamed of (303)? Once Lane passes over into the Feral Zone, the lesson she learns above all else is that nothing is as clear-cut and categorically evident as she had once believed. Even the new set of classifications adopted by the residents of the Feral Zone to make sense of this post-Ferae world must be acknowledged as limiting—only able to capture the truth in part. Living in such a materially threatening environment forces a constant recognition of (and adaptation to) vulnerability and change. And while the virus is still predominantly seen as one of the greatest threats of living in the zone, many have embraced the freedom that comes with infection. The visually evident flow of matter across physical "barriers" produced by the viral mutations allows the infected to embrace their more-than-human, wild, *true* self.

The genetic corruption with animal DNA thus becomes not a threat but a kind of gift that helps establish a self more embedded and in tune with its environment. This self can also be seen as one freed from the isolation and denial that comes with an allegiance to the pure human: this posthuman self is an embodiment of Deborah Bird Rose's ecological existentialist movements from atomism to connectivity and certainty to uncertainty. And the "cage" that Mahari spoke of can be translated as the faulty conception of the human as a contained unit held separate from nature. The human is thus more accurately rendered through a posthuman framework, where the boundaries of the

human are porous, and the animal "other" is already a component of a plural self. And Lane's move at the novel's conclusion to become a lioness "without the virus" reaffirms this plurality. The virus is just a tool to *reveal* these pluralities, and not what has, ultimately, created them. The inherent porosity of bodies and their consequent and continuous intertwining with their environment (and other bodies) is what has constructed the human as an already posthuman being. As the quote at the beginning of this section indicates, this posthuman plurality of self is merely a matter of perspective, as different approaches reveal different aspects of self—just as different approaches reveal different images and realities within an Escher drawing. As Alice Curry notes, these narratives are particularly essential in the YA novel,

> As young adults approach that further border—the far more permeable border separating childhood from adulthood—such a reconceptualization is not only ecologically relevant and appropriate, but also ethically, epistemologically and spiritually responsible. (191)

We will explore this plurality of self, and Alice Curry's concept of the ecological hybrid, further in the next chapter in the context of *Sweet Tooth*'s posthuman-hybrid utopia.

CHAPTER IV

"MAN'S TIME WAS DONE." THE POSTHUMAN ECOTOPIA OF JEFF LEMIRE'S *SWEET TOOTH*

> I really think [*Sweet Tooth* is] about trying to look at the world in a different way. What I mean by that is, if you look around at the state of the world, it's pretty easy to see that it's not a great place. There's a lot of terrible things going on in the world. We're not treating each other very well. It's going back to that idea that we're all connected, and getting back to a simpler way of life. Gus and the hybrid kids really represent that. They're the innocence of childhood. When you're a kid, you're not as corrupted by the world at large. You're not corrupted by prejudices. You're much more open-minded. Much more interested in the world around you. *Sweet Tooth* is about the world returning to that kind of place. (Lemire, "The End of 'Sweet Tooth'")

Jeff Lemire's *New York Times* bestselling 40-issue comic *Sweet Tooth* (2009-2013, collected in 6 volumes) presents a utopian project where humans have been replaced with god-like human-animal hybrids whose existence enables the construction of an ecotopia. The human-animal hybrids of *Sweet Tooth* offer valuable insight into the posthuman subject; one characterized by the complete dissolution of the boundaries separating humans from the "other." They exhibit a "complex interpenetration of supposedly binary categories … and the field on which this messy blurring of boundaries occurs is the human body itself" (Hughes 38). The ecotopian conclusion to the series depicts these hybrid children's inheritance of the earth. In this utopia, the posthuman hybrid is an embodiment of the self-other binary where the human-self materially exists alongside the animal-other, necessitating an embodied and simultaneous self-and-other identification. This subject thus produces a posthuman consciousness: an

acknowledgment of a plural self, where sameness and difference interact and mingle materially.

Set in the post-apocalyptic United States, *Sweet Tooth* follows the story of Gus, a boy who lives in the woods of Nebraska with his father, and who bears the features of a deer. The story is set in the aftermath of a pandemic, caused by the virus "H5-G9," that has wiped out the vast majority of the population, leaving behind power-hungry "Militias" as the sole authorities, and a new "species" of hybrid children. All babies born since the pandemic resemble a hybridization of human and animal, an inexplicable development that also comes with immunity to H5-G9, an immunity the Militia are determined to harness. After the death of Gus's father to "The Sick," Gus is tricked and captured by the Militia and brought to their compound. The first half of the serial follows Gus and his hybrid friends Wendy (pig-girl) and Bobby (groundhog-boy) as they escape the Militia with the help of a small group of faithful humans led by Gus's tough-guy protector, the ex-hockey player Tommy Jepperd. The group also includes rescued prostitutes, Lucy and Becky, Johnny (the turn-coat brother of the Militia leader Abbot), and Dr. Singh, who abandoned the Militia after meeting Gus, as Gus's lack of a belly button (indicating he was not "born") leads him to believe learning Gus's origins will reveal the true cause of the pestilence. The latter half of the serial details the group's journey to Alaska—where Gus was "born"—as they search for the truth behind the hybrids.

Human-Animal Material Continuity

Just as Dren from *Splice* and the ferals from *Inhuman* skirt the borders between worlds, identities, and species, so too do the hybrid children of *Sweet Tooth*. And the

particular format of the comic book, allowing for the layering and juxtaposition of images on the page, offers a unique insight into the material continuity between the human, animal, and the human-animal hybrid. Lemire uses these techniques particularly to play with moments of material conflation and confusion, and to draw out similarities between figures. These confusions are articulated from the start in the first installation of *Sweet Tooth: Out of the Deep Woods*. After the death of Gus's father, as Gus buries him he observes that now it is "just me…me and the deep woods" (ellipsis original, *Out of the Deep Woods* 22). A branch cracks and a buck-deer emerges beside him, startling Gus. The full-page panel detailing their encounter is overlaid by two other panels, the first shows Gus's startled eyes, the other shows the deer's (see fig. 12). These panels directly contrast the deer-boy and the buck-deer, showing that Gus is certainly not alone, and providing the animal counterpart of his dead human-father figure. This motif of panels detailing just the eyes of characters is a common one throughout the comic, particularly in the context of Gus and his stand-in father figure, Jepperd, which we will return to in a moment. The figures of Gus and the deer are further materially confused in the following panel, as the deer is mistaken for Gus by hybrid-poachers, and is shot dead in front of him. Gus flees, leaving the deer's body beside the grave of his father. This deer-father figure, then, also dies protecting Gus, just as his human-father did while sheltering him from the world outside the woods. Gus is then rendered both positively, and horribly, *not* alone in the "deep woods," as he is both protected and threatened by his material continuity between the human and the animal.

Fig. 12. Gus encounters a deer.

When the hybrid-poachers catch up with Gus he is barely saved in time by Jepperd, whose search for a hybrid child happened to bring him to the deep woods. Of course, though Jepperd kills the poachers, he is in fact looking for a hybrid to trade with the Militia for the bones of his dead wife, Lucille, who died in childbirth a few years prior. Jepperd's approach to Gus is thus purely out of instrumental interest, an emotional distancing that is troubled when he first looks into Gus's frightened and innocent face (see fig. 13). This set of panels clearly reflects the similar moment between Gus and the deer. Merely looking into Gus's eyes seems to draw out a protective impulse in those

around him—whether human or animal. With one look into Gus's wide and innocent eyes, the deer sacrificed itself, and here, Jepperd's quintessential scowl is immediately lifted and he already appears to be becoming emotionally attached to the boy.

Fig. 13 Gus and Jepperd meet.

In the following panels he, for the most part, gives up his rugged and standoffish demeanor, and assures Gus that he has no intention of hurting him. In both scenes, the juxtaposition of panels just showing the eyes of the figures draws further similarities between them. Gus and the deer have much in common, just as Gus and Jepperd do, thus further placing Gus in the position of material comingling of the human and the animal.

And, importantly, though there are no panels directly comparing Jepperd with the deer, the focus on the eyes for both scenes implies similarities across the spectrum of human, hybrid, and animal.

These similarities drawn between Jepperd and animals, as mediated through Gus, are particularly evident in Issue 21, "Endangered Species Part 2," when Jepperd and Gus encounter a bear. As the bear comes running after them, Gus falls to the ground before he can reach Jepperd, placing him between the bear's hungry jaws and Jepperd with his rifle (see fig. 14). Gus's placement between the human and the animal clearly portrays both his material location on the margin between human and animal, but also the relative similarities between Jepperd and the bear, as both are tough survivors with particular interests in the boy. The inset panels within the larger image capture the bear's hungry jaws (seemingly its most dangerous feature) and Gus and Jepperd's attention to that threat. At this point in the encounter, Gus and Jepperd are placed together—their inset-paneled eyes are beside one another on the right side of the image—and the bear is juxtaposed on the left as the threatening other. In the panels detailing Jepperd shooting the bear, Gus is again placed in between the two figures. The blue background of Jepperd's panel lightens to purple where Gus is, and then lightens further to a reddish hue in the bear's panel—further indicating Gus's in-betweenness, his mingling of the human and the animal.

Fig. 14. The two-page initial encounter between Gus, Jepperd, and the bear.

The shot barely slows the bear down before it destroys the rifle with one swing of its paw and then knocks Jepperd out with the other. It is important to pause here and also note the parallel story line that is being played out in the bottom tier of this page, and throughout the entire issue. The upper portion of the pages are dedicated to the bear encounter (which is a silent encounter), while the bottom portion details Lucy, Becky, and Wendy's interactions with "Walter Fish," a seemingly harmless man who lives in a dam converted into a greenhouse and living space. This juxtaposition of encounters serves as a hint of what's to come, as despite the cozy atmosphere Fish inhabits, the "honesty" of his storytelling and the "civilized" nature of the tea and cookies he has laid out, the girls are in just as much danger as Gus and Jepperd. Later on in the comic it is revealed that Fish

is in fact a rapist and murder, who killed the previous inhabitants of the dam, and eventually he attempts to keep teenaged Becky for himself. The synchronous storylines are also important because by the end of the issue we learn that Lucy is showing early signs of the Sick—the only thing that Jepperd cannot protect them from.

What must be considered "threatening" must also, then, be questioned—a confusion that is reinforced once Jepperd has been knocked unconscious and the bear has a chance to look more closely at Gus (see fig. 15). Here the bear stops and looks at Gus; he is thoroughly confused: is this creature a deer, or a human? Thought boxes emerge over the bear's head, images of first a deer then a human appear with question marks beside them—which is it?

Fig. 15. Is Gus human, a deer, or a god?

This combination is likely to be doubly confusing for the bear, as Gus's particular hybrid make-up conflates a prey species with a threatening predatory species. Then, in the bear's vision, Gus morphs into a red stylized idol-like figure of a human-deer hybrid and, still confused, but now fascinated, the bear takes Gus back to his cave unharmed. The bear's threat towards Gus is thus neutralized—though, of course, Gus's fear for Jepperd, and of the bear, are unquestionably still present. It is important to also note here that the thought-box deer is standing on an earthen surface, while the human seems to be floating in space. The "pure" animal figure is thus contextualized—the deer cannot exist away from its environment, it is materially embedded in such a manner that without its environment, perhaps it is no longer a deer. The "drifting" human could perhaps also indicate the ways in which our conceptualization of the human is decontextualized to the extent that it is no longer reflective of reality, a conception that merely reinforces the need for a materially reintegrated posthuman consciousness.

When Jepperd wakes, despite his injuries and the loss of his rifle, he quickly follows the bear's tracks, armed now with only a knife. At the mouth of the cave, Jepperd and the bear once again have a stand-off with Gus sprawled on the ground between them. Here, Lemire uses a spread of three panels across two pages (see fig. 16): the central panel shows the "stand-off" with thought-circles connecting Jepperd to the far left panel and the bear to the far right. Jepperd's thought is a split frame of the left side of Gus's frightened face; the bear's thought is a split frame of the right side of Gus's face—rendered in the bear's own stylized-idol version of Gus, a version that looks more powerful and threatening than frightened.

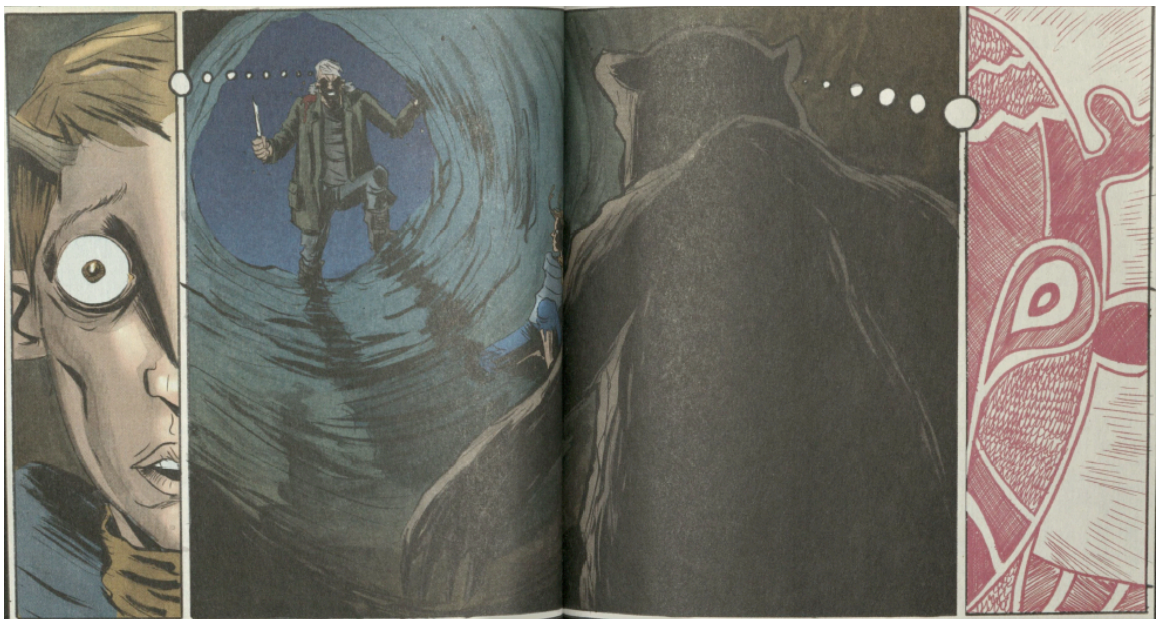

Fig. 16. Jepperd and the bear have Gus on their minds as they prepare to fight.

This panel framework again reiterates both the similarities between Jepperd and the bear as well as the hybrid nature of Gus—but here Gus's hybridity is also rendered through the different but intersecting perceptions of him. Jepperd sees Gus's youth and vulnerability, while the bear sees him as a superior god-like being. This hints at the future conflations of meaning for the hybrids, as they are later revealed to exactly resemble Inuit gods, but are also still perceived by some humans to be a "new race [that] would be forever innocent and pure" (*In Captivity* 113). Gus is here a conflation of vulnerability and power, just like Dren, though his power is as yet unrecognized and untapped.

This conflation is an issue we will return to in the next section—are the hybrids hunters or the hunted? As the cover for Issue 5 ("Out of the Deep Woods Conclusion") indicates (see fig. 17), the hybrids are not only the hunted, but they are creatures to be kept as trophies.

Fig. 17. Gus as a trophy wall-mount on the cover for Issue 5.

Whether or not the Militia is able to find the cure from the hybrid children they capture, the hunting, capturing, and killing of them is valuable enough as sport. It is also a way of re-establishing control over a world that has become filled with uncertainties—the primary of which being when one will eventually succumb to the virus. This issue cover is almost exactly replicated as the title pages for the collected volumes 1-5, further indicating the role of vulnerability the hybrid children play in these volumes, and creating a break of pattern for the final volume where it is the hybrids, not the human Militia, that come out on top.

Thus, in this case, Gus's conflation of power and vulnerability means Jepperd and the bear both wish to protect Gus, but for very different reasons. And despite the bear's fascination and seeming idolatry for Gus, both Jepperd and Gus still see it as threatening and vicious, and the encounter ends in Jepperd killing the bear to free the boy. In this way, despite Gus's role as a material conflation, or conduit, between the human and animal—the self and other—the mind of the other is still an unknown. This is an important distinction, as Gus's hybridity does not collapse *difference* between human and animal, but rather opens up a pathway to connectivity. The posthuman hybrid figure does not absorb the other into itself so much as bring forth already present connectivities—thus preventing the homogenizing tendencies of holistic idealism, an issue we will return to later.

Words Made Flesh

"It *was* a hybrid…now it's a *message.*" (*Wild Game* 96)

The comic book medium is also a particularly fitting locus for investigating hybridity and material continuity because of its own hybrid nature. The juxtaposition of words and images on the page provide a place for textual meaning to flow over onto/into material bodies. As Stacy Alaimo observes, "…human corporeality and textuality effortlessly extend into the more-than-human world. Word, flesh, and dirt are no longer discrete" (*Bodily Natures* 14). Lemire artfully renders these conflations of flesh and meaning through his issue title-page splashes. A particularly key mirrored pair are those from Issue 2 ("Out of the Deep Woods Part 2") and Issue 29 ("Unnatural Habitats Part

1"). In these splashes, the issue titles are written in the blood of the respective fallen individuals. In the first, Jepperd, in protecting Gus has collapsed from blood loss (see fig. 18), and in the second, a rabbit that Jepperd has just shot for food lies steaming in the snow (see fig. 19).

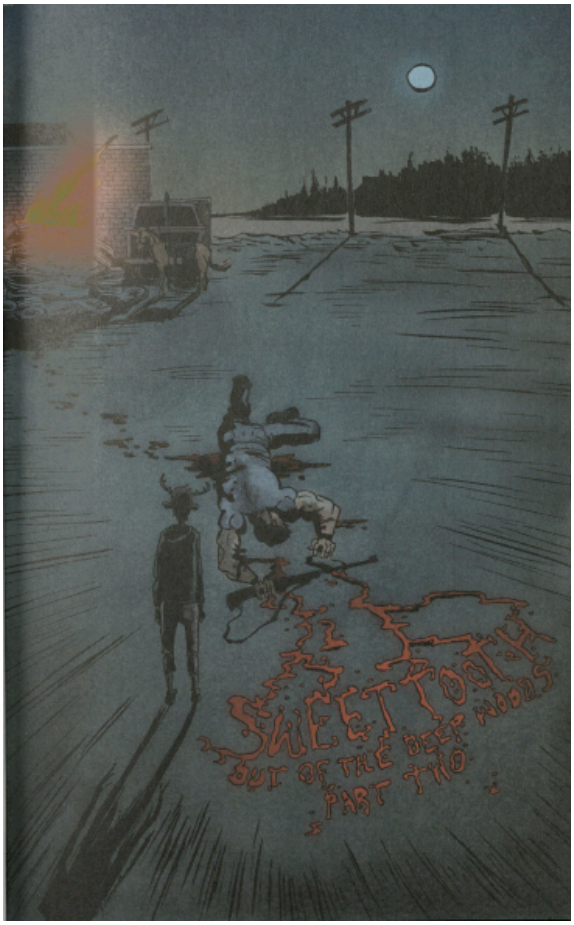

Fig. 18 Jepperd, fallen while protecting Gus.

Fig. 19 The rabbit killed for Jepperd's meal.

The mirroring of these images draw similarities between Jepperd and the rabbit. Not only are they both animals, mammals that can bleed, but are also both sacrifices—sacrifices for something bigger than either of them. The first image comes very early in the comic, when Jepperd is trying to see Gus as merely an item of trade so he can get the bones of his wife back from the Militia. His role in Gus's life, however, will be much bigger than that—a role of sacrifice for the good of Gus and the other hybrid children. The rabbit,

similarly, is a sacrifice to nourish Jepperd as he protects Gus—a sacrifice that is clearly beyond the rabbit's comprehension. In both contexts, then, their roles as sacrificial figures are as yet hidden from both of them.

The use of their blood as script further indicates that their bodies are not merely their own, but move beyond them as signifiers—they are read-able. In the second image, the captions of Jepperd's internal monologue help place these bodies into a binary context:

> And out here it's survival of the fittest. You're either the hunter or you're the food.
>
> And I decided a long time ago which one I was gonna be.
>
> (*Unnatural Habitats* 73)

Jepperd and the rabbit, though similar in some respects, are still placed within a human-animal and hunter-food binary context. He indicates that there are only two options in this world, and the role of the human hunter is the role of the survivor, so in order to survive, there really is no choice. But on the next page, when Gus meets Jepperd at the campsite, his monologue shifts: "But then I met *the boy*. And before I knew it, I had a *purpose* again" (*Unnatural Habitats* 74). Gus's return thus tells us that there is more than just this binary. There is more than just human and animal—there is the hybrid, and there is more than just the hunter and the hunted—there is the protector, and thus there is a context of historicity and future: life is more than just the present struggle. And the hybrid body itself is used further throughout the comic as a symbolic figure. When Abbot, the leader of the Militia who is tracking down Gus and his friends, kills a crow-boy, one of his men, shocked, yells "Jesus Christ! It's a hybrid!" to which Abbot replies,

"It *was* a hybrid…now it's a *message*" (ellipsis original, *Wild Game* 96). While in this circumstance Abbot plans to use the boy's dead body as a threat, his words merely reinforce the ways in which the hybrid body signifies so much more. The hybrid's message to humankind is the need for change, the need to move beyond the current atomistic and restrictive worldviews. The hybrid body is a break from binaristic thinking, a move towards connectivity and community: it is the posthuman subject made flesh.

And, because of the hybrid figure's artistic rendering through hand-drawn images, one can also look at the ways the hybrid figure emerges through the physical act of converting metaphysical symbolism to material image. The images themselves can be physically touched and manipulated as the reader flips through the comic—producing a material interaction with the figure. And, interestingly, even the first rendering of Gus by Lemire seemed to be more of a result of his body taking the lead, rather than a conscious decision or thought. On the origin of Gus, Lemire says:

> As for the idea of animal-human hybrids and hybrid children… I really wish I did know where that came from! For some reason, I started drawing this kid with antlers – I didn't even know when that started – and a story emerged: A kid with antlers, living in a cabin in the woods with his dad. It evolved from there. (ellipsis original, "The End of 'Sweet Tooth'")

The posthuman figure of the hybrid, then, seemed to materially produce itself—a trans-corporeal flow from Lemire's hand, to the pen, to the page. It was not so much just a story that needed telling, but rather the posthuman that required visual rendering: a material form from which to operate symbolically and build its own story.

For storytelling's role in *Sweet Tooth* cannot be overemphasized. Throughout the comic we have Gus's father's "bible" (which records both his pseudo religion and prophetic hints at what's to come) and Dr. Singh's "tapes" (telling his origin story and his hopes for the future) as well as guest artists telling the stories of Becky, Lucy, Wendy, Johnny and Abbot and the backstory of the plague's origin. Storytelling is a key component of the different characters' understandings of self—a way of remembering themselves. Emphasizing the importance of story, Lemire also plays with the typical vertical layout of the comic surface and instead draws two issues (18 and 33) using a horizontal visual style, creating a "storybook" feel. This format is then coupled with an abstracted narrative where the characters become known by figurations rather than their actual names. Becky is the "The Pretty Girl;" Jepperd, "The Big Man;" Lucy, "The Nice Lady;" and Johnny, "The Man With The Funny Eyes." This helps construct a kind of allegorical storytelling style—it isn't so much the characters themselves that matter, but rather what they represent. And this feeling is reinforced even through the characters' actual names. All the unquestionably "good" characters (aside from Gus) have names ending in "y": Wendy, Lucy, Becky, Jimmy, Johnny, Buddy, Tommy, Bobby, etc. The names are almost interchangeable in their similarity, thus not only structuring the roles rather than the characters as vital, but also emphasizing the role of stories and storytelling within the community as essential, rather than the events those stories depict.

The final issue ("Home Sweet Home") could not underscore this more completely through its ongoing narrative motif of "this is a story…." The story of Gus and his friends, their adventures and their struggles, become not just their *own* stories, but also

the story of the hybrid: a story that helps them to never forget their earthly context and fallibility:

> And this is a story of compassion. This is a story of how the last humans stopped fighting and came to the hybrids not as enemies … but rather as refugees. This is the story of how the hybrids *let* go of fear and hatred. And, despite being hunted and hated themselves … still helped mankind in their *final passage* out of this world. This is also a story of remembrance. Because they knew, to forget how they had gotten here—to forget the *sacrifices* made to get them here—would mean to repeat the mistakes of man. Despite their differences—despite their *scars*—they all stood together once a year and remembered. They remembered their fathers and they remembered themselves. They weren't just strangers bound by history and fate … they were family. And this was their story.
> (ellipses original, *Wild Game* 188-189)

These stories are not timeless like fairytales—not like the stories Lane's father in *Inhuman* told her before bed—but are instead historically situated and constructed in order to help build and support a thriving future. The story moves beyond the individual and expands to chart the journey of a family—a community of earth others. In contrast to *Inhuman*, then, *Sweet Tooth* looks beyond the present to imagine possible futures. It doesn't merely cope with and adapt to the circumstances at hand, it builds a life out of them. As the narration notes in the final issue: "But the story didn't end here. In fact it was really only just beginning…" (ellipsis original, *Wild Game* 191).

> "Man's time was done. They had their chance to live in harmony with the land and they failed. Then we were born. The hybrid. We are one with the land. One with the animals that walk it."
> (*Wild Game* 169)

And the life the hybrid children build, the story they begin, is unquestionably utopian. As Lemire himself said, "we are all looking for a better way, or a *different* way, to make real change in the world, or change the course we're on" (emphasis original, "The End of 'Sweet Tooth'"). Because the primary catalyst and figurehead for this utopian world is the human-animal hybrid, it is thus important to track the ways human-animal relationships (and self-other figurations) are idealistically framed. In Lucy Sargisson's compelling essay "Green Utopias of Self and Other," she explores the ways in which many ecotopias, particularly those in the holistic tradition of deep ecology, too often idealize "a conceptual widening of Self to *include* the Other," which can potentially "result in a massive assertion of Self, and of sameness that serves to deny the Other its conceptual autonomy" (144, 145). "This approach to the Other," she writes, "is based on affinity and identity and on the belief that it is possible to *know* the Other …. It assumes ontological access to the Other," which, she asserts, "is problematic" (145-146). While *Sweet Tooth* does construct a utopian integration of the self and other, and one that is in part based off of "affinity and identity," it is not one that results in the "massive assertion of Self" that Sargisson warns against.

Sweet Tooth concludes with the complete die-off of the human species from the H5-G9 virus, and the construction of a new hybrid civilization. The founding structure of this new society is framed through a prayer Gus leads before dinner with his two sons,

Tommy and Richard (who bear the features of both a deer and pig, inherited from Gus and their mother, Wendy), and his friend Bobby. Before eating, Gus lifts up the hide of the rabbit they are about to eat, and leads this prayer:

> The gods have given us this rabbit…this animal that is *one of us*…to sustain us.[8] And for that we are grateful. And we must *never forget*…the gods once lived in harmony with man. But man forgot their faces and turned to sin and death. And as their world crumbled around them they tried to touch the gods again…to recreate them with science. But this was forbidden. And the gods sent a pestilence. Their breath on the wind. Man's time was done. They had their chance to live in harmony with the land and they failed.
>
> Then we were born. The hybrid. We are one with the land. One with the animals that walk it. But we also carry mankind's legacy in our blood and bones, so that we never forget that we are no better than they. We too can fall. We too can fail. We must never forget the face of the gods as man did.…for their faces are our faces. And for that we leave this hide to feed the wolves. An offering back to the land that sustains us.
>
> (ellipses original, *Wild Game* 169-170)

This prayer shows how Gus and the new hybrid society see their own Self-Other constructedness: they are "*one* with the land. *One* with the animals that walk it," and "*carry* mankind's legacy in [their] blood and bones" (my emphasis, 169). Their identities are thus primarily constituted in relation to their environment and earth others. Just as the

[8] This rabbit can also be seen as a mirror of the one Jepperd killed earlier in the comic. The role of sacrifice, of altruism and give-and-take, within the context of their new utopian community is essential for its success.

bear's thought-bubble-deer was defined in relation to the earth, so too are the hybrids. They thus deny a full *identification* with the decontextualized human, but by carrying the human "legacy" materially, they prevent themselves from forgetting their own fallibility. Thus, despite its failures, the human *must* continue to exist, if only as a warning against their mistakes for the future generations of hybrids.

In this way, Gus comes to outwardly align and identify most closely with his "othered" components and identities (animal, hybrid, etc.), in some cases even denying previous human attachments. Though he continues to tell his children stories of his adventures with "The Big Man" (in part as a way to never forget the human legacy they carry), he refuses to divulge information about his previous romance with the human girl, Becky. He says there is "no point in them knowing, I guess," despite Bobby's lament: "it am shame [sic] no one remembers her. She was so nice" (*Wild Game* 175). Gus's denial of Becky's memory helps him maintain a construction of the pure human-other as a negative figure, and one with which full identification should be avoided at all cost. In some ways this decision erases much of the good of humanity from hybrid memory, but as this helps structure his children's self-identification, as well as the rest of the hybrid-society, it is a seemingly small sacrifice for the good of hybrid-kind (and the earth's future). The hybrid is thus a material conflation of the human and animal, the self and other, but one that maintains a dual-consciousness, acknowledging the different components of the hybrid as both integrated, but also just that—different.

This self-other utopian construction, then, exhibits both a material conflation of the self-and-other, but also a conscious recognition of difference. The hybrids are thus expected to maintain a hybrid-consciousness—simultaneously identifying as both human

and animal, as well as differentiating between the two "selves" and recognizing the fallibility of this duality. This hybrid formation reflects Alice Curry's "ecological hybrid," which she defines as "physiological embodiments of multiplicity; they manifest dual or plural subject positions, identities and perspectives. They actively refute the deep ecological tendency towards … assimilation of the other into the human self by articulating the distinctness of both self and other" (181). This posthuman subject, Curry asserts, has powerful counter-hegemonic potential because it denies the binaristic thinking evident in self-other distinctions by adopting a plurality of self. Multiple "positions, identities and perspectives" converge in the ecological hybrid, and through an acceptance of this multiplicity the subject has considerable agential power as it operates beyond the restrictiveness of binaries. As Curry goes on to explain,

> Through challenging the borders of the self—not simply the body but the emotions, mind and identity—these [figures] extend a further challenge to the discursive borders structuring contemporary environmental representation. To imagine the environment not as a setting or background but as a fully agential ecological entity is to reconceptualize the borders of human identity according to humanity's intimate enmeshment in the earth. (191)

This reconceptualization of the borders of the human reinforces the role of the ecological hybrid as a posthuman figuration. This hybrid opens the gates of possibility for expression of the posthuman by troubling borders and categories and bridging the boundaries between not only material bodies, but also conceptual ones. The hybrid

figuration and plural-selves of Gus and his friends can thus be seen as components of a utopian posthuman that evolved out of the failures of the atomistic human.

A Posthuman Utopia

> Instead of a human future of utopian technological miracles or dystopian technological destruction, [these stories] imagine a nonhuman future in which the natural world flourishes. … These works might represent a change in our understanding. We now begin to understand a perfect or just world as one without humans. (Jendrysik 35-36)

In Mark S. Jendrysik's essay "Back to the Garden: New Visions of Posthuman Futures," he explores the way that many contemporary visions of ideal worlds see utopia as only achievable in a world where technology and man have been eradicated:

> These [utopias] project a new Garden of Eden blossoming on an Earth freed of the malign influence of human beings. They are oddly hopeful, asking us to understand our own demise as a sacrifice for the good of nature. … They might be an ironic form of critical utopia, suggesting that humans recognize that we are the greatest obstacle to utopia. (Jendrysik 35-36)

This ecological utopia, or ecotopia, is then "distinctive insofar as it uncouples the hope of a better future from hegemonic discourses of progress and advances a 'radically different conception of happiness and the good life'" (Garforth 396). In Jendrysik's look at futures devoid of humanity (as exhibited through shows and documentaries such as *Aftermath: Population Zero* and *Life After People*), he stresses that since these works represent humanity as "doomed, we seek to reassure ourselves that we have not brought nature

down with us. As such these works are not calls to action. Instead they ask us to take a position of hopeful acceptance of our end" (48). This stance could produce a kind of apathy towards change, *or*, because of *Sweet Tooth*'s unique trans-corporeal representation of the human and animal, it could induce the production of a new conception of the human—the posthuman. This move would replace the damaging and false conception of the atomistic separation of humans from nature, and move towards an acceptance of the connectivity and uncertainty evident in a truly agential world. Thus, rather than deeming utopia as only possible through the complete eradication of humans, one could see instead the atomistic *construction* of the human as the figure worth discarding in favor of the posthuman, ecologically hybrid, conception of self outlined in the previous section.

What would be needed, then, is an alteration of consciousness rather than a removal of bodies. It is the *idea* of the human[9] that is the problem, not the species itself. Narratives of this kind would thus undermine the apathy Jendrysik describes, and would reinforce the need for consideration and change of the "human" existence. Just before the final battle made to protect the hybrids from the Militia, Jepperd says to Gus,

> "One thing we *do* know…one thing we *can't argue about* is that sooner or later the plague gets all of us…all of us *humans* I mean. But not you. You kids are safe from it. And I gotta keep it that way. Hell. Maybe that's why I lasted as long as I have."
>
> (ellipses original, *Wild Game* 108)

Jepperd recognizes the futility of preserving the human, and sees it as his duty (and humanity's duty) to make sure that the posthuman hybrids survive and thrive. And Dr.

[9] And, specifically, this "idea" of the human is the Liberal, atomistic version, not a universal conception.

Singh also finds his own life purpose as he attempts to unravel the mystery of Gus's "birth" at the cabin where Gus grew up:

> The possibilities…the potential that Gus and his wonderful mystery have brought into my life again…I haven't allowed myself to feel like this in so very long. I feel guilty even *thinking* this, but I never could have imagined that it would take unimaginable pain, suffering and loss for me to truly find my place in the world […] This is where I'll save the world.
> (ellipses original unless bracketed, *Animal Armies* 39-40)

What Singh does not know at the time, is that he *will* "save the world" but not by curing the pestilence as he imagines. He remarkably withstands the virus and eventually helps the hybrids start their ecotopian community, teaching medicine and other essential survival skills. The suffering and loss were not only essential for him to find his own purpose, but also for the creation of a new existence where the *world* is saved, not necessarily humans—or, not humans as we currently know them. And humanity must not only take on the role of protecting the posthuman, but it must also take responsibility for the "plague" that kills off their current existence. As Becky tells Gus, "You didn't do anything wrong. We did…*humans*, I mean. Whatever happened here…whatever caused you and the sick…it was us" (ellipses original, 120). Taken allegorically, the comic thus reinforces the role of the human in not only its own demise, but also its potential role in reconceiving the human and building a new existence of relationality and interconnectedness with the rest of the environment.

In Chris Boehm's look at the post-apocalyptic television show *The Walking Dead*, he notes the ways it "illustrates that utopia is not necessarily a materially-constituted

social order (the dream of a "city on the hill" or a lost Eden), but … a perpetual willingness to become zombie, to see from the point of exclusion, in order to start over again and build it better the next time" (140). He sees these "apocalyptic utopias" as places to enact radical social change, a willingness to admit to failure and try again. Lucy Sargisson calls this *transgressive utopianism*:

> [These utopias] are spaces in which we can begin to think differently, play with alternatives, explore ideas to their limits—and from which, perhaps, we can approach the world with a fresh viewpoint. Utopias permit us radically to change the way that we think. Once that process has begun, we can, perhaps, begin to act in ways that are sustainably different. (140)

The posthuman utopia of *Sweet Tooth* is just such a transgressive vision, as it offers a new way of conceiving of the human and our relationship with the world around (and inside) us. It kills off the construction of the species as we know it today and gives it new life in the posthuman body of the hybrid. In Dr. Singh's words: "There will be pain and death. And from it new life will spring" (*Wild Game* 115).

A Hybrid Future

> Really what the book was about was what came after the plague: This new race, this new species, and what they meant for mankind and what they represent. I was always more interested where the kids ended up than revealing the mystery of "this is how it happened."
> (Lemire, "The End of 'Sweet Tooth'")

What is ultimately most valuable about the human-animal hybrid figure is its ability to break us from our atomistic conceptions of the human condition and to re-

embed ourselves within our living, agential environment. The pluralistic approach to identity and self that the hybrids of *Sweet Tooth* exhibit offers an alternative: the posthuman consciousness. In embracing this posthuman consciousness, the hybrids are both anchored through the human-based historicity of their emergence and freed from the isolation of human exceptionalism and the limitations of binaristic thinking. Just like the ferals of *Inhuman*, the hybrids are able to unleash their full potentials and embrace their wilder natures just as they are reconnected with their earth others. As Gus told his children: "we took to the land. And it embraced us. … For the first time we felt *free*" (*Wild Game* 173).[10] And by maintaining the plurality of self and identity evident in this posthuman consciousness, they also avoid the holistic Self-Other assimilation trap that Sargisson warns against.

This conscious recognition of both the differences and similarities humans share with other animals, coupled with an acknowledgement of our co-constitutive roles in a trans-corporeal world, can offer us a new direction—a new hybrid future—that reconnects us with our posthuman selves. By following the hybrids' example, perhaps we can attain this posthuman, hybrid consciousness without growing antlers. *Sweet Tooth* imagines a unique ecotopia that provides opportunities for critique of the Self-Other binaries, while maintaining recognition and respect for the reality of difference. And, while one could look closely at *why* these hybrids came about, and the moralistic and idealistic structures of religion within the comic, as the quote from Lemire above indicates, this isn't what the hybrids are really about. It is not the *how* that matters*,* it's, as Jepperd says to Gus at the conclusion of the series, "It's *what happens next* that really

[10] The qualification of "felt" here also further anchors them historically and practically, as with this connectivity comes responsibility and mindfulness, thus not necessarily "freedom."

matters" (*Wild Game* 101).

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSION

> Only by welcoming uncertainty from the get-go can we acclimate ourselves to the shattering wonder that enfolds us. (Abram 8)

In this thesis, and throughout my research with human-animal hybrid figures, two primary themes arose: horror and utopia. The hybrid figure's visually arresting composition and its proposed uncertainty of category and identity make it a highly provocative figure that produces passionate responses—both positive and negative. With the connectivity and embeddedness it represents one can find a pleasurable sense of belonging and kinship with earth others, and the earth itself. But these very components also threaten the constructed uniqueness of humans, instigating a horrified retreat from the relationality they exhibit. The three popular culture narratives analyzed here represent ways this combination of desire and fear can be harnessed to capture the attentions of an array of audiences, provoking discussion and, perhaps, a re-envisioning of the human. In this way, the hybrid figure can be seen as exhibiting utopian horror—a horror that can be employed to draw attention to critical issues like the human animal relationship, and to thus direct us towards new, more positive, iterations of the "human." And one such conception, embodying connectivity and the acceptance of uncertainty, is the posthuman—an understanding of the human as already enmeshed in trans-corporeal relationships with the rest of the world.

The particular establishment of these narratives within a speculative science-fiction tradition and the very real context of chimera research further prevents flippant disregard for their messages and demands the ontological, epistemological, and ethical

issues they embody be seriously considered. The combinative vulnerability and power these figures exhibit also prevents both the "rush to embrace" the "primitive and pure other" as an existential cure, as well as the human exceptionalist vertical retreat (escape) from nature (Wolfe 17; "Discomforting Creatures"). While the constructedness of the atomistic "human" as we currently know it can be seen as a restrictive "cage," the uncaging of the posthuman plurality of self must be coupled with an acknowledgement of responsibility and mindfulness. When we recognize ourselves to be inherently embedded in complex relationships with other species we must be continually mindful of these connections and the positive (and negative) roles we, and other animals, can play. Seeing from the plural positionalities of the posthuman, then, is to embody these relationships and to embrace the fluid, agential, and co-constitutive world inside and around us.

The simultaneous self-other identification and acknowledgement (and value) of difference that characterizes this hybrid envisioning of the posthuman can thus also be a productive place to interrogate other binaristic and restrictive constructions. As indicated particularly with my analysis of Dren in Chapter 2, the hybrid can not only embody the animal other, but also a variety of other traditionally marginalized figures, in her case: the woman, child, and specimen. Thus, future work with the posthuman hybrid can look at the ways it operates at the junctures of these other "binaristic" identities: gender, race, age, ability, etc. Looking at the ways the proliferation of hybrids draws out fears of these other "others" can provide a fruitful place to interrogate these fears and to build more inclusive and positive relationships between bodies.

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