

# Trolling Humanism: New Materialist Performativity in *Border*

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## Abstract:

Director Ali Abbasi's film *Border* (2018; Swedish: *Gräns*) contributes to new materialism's ontological and ethical reconsiderations of matter, which call for new cultural imaginaries that equipose the concerns of interdependently connected humans and nonhumans. This essay examines *Border* as a new materialist intervention in debates about the meaning and ethics of care in a more-than-human world. The essay also gestures toward how works of representation may contribute to new materialist inquiry, pointing toward underexplored archives by highlighting the multimodal forms through which theoretical inquiry may take place. I argue that *Border*'s articulation of care work does more than represent material entanglements; it also redefines human responsibility for a posthuman age, one of the most pressing tasks of recent research in new materialism.

1 The film *Border* (2018; Swedish: *Gräns*) ends with a set of images that appears, on the surface, to replicate some of the oldest iconography in Western culture. A mother holds and feeds a child. Surrounded by trees and wearing a long, white dress, she recalls traditional symbolism that attributes the activities of the female body, including maternal care, to instinct and natural forces, while paradoxically linking women and femininity to otherworldly purity. Such symbolism frames care work — here, the labor of feeding, carrying, and calming a vulnerable child — as the natural byproduct of women's embodiment. Yet *Border*'s path to these final images undercuts the symbolism that they invoke. A film centered on care — what it is, what it means, how it happens, and how it should happen — *Border* conjures and distorts traditional images of care to discredit their representational power. In doing so, the film retrains audiences to view care work not as innate, but as accretive and improvisational.

2 I argue that *Border*'s articulation of care work addresses one of the most pressing questions raised by recent research in new materialism, an interdisciplinary area of inquiry comprising scholarship in feminist theory, gender and sexuality studies, science studies, disability studies, affect theory, and ecocriticism: What should care work look like in a world constituted by the entanglement of technoscience and naturecultures?<sup>1</sup> Unraveling humanist frameworks that view

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<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the terminology *technoscience* and *naturecultures*, see Donna J. Haraway, *When Species Meet* and *Modest\_Witness@Second\_Millennium.FemaleMan©\_Meets\_OncoMouse™: Feminism and Technoscience*.

humans as distinct from and, often, superior to entities such as nonhuman animals, plants, matter, and their various assemblages, new materialist scholarship acknowledges the entanglement and interdependence of “posthumanist constituencies” (Puig de la Bellacasa 5).<sup>2</sup> At a more fundamental level, such scholarship participates in “a return to the notion of matter” (Butler 9).<sup>3</sup> Attending to matter calls into question familiar divisions between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, body and mind, and animate and inanimate at the level of ontology, divisions that overlook “how matter that is considered insensate, immobile, deathly, or otherwise ‘wrong’ animates cultural life in important ways” (Chen 2). In a new materialist paradigm, matter is not passive residue or background; it is the medium through which interactions occur. New materialist recalibrations of humanism call for discourses, ethics, and politics that attend to more-than-human worlds. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write: “Conceiving matter as possessing its own modes of self-transformation, self-organization, and directedness, and thus no longer as simply passive or inert, disturbs the conventional sense that agents are exclusively humans who possess the cognitive abilities, intentionality, and freedom to make autonomous decisions and the corollary presumption that humans have the right or ability to master nature” (10). New materialist inquiry has laid the groundwork for different ways of responding to the questions of how — and for whom and what — we, as humans, care.

3 New materialism’s ontological and ethical reconsiderations of matter call for new cultural imaginaries that equipose the concerns of interdependently connected humans and nonhumans. I view *Border* as a case study that takes up this work. My analysis focuses on how the film holds up for examination the assumptions and traditional symbols of humanism and revises them for a posthuman world. In modeling these revisions, *Border* draws attention away from anthropocentrism and toward the meanings and responsibilities of being human in the Anthropocene.<sup>4</sup>

4 Cultural imaginaries matter. Imagination is a crucial prerequisite for and corollary to action because it enunciates and delimits the horizon of the possible. Fictional narratives, the playhouses

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<sup>2</sup> See Rosi Braidotti’s genealogy of new materialism in Rick Dolphijn and Iris van der Tuin’s *New Materialism: Interviews & Cartographies* (19-37).

<sup>3</sup> Karen Barad explains Judith Butler’s contributions to new materialism in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (59-66).

<sup>4</sup> Paul J. Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer use the term *Anthropocene* to describe the period of geological history from roughly the eighteenth century to the present in which humankind’s “activities grew into a significant geological, morphological force” (17).

in which cultural imaginaries often emerge and reverberate, offer “a panorama of what is possible, because [they are] not hedged in by either the limitations or the considerations that determine the institutionalized organizations within which human life otherwise takes its course” (Iser xviii). In other words, fictional narratives simulate potentialities by “giv[ing] presence to what otherwise would be unavailable” (Iser xi). Understood in these terms, fictional narratives such as *Border* — in giving form to new materialist insistence on revisions to the ontological and ethical percepts that are at the core of what it means to be human — do more than illustrate paradigmatic shifts in the making. They also facilitate the adjustments to imagination demanded by new materialist inquiry.

5 *Border* makes these adjustments to imagination both through narrative and the presentation of bodies on screen interacting with and caring for more-than-human worlds. In doing so, the film calls the viewer into a performative relationship with the materiality expressed on the screen. If, as Karen Barad proposes, performativity is the mode that collapses the artificial distance between discourse and matter, it is the mode through which new materialist inquiry might be best articulated. Barad writes that performativity “call[s] into question representationalism’s claim that there are representations, on the one hand, and ontologically separate entities awaiting representation, on the other, and focus[es] inquiry on the practices or performances of representing, as well as the productive effects of those practices and the conditions for their efficacy” (49). My examination of *Border* shows how the film animates new materialist principles in the mode of performativity. By engaging with the discourse of new materialism through a fictional narrative and within a performative framework, the film not only expresses new materialist ideas, but also acts on its viewers by priming them to think and feel in more-than-human ways. If new materialism urges reconsiderations of humanism, *Border* participates in this work by offering new habits of mind that would allow for the absorption of new materialist principles, as well as the actions that might emerge from these principles. The film illustrates, therefore, how works of art are themselves material presences that provide the conditions of possibility through which humans understand and respond to our world.

6 This essay proceeds in two parts. I first read *Border* as a new materialist intervention in debates about the meaning and ethics of care in a more-than-human world. I then sketch out what fictional narratives as a whole may offer new materialist inquiry. The product of these analyses is twofold. On the one hand, I show how *Border* extends ongoing new materialist debates. On the

other hand, I use *Border* as an illustration of the theoretical complexity that I claim is endogenous to fictional narratives. This latter contribution activates underexplored archives by highlighting the multimodal forms through which theoretical inquiry may take place.

### **Between Human and Ecobeast**

7 *Border* concerns a woman's life at the porous borders that separate nations, human from other, and realism from fantasy.<sup>5</sup> Tina is a customs officer with an unusual gift: she can smell guilt on travelers entering into Sweden with illicit goods. In the film's early scenes, Tina stands stiffly in an officer's uniform, discretely sniffing passengers as they disembark. Fellow customs officers trust her expertise implicitly. When she senses that a traveler is hiding something and begins to smell his phone for more information, for instance, her coworker waits calmly for her to complete her work (0:09:30-0:10:13). Yet while she is respected for her extraordinary capacities, which allow her to enforce state regulations and secure the national economy by apprehending tax and tariff violators, her unusual body sparks repulsion and fear in those around her. Travelers stare in disbelief at her uncommonly shaped face, small and deep-set eyes, and mottled skin. When she returns home, Tina catches passersby gazing after her in fascination (0:12:58-0:13:15). Largely ignored by her housemate and sometime romantic interest, Tina lives a life that is mostly devoid of meaningful human companionship and intimacy. She escapes the prying eyes of others by taking refuge in nature, where she admires the movements of insects before she clocks into work and, in the evenings, walks barefoot through the forest adjacent to her property (0:01:27-0:02:17; 0:06:19-0:07:14). Receiving more affection from nonhuman animals — such as the fox that nuzzles at her bedroom window (0:33:04-0:33:54) — than from humans, Tina resides in the liminal space between human and nonhuman worlds.

8 In an interview about *Border*, director Ali Abbasi compares Tina's outsider status to the experience of living as an ethnic minority in Sweden, where the acceleration of global migration has inspired a nationalist backlash against immigrants and immigration policies.<sup>6</sup> Abbasi says that the film expresses “this Nordic melancholy of a person that is connected with everything around her in nature but not with human beings. That's the experience of being a minority” (Mitchell par.

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<sup>5</sup> *Border* is based on a short story of the same name by Swedish author John Ajvide Lindqvist.

<sup>6</sup> See journalist Cajsa Collin's discussion of immigration as a political issue in Sweden. Collin writes, “the public mood in Sweden toward foreigners has changed . . . [T]he public talk of ‘Swedish values’ has increased dramatically in recent years” (par. 18).

3). Race and disability, as entangled modes of otherness, render Tina's body unusual and accord her minority status. Distinct modes of oppression, racism and ableism often draw on one another for discursive power. As Douglas Bayton writes, "disability has functioned historically to justify inequality for disabled people themselves, but it has also done so for women and minority groups . . . [T]he concept of disability has been used to justify discrimination against other groups by attributing disability to them" (33). Tina's body is above all extraordinary and even monstrous, and her appearance arouses uncertainty and anxiety in those who view her. Disability studies scholar Rosemarie Garland Thompson observes that extraordinary bodies often provoke the "vivid form of human communication" known as staring (par. 1).<sup>7</sup> In *Border*, staring indicates Tina's location at the margins of the Swedish national community and the human species. Ethnic Swedes in the film communicate Tina's otherness through furtive looking. Their mode of visual engagement with Tina echoes *Border*'s invitation to its viewers to participate in "virtual staring": a visual experience of gazing at unusual bodies through the cover of mediation (Garland Thomson par. 7). Frequently guiding the viewer to examine actress Eva Melander's heavily altered face through extended close-ups unrelated to the film's narrative, *Border* draws on the aesthetics of the freak show to call attention to the ways in which extraordinary bodies define and challenge what cultures consider to be normal and, by extension, human.<sup>8</sup> Tina's exceptionality is valuable when it identifies minor transgressions against the state, but outside of the workplace, her physical difference signals the tenuousness of her claims to belonging.

9 *Border* stages two explanations for Tina's unusual appearance. In the first part of the film, Tina understands her appearance to be the result of a chromosomal disorder and a series of accidents in childhood. Her adoptive father guides these medical explanations. He tells her, for example, that the scar she has near the base of her spine is there because she "fell on something sharp as a little girl. A rock if I remember correctly" (0:28:18-0:28:48). This medical discourse frames Tina's body as the product of genetic misfires and accidents. But medical discourse begins to seem inadequate for explaining her physical differences when she first encounters Vore. Like

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<sup>7</sup> See also Garland Thompson's foundational discussion of disability in *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Literature and Culture*.

<sup>8</sup> See *Sideshow USA: Freaks and the American Cultural Imagination*, in which Rachel Adams argues that freaks are highly constructed and stylized performers who provide viewers with a visual cultural education while also calling into question the stability of cultural norms and values. Activating the discourses of freak shows, reporter Tristram Fane Saunders comments on the "eerily convincing prosthetics [used] to create the ugly, Missing Link appearance of the film's heroine" (par. 2).

Tina, Vore has an extraordinarily shaped face with deep-set eyes, yellowish teeth, and chin-length hair, features that are visual echoes of Tina in the shot-reverse-shot sequence that depicts their first meeting (0:11:11-0:12:55). Like Tina, Vore uses the sense of smell to gather information about the world, and, like her, exhibits an uncommon connection to nature. Yet even more startling than these affinities for Tina is what she and her colleagues discover during a body cavity search at the customs checkpoint: Vore does not have a penis. Tina's colleague tells her, "You should have been the one doing [the body cavity search], not me. To put it in scientific terms, she . . . he . . . She has a vagina" (0:24:18-0:24:40). The colleague's hesitant repetition of gender pronouns signals his difficulty in categorizing Vore's body, which also lacks the scars that Tina and her colleague believe would indicate gender affirmation surgery. However, Vore does have a mysterious scar at the base of the spine that resembles Tina's. Vore's body is an enigma that defies medical explanations and complicates state surveillance.<sup>9</sup>

10 Vore introduces uncertainty into the world of rigid boundaries that Tina has enforced and to which she has been subjected. For example, when she observes Vore collecting maggots from a tree at a nearby hostel, Tina turns down the invitation to eat one. "You shouldn't do that. It's gross," Tina tells Vore. "Says who?" Vore asks, holding out a maggot toward her. She eventually takes the maggot into her mouth (0:34:25-0:35:05). This sexualized exchange, which takes place against a backdrop of lush, green trees and ambient bird and insect noises, echoes the Genesis myth in which Eve offers Adam an apple in the Garden of Eden. In Genesis, Eve's invitation disrupts the ordered system imposed by the divine. In *Border*, Vore's provocative question undercuts the values and norms that have shaped Tina's alienation. Yet Vore's invitation is more than a cultural critique, which would highlight how social expectations are articulated and maintained within a given culture: it is also a critique of the concept of humanness when it is defined in ways that exclude difference, ambiguity, and fluidity. When she speaks of the disappointment that she felt as a child upon learning that she is "[a]n ugly, strange human with a chromosome flaw," Vore responds: "You shouldn't listen to what humans say" (0:45:00-0:46:17). As Vore exits the shot, the camera lingers on the back of Tina's head, pausing on this repudiation of humanness that suggests another, posthuman semiotic order is possible.

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<sup>9</sup> See Toby Beauchamp's discussion in *Going Stealth: Transgender Politics and US Surveillance Practices* of the relationship between the enforcement of gender conformity and state surveillance.

11 A second explanation for Tina’s body appears roughly halfway through the film, when Vore reveals to Tina that she is not monstrous, but inhuman. She learns that she is, like Vore, a troll (1:03:22). The film’s gradual turn toward the genre of fantasy draws on the salience of trolls in contemporary culture, and particularly in Nordic literature and film. As Adriana Margareta Dancus argues, trolls, like other supernatural creatures such as vampires and zombies — which have received significant attention in literary and cultural studies for their associations with erotic otherness and undead automatism, respectively — evoke a specific set of cultural concerns. Dancus writes that literary and cinematic narratives often associate trolls with “the uncontrollable forces of nature that have become increasingly threatening” in a moment when the effects of climate crises are beginning to be widely felt (Dancus 257). In narratives such as the Norwegian mockumentary *Trollhunter* (2010) and Finnish author Johanna Sinisalo’s fantasy novel *Troll: A Love Story* (2000), trolls embody the violent reactions of nature to human resource depletion.

12 Although trolls originated in Nordic folklore, this association between trolls and retaliatory, often violent natural forces can also be found in other national contexts. The cult favorite *Troll 2* (1990) depicts supernatural vegetarian creatures attempting to turn a family into plants so that they can be eaten, and DreamWorks’ *Trolls* (2016) shows trolls fighting back against an unhappy, ravenous, humanoid species. In these contemporary representations, trolls are mythical “ecobeasts” that speak to the “ecosystemic friction” between human and nature in the Anthropocene (Kääpä 45; 84).<sup>10</sup> Trolls, in other words, signal an ecological temporality in which human destruction has made nature a newly unpredictable and menacing force. As symbols of the disjuncture between human and nature in the Anthropocene, trolls point to the unnatural consequences of humanist principles. If human concerns are considered to be different from, or superior to, those of the more-than-human world, the species pits itself against that which shapes it. Contemporary troll narratives frequently illustrate the connections between anthropocentrism and the extractive logics of late capitalism, framing environmental crises and destruction as the natural extensions of humanism.

13 Beyond their representations in literature and film, trolls have become an important feature in contemporary digital culture. Online commenters who post inflammatory messages with the intention of provoking emotional responses are *trolls*; *trolling* — making provocative comments

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<sup>10</sup> Kääpä provides fuller discussion of the relationship between trolls and ecohorror in Nordic cinema in *Ecology and Contemporary Nordic Cinemas: From Nation-Building to Ecocosmopolitanism*.

for the purpose of evoking strong emotional reactions in others — is a mode of discourse that has contributed to the increased porosity of the digital and political spheres. In 2017, 81% of respondents told researchers at the Pew Research Center and Elon University’s Imagining the Internet Center that “bad actors, harassment, trolls, and an overall tone of griping, distrust, and disgust” will shape public discourse online as much or more over the next decade than they do today (Raine, Anderson, and Albright par. 20). Researchers inferred from responses such as these that “[t]hings will stay bad because to troll is human” (Raine, Anderson, and Albright par. 35). This discussion of online trolling highlights another feature of contemporary representations of trolls in literature and media: trolls are figured not as inhuman antagonists to human society, but rather as mirrors that make apparent humans’ own inhumanity. Even when troll media show trolls committing acts of violence against humans, it is usually humans, not trolls, who are presented as unjust. For example, in *Trollhunter*, the trolls that the Norwegian government hunts are revealed to be the unfortunate victims of a rabies epidemic. While government officials conceal the threat of legitimate dangers to unsuspecting tourists and lie to the news media, trolls are sympathetic creatures who are being hunted by humans. One character says of the hunted trolls, “I wish they didn’t have to experience such pain. It is traumatic for them, even though it only takes a few seconds” (0:58:26-0:58:39). In contemporary troll media, the actions of humans, not trolls, are inhuman.

14 *Border* invokes the inhumanity of humankind when Vore tells Tina that she is a survivor of an ethnic cleansing perpetuated by humans against trolls. Vore’s own parents, she learns, were the subjects of brutal medical experiments (1:08:58-1:09:21). Distraught by these revelations, Tina confronts her adoptive father and learns that he worked at a psychiatric hospital, where her biological parents — and many other trolls — were detained following their capture. After their death, Tina’s father adopted her as a remedy for the childlessness in his marriage (1:38:00-1:39:44). Through her conversations with Vore and her adoptive father, Tina realizes that her marginalization in human society is a reflection of human cruelty rather than the result of her unusual form; her desire for acceptance has been a longing to be allied with her biological family’s murderers. In the second half of the film, it is not Tina’s appearance but rather humanity’s tendency to feel no responsibility towards those perceived as outsiders that is exposed as monstrous.

15 Tina’s discoveries about her true identity and background cause her to angrily reject the human tales that she had absorbed and believed in the first part of the narrative. Yet she stops short

of joining Vore in acts of vengeful retaliation against the species that has wronged them. Vore's vengeance takes place through a series of reproductive substitutions. Like the trolls of Nordic mythology, Vore steals human children, leaving in their place *hiisi*: undead creatures that resemble human infants in their form but that, Vore explains, "don't feel anything" and "can only eat and sleep" (1:26:58-1:27:06).<sup>11</sup> *Hiisi* live for short periods of time, fooling humans into believing that their children are not missing, but rather that they have transformed. Vore births them regularly and stores one in the refrigerator of Tina's guesthouse, where she has invited Vore to stay.

16 Tina, who has been told by human doctors that she cannot conceive, is fascinated by reproduction. In the short story on which *Border* is based, the motivations for this fascination are ambiguous. In one passage, when Tina smells the "secret, anticipatory" scent of pregnancy on her neighbor, she "long[s] for something that would never be" (Lindqvist 14-15). The story leaves unresolved whether this longing indicates Tina's human desire to mother a child or her troll desire to steal human children; the story suggests that the latter impulse lingers underneath the veneer of Tina's human socialization. The ambiguity of Tina's desire for children highlights the monstrous potential of maternal bodies, which both foster and expel life. In the film, Tina's fascination seems more unequivocally about motherly care; when she touches a *hiisi* for the first time, she recoils in horror at the sensation of its cold body and later confronts Vore about what she believes is its mistreatment (1:19:43-1:21:51; 1:25:52-1:26:26). The film also depicts Tina's fascination with her own sexual and reproductive capacities. In an intimate encounter with Vore, Tina realizes that — unbeknownst to her — her body has been concealing a retractable penis. For the first time, she enjoys intercourse, which had been too painful to pursue with human partners. But even though she is intrigued by the unfamiliar and exciting reproductive experiences of troll bodies, Tina refuses to join Vore in kidnapping human children. Split between her troll identity and her human upbringing, Tina realizes that she does not want to exchange the human world for Vore's separatism and violence.

17 In the second half of the film, *Border* blends the genres of fantasy, horror, and crime thriller as Vore's motives for kidnapping human children become clear. In her role as a customs officer, Tina uncovers evidence of a child pornography ring and works with police to apprehend the

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<sup>11</sup> Although troll myths are primarily Norwegian and Swedish in origin, Vore's troll colony in *Border* is located in Finland, and the film uses the Finnish word *hiisi*, a folkloric term for various kinds of mythic entities, to refer to Vore's spawn. These references to Finland, a foreign nation and culture, extend the film's broader concern with border security and the threat of contamination to the nation.

perpetrators. She begins to suspect that Vore is responsible for supplying children to offenders such as these. When she confronts him, her suspicions are confirmed, but Vore denies culpability on the grounds that he is avenging troll victims of human mistreatment. “They must suffer as we have suffered,” Vore tells her. But Tina rejects this philosophy of retributive justice. “You’re sick,” says Tina. Vore responds: “I would be if I were human, but I am not, thankfully” (1:27:41-1:29:02). Ironically, Vore denies humanness while also echoing the laws of retaliation that are foundational to Western juridical practices. In the Code of Hammurabi and Leviticus, the retributive principle “an eye for an eye” promises to restore order to the world through the symmetrical distribution of pain and grievance. Vore’s philosophy of justice shares with these humanist texts an understanding that the world is organized through straightforward processes of action and reaction. By contrast, Tina’s response to Vore indicates that she does not believe such forms of justice do, or can, restore equilibrium. In the complex world to which Tina belongs, proportion is not the establishing principle, and no individual has the capacity to understand events enough to map their effects and design responses. Growling ferociously at Vore in an extended handheld sequence, Tina embodies the excesses of a world that always circumvents human attempts at order. As she growls, tears well up in her eyes and slide down her face, and spittle settles along her lower lip. Her face slips in and out of focus as the camera tracks a series of close-ups in dim lighting. Stylistically reinforcing Tina’s rejection of retribution, the film exposes the technical difficulties of representing even such an ordinary image as a face on the screen (1:28:08-1:28:47).

18 *Border*’s child pornography subplot and aftermath are significant additions to Lindqvist’s short story, which ends with the suggestion that Tina and Vore will form a family together. The film’s additions highlight its animating question: What responsibilities, if any, do those who have been aggrieved have toward the groups that have wronged them? Despite the fact that Tina has been marginalized within human society — and although, as Vore’s stories about the past make clear, trolls have experienced oppression and violence at the hands of humans for generations — Tina struggles with how to respond to Vore once she uncovers that her species companion is complicit in human evil. On the one hand, she is enticed by Vore’s invitation to join an underground community of trolls in Finland, where she would live with others like herself. But on the other hand, she is horrified by Vore’s pitilessness toward humans and contributions to their abuse of one another. The film’s final scenes trace Tina’s indecision as she deliberates with which

species her primary membership lies and whether she should seek to protect the human society that has wronged her.

19 But when her neighbors' child goes missing and they discover a *hiisi* in its place, Tina rejects Vore altogether. She recognizes that Vore's motives for living in her guesthouse were not based on romance or species affiliation — at least not entirely. Instead, Vore has been using Tina to gain access to another human child for the purposes of trafficking. She shares what she knows with the police and helps them track Vore to Sweden's border. In their final encounter, Vore repeats his offer to Tina that they travel together to a separatist troll colony in Finland. Together, Vore suggests, they would be able to revitalize the troll species and realize Tina's dream of parenting a child: "We can carry on our kind together. You and I." But Tina turns down Vore's offer of independence and isolationism, which is premised on a hierarchy of species and a disregard for other life forms. "I don't want to hurt anyone," she tells Vore. "Is it human to think that way?" (1:34:20-1:35:10). Voiced by Tina, this question is not rhetorical. Her experiences in *Border* confirm the frequency of human participation in forms of regulation, persecution, and harm that disadvantage and oppress those who are different or vulnerable. But Tina's actions suggest an alternative to these human tendencies, tendencies that are mirrored in Vore's vision of troll revenge. By declining Vore's invitation, Tina turns away from the temptation of belonging that organizes systems of inclusion and exclusion in human cultures. Vore escapes capture by diving into the Gulf of Bothnia, but Tina chooses instead to remain an outsider in the human world. *Border* does not explore Tina's reasons for rejecting the comfort of community that Vore promises. Extending its activation of freak show aesthetics, the film positions its viewers as outside observers of Tina's actions without granting access to the mind of the enfreaked. More important than the articulation of Tina's rationale for remaining in the human world, *Border* suggests, are the actions that she undertakes.

20 The film's emphasis on action (Tina's rejection of Vore) rather than reasoning (explaining why she has chosen to do so) underscores the ethics of care that the film illustrates in its second half, which culminates in the images of motherhood that appear in *Border*'s final scene. After he escapes to Finland, Vore mails Tina the troll born from their intimate involvement. Hesitant at first to accept it, Tina gradually removes the child from the box, watches it squirm beside her, and then takes it awkwardly into her arms (1:42:24-1:44:15). In contrast to the birth of her neighbors' human child — a momentous event for both Tina and her neighbors, which the film punctuates with the

appearance of two otherworldly deer (0:30:01-0:30:34) — Tina's entrance into motherhood is incremental. Her body language is uncertain, and she hesitates in her responses to the baby's cries. Eventually, attempting to find a solution to the child's distress, she clumsily wraps it and takes it outside, where she finds an insect to feed it. The child becomes calm and gazes upward from Tina's arm, a faint smile on its lips (1:44:54-1:45:02). The scene is an inhuman echo of classic Western images of motherhood, but *Border* recalibrates these images by framing maternal care as the product of piecemeal and even glitchy decisions. Tina's style of motherhood is not based on instinct; she learned from watching Vore how to feed the baby, and the arrival of her child required both the Finnish and Swedish postal services. Yet the tentative, hopeful, shimmering music at the end of the film promises that this ending is a happy one. The form of care that Tina's actions point to is grounded in the fortuitous coordination of human and more-than-human matter. More significantly, it does not require the methods of separation and categorization that organized Tina's life at the beginning of the film. A troll mother in a human world, Tina symbolizes a posthuman approach to care work.

21 Tina's form of maternal care is also a model for ecological care in the Anthropocene. In the final scene, Tina acts on the connection to nature that she feels throughout the film, walking barefoot through the forest and gently plucking insects from the patches of moss that surround her house. These lush images suggest harmony with an environment that is produced through the cautious, gradual accumulation of actions. This is not a return to an Edenic past; even as a fox appears on the screen, it shares the shot with Tina's weathered silver car, an image that confirms the industrial landscape that opened the film is near at hand and here to stay (1:40:46-1:40:57; 0:01:26-0:01:48). Yet the film's final images suggest that ecological relations premised on interdependence and gradualism, rather than on heroic, grand gestures, may make space for experiences of connection. Documenting small movements, such as the touch of a bare foot against the snow and the crunch of dry leaves, the film's final shots present sensations and images that rarely rise to the level of human concern (1:41:06-1:41:12). Caring for this delicate world, the film suggests, requires the re-attunement of human attention to the small and the ordinary, as well as to the patterns of activity that occur at inhuman scales.

22 *Border* animates images, premises, and patterns of thought at the heart of Western humanism, but the second half of the film rewrites these logics for a more-than-human world. These revisions of humanist principles in the latter part of the film invite viewers to recognize,

reimagine, and adjust habits of mind grounded in anthropocentrism and, more fundamentally, the division of human and other. The film's troll plot invokes the ecological destruction made possible by such principles, and the final scenes map out a mode of engaging with the world that disavows the rigidity of human categories and hierarchies. What *Border* offers is an ethics of care grounded in the ideas and questions of new materialism.

### **Fictional Matters**

23 Care is a capacious term that refers to “everything we do to maintain, continue, and repair ‘our world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. The world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex life-sustaining web” (Puig de la Bellacasa 8).<sup>12</sup> *Border* addresses many forms of care: care for the body, for children, and the environment. Yet focalized through Tina's marginalization, the film is centrally concerned with care for the aggrieved, the appropriate forms of which, *Border* suggests, are not as simple as inviting those who have been wounded into the charmed circle of human concern. Instead, such care work requires dismantling the ways of thinking that have facilitated such grievances in the first place.

24 But the nature and scope of ethical responsibility for the aggrieved becomes harder to envision in a new materialist framework, which espouses an expansive world of agential matter and disavows the viability of paternalistic humanism. If, as new materialist scholars argue, matter is an agential force, and if human exceptionalism is no longer tenable, how can scholars, activists, and others articulate human responsibility without replicating humanism's anthropocentrism and minimization of difference? This question is especially important in the case of environmental crises that are the results of human activity. As Frost observes, “If the convulsions and depredations characteristic of the Anthropocene demand that we think of humans as culpable and responsible for the current predicament, the inescapable question about the nature of the ‘we’ implied in the question ‘what should or can we do’ entails that we reconsider what it might mean to refer to, to invoke, or to try to mobilize a human subject” (2). The difficulty lies in imagining human responsibility without slipping into paradigms of human exceptionalism. Given this difficulty, the work of the imagination becomes increasingly urgent, and imaginative forms are

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<sup>12</sup> Puig de la Bellacasa builds this definition with reference to Joan Tronto's *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*.

increasingly important resources for addressing ethical questions. Fictional narratives, I argue, can do more than represent material entanglements; they can also shape ways of thinking about human responsibility.

25 In *Border*, human responsibility is synthetic, not natural: it is the product of choice, not instinct. When Tina articulates her desire to do no harm and asks if it is “human to think that way” (1:34:20-1:35:10), she invokes a provisional and even hypothetical human subject shaped by affective commitment rather than species affiliation. The subject to whom Tina tentatively alludes belongs to the category of human because of actions, not appearances. Through Tina’s deliberations about the extent to which she is human, *Border* advocates for capacious definitions of humanness while also articulating the category of the human in terms of ethical action. The film’s instantiation of these ideas in Tina’s final actions can be understood as invitations to the viewer that not only represent, but also performatively constitute new materialist revisions to humanism.

26 The material presence and effects of works of representation such as *Border* point toward new potential archives that conduct the theoretical work of new materialisms, an area of inquiry that is grounded in mattering: “a kind of posthumanist performativity that emphasizes matter’s capacity to matter, to achieve significance in its being *as* doing” (Jones 245). If new materialism is concerned with the meaning and agency of matter, it makes sense that it has something to learn from works of representation, which do the work of making matter present through mapping the relational liveliness of bodies, voices, places, societies, and more. Rather than reducing representation to its representational work, new materialist scholars should turn to representations for their material performativity.

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