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New Feminist Materialism and Queer Studies in the Anthropocene

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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

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Editorial

By Christian David Zeitz, University of Toronto

1 The question of “What even is the Anthropocene?” is oddly open and self-deferring, which is even further complicated yet significantly expanded by a cultural tendency to neologize around the -cene: Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chtuhlucene (Haraway), Anthrobscene (Parikka), Mediocene (Engell and Siegert), Black Anthropocene(s) (Yusoff), just to mention a few. New feminist materialisms are emerging at a time in need for alternative visions of the world threatened by human exceptionalism, ecological terror(ism), and devastating, extinction-fostering capital flows: they pose the question of how to theorize and practice ethical and decidedly posthuman and non-anthropocentric feminisms in the geological era of the (late capitalist) Anthropocene. What is at stake here, is a new awareness of the ontological relationality of always-already non-individual bodies and the potential for entangled agencies in an age of looming planetary crisis; what Joanna Zylińska theorizes as a *minimal ethics* of distributing rather than rehumanizing responsibility (also see Pulsifer’s article in this issue). This is directly linked to shedding light on the affectivity of matter and varieties of nonhuman agents/actants, to use Latourian terms, in processes of gendering and racialization, or the emergence of the body and social bodies as affective human-nonhuman assemblages: this can be the starting point for new –isms, as well as new politics of feminist intervention, calling attention to a shared yet stratified nonhuman condition and Anthropocene.

3 Contextually, in recent European immigration and ‘Islam debates,’ gendering and racialization are precisely technologies of mattering, given that racialized-gendered bodies *come to matter*, i.e. they manifest materially-performatively and discursively, at the intersection of the (de-)human (subjects such as *the Muslim woman*) and the nonhuman (objects such as the hijab). In thinking the new materialisms intersectionally, we might resort to what Deleuze & Guattari call an *assemblage* in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

On the one hand it is a *machinic assemblage* of bodies, of actions, and intermingling of bodies reacting to one another; on the other hand it is a *collective assemblage of enunciation*, of acts and statements, of incorporeal transformations attributed to bodies. Then on a vertical axis, the assemblage has both *territorial sides*, or reterritorialized sides, which stabilize it, and *cutting edges of deterritorialization*, which carry it away (265).

Bodies as assemblages are “chaotic combinations” of multiple affective elements so that the affectivity of a body cannot be reduced to “the presumed organicity of the body,” as Jasbir K. Puar

puts in her *Terrorist Assemblages* (193). Assemblage-thinking brings together theorizations of how power operates on the somewhat bounded-coherent body with ways of thinking bodies not as bounded organisms, and instead as affectively produced and affective assemblages in and through which relationalities of machinic (organic and inorganic parts in relation) and enunciative (statements about the bodies) are territorialized, deterritorialized, and reterritorialized. Puar speaks of “multiple bodies”: “the visual, representational body”, the body of visible, potentially intersecting identitarian integrities, and “the affective body”, the assemblage of “multiple registers” of affectivity that exceed the *biology* of the human body: things, clothes, media, data, surroundings etc. that are not simply *extensions* of a biologically bounded body, but, on the contrary, inter-affecting parts “of organic and nonorganic machinic” body-assemblages (Puar 199-200).

4 A brief example: in 2018, the German AfD politician Alice Weidel delivered a controversial speech decrying that (implicitly Muslim brown) *Kopftuchmädchen* (hijab-girls) and *alimentierte Messermänner* (stately supported knife-men) will inevitably bring about the downfall of the German welfare-state (Reuters-Redaktion). Identitarian categories loom large, yet Weidel’s racism-sexism specifically targets racialized-gendered bodies as assemblages of performatively constituted organic (the gendered-racialized human body) and inorganic (hijab and knife) elements. More traditional cultural racisms of the Muslim-as-identity are somewhat deterritorialized (*it is the material-person-assemblage not the person as such*) and reterritorialize in (not less Orientalist) hijab-body- and knife-body-assemblages, where identity and affective capacity are only thinkable through their “rematerialization” (Puar 199). The identity marker or stereotype of the threatening and non-integrated Muslim is precisely not what comes into being through the person, the organic and discursively subjectivated, cohering body alone. Instead, what matters most are its in/organic, in/corporeal relations (and the many discourses circulating about them), that which exceeds and threatens the “liberal fantasy of bodily integrity” (198), and is reduced to or reserved for, by Weidel, a certain racialized-gendered-religionized subject, whose very dehumanization “give[s] way to normative identity markers” only by way of its posthumanization as hijabed or knifed human-nonhuman assemblage (220): the discursive body becomes affective only after being attached to the affective thing, only after entering into the assemblage. Hence, what makes bodies affective are their internal and external relations, their

relative (non-human, material) parts and their affects, not in contradistinction to but in interplay with the subjectivated human body and its concretized identity-effects.

5 This is very much in line with Jane Bennett's new materialist conceptions of *impersonal affect* and *affective matter* in her *Vibrant Matter*. Her "focus [is] less on the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts and more on the catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies. This power is ... impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons" (xii). Thus, matter, as well as nonhuman bodies in general, can be described as affective, as having affects, whilst these affects are dubbed impersonal, for what is affective here or has affective capacity is not the human body, but the things (and other nonhuman bodies) it is in constant relation with. Thinking affect in terms of impersonality is a significant methodological strategy to analyze and count the multiple affects of racialized-gendered human-nonhuman-assemblages. It should be noted that Bennett is indebted to the work of Latour and his theory of acting and doing as a non-hierarchical connection of and exchange between (human) actors and (nonhuman) actants: a man using a gun is an agent 1 drawing on an agent 2 (gun), a process, however, leading to the evolvment of agent 3, a hybrid-actor, making strict subject-object, human-material border lines impossible (*Pandora* 217). As Bennett puts it: "The locus of agency is always a human-nonhuman working group" (xvii). It could be helpful to think in terms of the body-assemblage through the hybrid-actor (neither the Muslim girl nor the hijab but the hijab-girl, and specifically not simply the active human girl and the passive nonhuman material/cloth, for example, are what is mobilized in Weidel's racism-sexism). Impersonal affects are perfectly exemplified in Shiva Zarabadi and Jessica Ringrose's compelling analysis of the hijab as an *affective actant*: "The hijab thus has 'thing power' (Bennett 2010, xvi), it is an affective actant that has the capacity to affect and intervene" (22). In this sense, a pressing question for intersectional feminisms and gender studies, one that works by Puar, Zarabadi and Ringrose as well as Alexander Weheliye and Kyla Schuller already touch upon, is how sexism, racism, and other -isms of the posthuman moment have themselves taken a new materialist and nonhuman turn (under which *our* unexceptional nonhuman or rather human-nonhuman condition is all too often turned into a gendered and racialized exception).

6 The articles assembled in this issue are located at the intersection of media studies and the material, posthuman, and environmental turn. They bring together concerns for the imbrication of ethics, performativity, and materiality, the monstrous potentialities of posting the human in the

wake of human-nonhuman futurities, and the material and affective sedimentation of neoliberal capitalist logics that produce both gendered precarious subjects and anthropocenic life-worlds. A common thread that connects the articles is the question of how the gendered body matters beyond itself, how it comes to matter at the intersection of embodiment and disembodiment, the human and the nonhuman. Rebecah Pulsifer's "Trolling Humanism: New Materialist Performativity in Border," discusses, by way of a new materialist framework, how Ali Abbasi's 2018 feature film *Border* revises ontologies and ethics of matter(ing). It does so by imagining human-nonhuman ethical encounters, and the responsibilities they entail, beyond the exceptionalist work of humanism, affirming the entangled agencies involved in taking care for each other. Thus, the essay posits that *Border*'s intervention can be attributed to its imagination of an ethics of care worthy of a more-than-human world. The essay itself stages an intervention by combining representational critique with the more non-representationally attuned modes of new materialist inquiry: rather than reversing a representation vs. mattering hierarchy, Pulsifer urges to pay attention to the ways in which representations *matter* (performatively). She concludes that *Border*'s materially performative representation of care goes beyond a *mere* representation of entangled agencies, actively enacting and worlding new forms of how human responsibility might come to matter in a posthuman age.

7 In "Sia's Strained Girl: Performing Persistence in Neoliberal Environments," Alina Haliliuc focusses on how Australian singer-songwriter Sia's (Kate Isobelle Furler) music videos "Elastic Heart" and "Chandelier," orchestrate and materialize the girlhood(s), embodied by child-dancer Maddie Ziegler, of anthropocenic neoliberalism. The videos construct girlhood multivalently, in the same way as the girl becomes a multivalent producer or negotiator of meaning. She comes in to stand for the relationalities of consumption and sacrifice in celebrity culture, while performatively exhibiting both existential precarity and the struggle for livability, that neoliberal youth are faced with in a neoliberalized capitalist ecology of self-investment. Haliliuc analyzes how Sia's music video reroute the (postfeminist) promise of the girl or girlhood, signaling the affective registers of hope, worthy investment, and better living through disciplined optimization, into a figuration of strained persistence. Contrary to the celebrated perfect girl-subject of postfeminist neoliberalism, the persistent and struggling girl-subject puts on display the extractivist late capitalist relations, so normalized by neoliberal cultural imaginaries, that precarize, drain, and exploit subjects and cultural-natural environments alike.

8 The last paper somewhat parts with the canonized notion of the monster as a reducibly culturalized, e.g. gendered or racialized, body, positing 21st century mediatic monstrosity as irreducibly agential, as the human-nonhuman assemblage or the Anthropocene itself. In “A Lesser Human Future: Posthuman Monstrosities in *World War Z* (2013) and *Annihilation* (2018),” Christian David Zeitz proposes that *World War Z*’s (Palestinianized) zombies and *Annihilation*’s anthropocenic Shimmer *post* conceptions of humanist and anthropomorphic monstrous bodies, as they emerge in and as nonhuman, informational, technological, ecological, and geological actor-networks. The article expands on canonical monster theory’s conception of the monster as a cultural body of power by linking the monstrous formations in both films to post- and nonhuman embodiment, futurity, and agential networks: the monstrous is given form in the convergence of the racialized terrorist assemblage and the resistive undeath, coherence-defying corporeality, and contagious potentiality of zombie bodies in *World War Z*, and the monstrosity of a diffractive allegorical Anthropocene, the Shimmer, in *Annihilation*. It is argued that posthuman monstrosities of uncertainty and futurity are dually formalized: first, the monsters of racialized posthuman affectivity (which are the monstrous promises but also monstrous materialities of new materialisms), and second, the monsters of the agential Anthropocene

9 Yuwei Ge’s review of Drude Dahlerup’s 2017 monograph *Has Democracy Failed Women?*, published in Polity’s *Democratic Futures* series, completes this issue with an exciting excursion into feminist political philosophy and democratic theory.

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Trolling Humanism: New Materialist Performativity in *Border*

By Rebecah Pulsifer, Kettering University, USA

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?¹ Unraveling humanist frameworks that view

¹ 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).² At a more fundamental level, such scholarship participates in “a return to the notion of matter” (Butler 9).³ 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.⁴

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

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

³ 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).

⁴ 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.⁵ 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.⁶ 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.

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

⁶ 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).⁷ 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.⁸ 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

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

⁸ 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.⁹

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.

⁹ 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).¹⁰ 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

¹⁰ 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).¹¹ *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

¹¹ 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).¹² *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

¹² 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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Sia's Strained Girl: Performing Persistence in Neoliberal Environments

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Abstract

Australian singer-songwriter Sia (Kate Isobelle Furler) has become known as much for hit songs such as “Elastic Heart” and “Chandelier,” as for unusual claims to anonymity and privacy: Sia performs with her face covered by an oversized wig topped with a big ribbon or a hat, while child-dancer Maddie Ziegler takes the spotlight. Sia discussed her avoidance of visibility as an attempt to preserve a sense of privacy and freedom that celebrity culture does not usually afford stars. Ziegler has become the face and body of Sia's videos and concerts, sometimes accompanied by other child actors. In Sia's videos, the girl signifies multiply. She not only catalyzes the artist's larger preoccupation with consumption and sacrifice in celebrity culture, but performs the entrapment, vulnerability, and will for a livable life of a neoliberal youth subsumed to the logic of self-investment (Wendy Brown). This article analyzes how the girl, usually a figure of preoccupation, hope, and worthy investment (Angela McRobbie, Anita Harris), appears as one of strained persistence who defies both concern and hope, while, instead, spurring questions about the affective modalities available to young women in the age of increased neoliberal precarity.

1 Australian singer-songwriter Sia (Kate Isobelle Furler) has become known as much for her unusual claims to partial anonymity and privacy as for her hit songs, “Elastic Heart” (2013), “Chandelier” (2014), and “Cheap Thrills” (2016). Sia appears in performing spaces—whether stages, television sets, or the carpool karaoke—with her face covered by an oversized wig, usually topped with a big ribbon or a hat. In her few live shows she draws attention away from herself by singing in the back of the stage or hidden behind stage decor. Instead, the spotlight is on the carefully staged choreography of dancers.

2 Sia's reluctance to make herself visible has been discussed, including by the artist herself, as an attempt to escape the relentless gaze of the entertainment industry while preserving a sense of privacy and freedom that celebrity culture does not afford. As she explains in an interview:

I would like to be able to make great pop music for another 20 years. And it feels like creating a sort of inanimate blond bob and allowing other people to play the role of the pop singer, it affords me a little bit more freedom in terms of my expiration date. (Wiig n.p.)

Here, Sia speaks to the hyper-visibility of stars and to the industry's habits of subjecting musicians, in general, and women artists, in particular, to a cycle of consumption where we build them up and take them down (Bradshaw, Schlotterbeck, Smit). Indeed, a cursory look at the career of popular

musicians—from Janis Joplin and Nina Simone to Britney Spears and Amy Winehouse—shows this narrative trajectory of rise to fame followed by fall out of grace. Popular artists who challenge or diverge from such biographical storyline are rare.¹ That is because, as Melissa Brashaw notes, the narrative of rise to fame followed by demise is reflective of both a capitalist economy, where popular artists are consumed and discarded like all other goods, and of the audiences’ emotional inconsistency towards stars as “a stand-in for the fetishized mother... that we ambivalently adore, mourn, and hate” (Bradshaw 71-72). The female music star’s trajectory, at the intersection of capitalist practices and gender expectations, begs asking: What insights might we gain from reading star personae as manifesting our cultural moment’s ideological nexus of economic and gender ideologies? How can a music artist intervene in negotiating the dominant cultural imagination?

3 I propose that, in challenging prevailing narratives of star intelligibility to attempt a long-lived creative career, Sia has crafted the persona of ‘the strained girl’ as one critical not only of the culture of celebrity consumption, but also of neoliberal logics of subject formation increasingly modeled after star culture. I examine how Sia’s music videos accomplish a larger commentary on agency and vulnerability in late capitalism, arguing that she does so by appropriating the culturally ‘protected’ figure of the young ‘can-do’ girl and deploying it as one of strained effort, unlikely mastery, zany emotional labor, and vulnerability. In appropriating the idealized neoliberal subject of power and ambition, Sia positions the young girl as neither a super-heroine, as neoliberal postfeminist culture would have it, nor as a shattered feminine subject, as celebrity culture demands. Instead, Sia’s girl performs overwrought strength in precarious conditions. Through this persona, Sia interrogates consumption and sacrifice both in celebrity culture and as modes of being in this neoliberal capitalist moment of the Anthropocene.

4 I begin by discussing how neoliberalism normalizes exploitation of both the environment, through consumption, and of humans, through a logic of self-investment that understands people as equal only to their value-producing labor. The logic of consumption, in other words, overtakes subjects who understand not only materiality as potential capital and value, but themselves as a series of experiences, relations, and identities to be turned into exchange value and potential profit.

¹ Jesse Schlotterbeck explores such an exception: Todd Haynes’ biopic *I’m Not There*, which stages a series of symbolic deaths and rebirths, what the author calls a “thanatography.” See Schlotterbeck 231.

5 The girl has been the idealized subject of capitalism since the 1990s, hailed as a figure of hope and worthy investment by both the neoliberal capitalist economy and by feminism, albeit with different political agendas. I read Sia’s music videos as deploying the figure of the girl so as to make visible that which neoliberalism obscures: (1) the affective labor of continuous self-investment and production of a subject living by the logic of the market; and (2) the relations and environments that support the neoliberal girl’s “compulsory success” (Burman 358). Under neoliberalism’s logic, both the subject’s and the environment’s labor and potential depletion are invisible and only treated as ‘externalities.’ The system operates by making invisible or irrelevant the two ends of the cycle of value production. At one end, the support networks, practices, and conditions that have readied people and environments for the value-reaping stage. At another, the ‘externalities’ of that process: waste, pollution, disease, and species extinction. In late capitalism’s logic of disavowal, what is readily available for cultural representation are only subjects of power and enjoyment and objects of value, but neither the labor of production, nor the waste of consumption. Sia’s music videos, I will illustrate, foreground the obscured and implicit dimensions of life in neoliberal capitalism, dramatizing how the culture of consumption and self-investment leave both subjects and environments strained.

Neoliberalism’s Reach: The Girl and the Logic of Self-Investment

6 As the leading ideology of the Anthropocene, neoliberalism produces the economic and financial structures of an unsustainable world. In it, subjects living in strained ecological, political, and social systems increasingly experience life as relentless self-investment (Brown) and, those caught in systemic poverty, as slow death (Berlant). Neoliberalism accelerates the goals of the Reagan-Thatcher era, “dismantling . . . publicly owned industry and deregulation of capital, especially finance capital; . . . eliminat[ing] public provisions and the idea of public goods; and [submitting] everything to markets and to unregulated markets” (Brown in Isquith n.p.). It holds that society will function better if business reigns free and puts the state in the service of business through the language of state non-interventionism. In *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism’s Stealth Revolution*, Wendy Brown proposes that neoliberalism is more than an extreme form of capitalism. It is also a system that turns market-thinking into a totalizing form of reason (10). Brown explains that, if in earlier forms of economic liberalism, people would see themselves as market actors when they are in the marketplace, but use another form of reason for when they are in family, religious,

and political communities, in neoliberal capitalism humans think of themselves as market actors at all times (32-34). Brown calls this a totalizing logic of self-investment, known to children as young as the sixth grade:

As a proper bit of self-investing human capital, that child will be thinking at every turn . . . *How do I enhance my attractiveness to future investors?* And future investors will be excellent, private high schools; or excellent colleges; or excellent employers. Each thing the child does—whether it's volunteering at a charity in order to build up the résumé in order to look like a good civic citizen, a hardworking, willingly civic human being; or whether it's an unpaid internship where one is simply using the internship in order to enhance one's appearance of experience and knowledge and networking—becomes a way of making herself more attractive to future "investors." (Isquith n.p.)

The spread of this rationality, scholars of the Anthropocene would argue, goes hand in hand with our dis-investment from systems on which our sanity, humanity, and very embodiment depend, from local communities and families to the Earth's ecosystems.

7 Like all hegemonic ideologies, neoliberalism works at both the level of everyday experience and at the level of representation. Representationally, it normalizes which subjects are worthy of symbolic and material rewards, whether those material rewards follow or not in real life. Scholars have argued that young women have become the exemplary subjects of neoliberal governmentality, as figures of competition, ambition, talent, great capacity, and can-do-ness (McRobbie, Harris, Gonick). They explain the rise of the girl as a convergence of both progressive and conservative forces. According Marnina Gonick, the feminization of exemplary neoliberal subjectivity follows the transformation of the economy from manual production, dominated by men, to a service economy dominated by women (5). Women's increased centrality in the economic system has evolved alongside a feminist activist push for female empowerment and, since the 1990s, a postfeminist discourse of empowering the female consumer. In other words, women's movements have pushed the cultural agenda towards the affirmation of women's power and the political agenda toward equality and rights for women. As women's power became part of the neoliberal economy, the meaning of 'empowerment' was co-opted. As Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra explain:

Postfeminist culture works in part to incorporate, assume, or naturalize aspects of feminism; crucially, . . . to commodify feminism via the figure of woman as empowered consumer. Thus, postfeminist culture emphasizes educational and professional opportunities for women and girls; freedom of choice with respect to work, domesticity, and parenting; and physical and particularly sexual empowerment . . . Postfeminist fictions

frequently set aside both evident economic disparities and the fact that the majority of women approach paid labor as an economic necessity rather than a ‘choice.’ (2)

Tasker and Negra usefully underscore that, despite idealizations of female power since the 1990s, experiences and practices of female empowerment have remained profoundly fractured, full of contradictions, or simply unfulfilled.

8 Such short-changing of women is part of an increasingly short-changing of young people by a neoliberal economy predicated on “the dismantling of postwar social structures, rising levels of youth unemployment, welfare and education cuts, and credential inflation” (Gonick 5). Social class will smooth over the incongruity between cultural ideals of success and the economic realities of depleted infrastructures of support, by allowing middle- and upper-class families to fill the gap in supporting young women’s success. Meanwhile, Gonick notes, working class girls are left stranded with personal insufficiency as the sole explanation for their failure. For them, the postfeminist discourse of ‘empowerment’ becomes what Laurent Berlant would call a cruelly optimistic one.

9 In a representational economy where contexts and environments are removed from our cultural imagination and only a self-investing individual—idealized for her can-do attitude, productive work, and material consumption—is visible, Sia’s music becomes a powerful commentary on the current predicaments of our age. It foregrounds what neoliberal logics exploit—the body, labor, emotion, and environments—and forces us to confront their sustainability.

Brilliant Bodies of a Dystopian World

10 The postfeminist girl lives in hypervisibility. As Anita Harris writes:

Good girls, bad girls, schoolgirls, Ophelias, third wavers, no wavers, Bgirls, riot grrrls, cybergURLs, queen bees, tweenies, Girlies: young women suddenly seem to be everywhere. They are the new heroes of popular culture, the dominant faces on college campuses and the spokespeople of public education campaigns. (2004 xvii)

Girls are both represented by institutions that hold the power of representation, and are themselves seeking visibility, as entertainment figures. Since reality television has changed the perception of surveillance to cast perpetual monitoring as pleasurable and profitable (Andrejevic), young female ‘influencers’ and producers of content have become the faces of *YouTube* and Instagram, now billion-dollar businesses populated in great proportions by girls (Blattberg, Sandoval, Shobhit).

11 Sia's choice of protagonist for her music videos, Maddie Ziegler, is consequential for understanding the cultural significance of her 'strained girl.' Ziegler gained fame as a very talented child star dancer on *Dance Moms*, a reality television show where a tyrannical dance teacher works with young girl dancers and moms hungry for fame. Sia rerouted Maddie's fame by turning her into the performative substitute for the singer's body.

12 What emerges out this collaboration is the performance of hypermastery, an ideologically dominant mode of visibility for the postfeminist girl and for the young neoliberal subject. But despite displays of vocal and bodily hypermastery in Sia's videos, the heroine never comes close to the celebratory visibility we reserve for 'the can-do girl.' Instead, Sia's girl is on the edge, either about to lose her hold on reality, or adamantly resilient, if extremely vulnerable, in environments that accentuate her precarity. Such representation makes visible what the neoliberal imagination has made irrelevant: the environments that support the subject, their material and symbolic agency, and the emotional lives mandated of late capitalism's subjects.

13 The ensuing analysis takes three examples of Sia's strained girl—the music videos "Chandelier," "Alive," and "Big Girls Cry"—illustrating how they articulate three disavowed registers of neoliberalism: a frenzied search for support ("Chandelier"), the fatigued composure of the perpetually vigilant subject ("Alive"), and the zany animation of perpetual adaptation ("Big Girls Cry").

"Chandelier:" Amassing a Holding Environment

14 Like most of Sia's videos, the opening shots of "Chandelier" are silent, displaying drab settings that the child-dancer will animate with her movement. Here, a carpeted room with sparse old furniture, a hallway, and yet another room with stained carpet, worn out paint, and a few old portraits on the wall, signify a deserted home in an apartment building. The child's presence is almost eerie, as if she was forgotten in a place that has none of the attributes of a 'home:' protection, care, or the presence of adult effort. This unfriendly dead space will soon be animated by the child's playful body and bouncy blond wig. Through a choreography of tireless frantic movement, Maddie tries to compose a supportive environment out of the abandoned objects of domestic care—beds, sofas, tables, and carpets—which reveal themselves as insufficient the more the girl animates them.

15 In the vocabulary of classical ballet—which Maddie references in her supple embodiment, her tan leotard, as well as her dance movements,²—a male dancer acts as the stable holder, the stabilizer of the woman’s pirouettes, the frame on which her gracious body lands safely and off of which she projects effortlessly into the spotlight. “Chandelier” reassigns that role to the space and the objects surrounding Maddie. From the early seconds when she appears hanging ghostly in the doorframe and staring down the viewer to the last moments of the clip, Maddie moves continuously through abandoned spaces (see fig. 1).

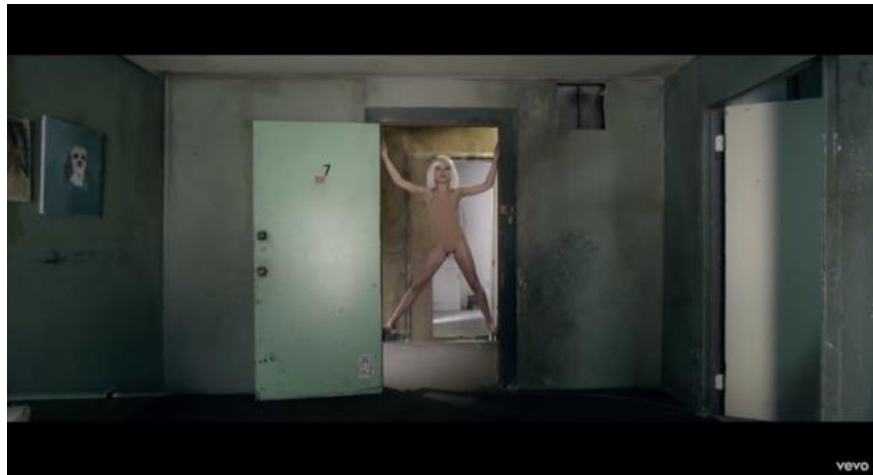


Fig 1. Maddie in inhospitable space. “Chandelier” (Youtube)

She bounces off the run-down décor, she dives onto old mattresses and couches, hangs from curtains, plays at the table, drags herself through rooms and swirls through hallways. Her choreography, thus, dramatizes a post-feminist neoliberal environment as a precarious ‘holding environment’ for the youthful subject of talent (see fig. set 2).



Fig. Set 2. Maddie’s movement enabled by space. “Chandelier” (Youtube)

² She turns into a grand jeté followed by a petit jeté, breaks into pirouettes, battements, pique turns, and jeté coupes, and peppers her choreography with series of chaînés. I am grateful to Dance Professor, Sandra Mathern-Smith, for clarifying the ballet terminology.

16 I borrow the concept of ‘holding environment’ from the psychoanalytic work of Donald Winnicott. To Winnicott, a reliable holding environment is key to becoming an individuated healthy adult, one who feels real to oneself, can be spontaneous, and can experience aliveness. Such holding environment is cultivated early in life by a “good enough” caretaker (Winnicott, 1987 188). This is someone who is able to adapt to the needs of the child with reliability until the child can express aggression, and then teaches them the play between aggression and compassion (1990 22). To Winnicott, our material and symbolic holding environments—from parents and relations to schools and other institutions—need to provide enough support, if individual and collective life are “given a chance” (1990 107).

17 Born out of the experience of working with children displaced by World War II, Winnicott’s psychoanalytic theory has been used to theorize neoliberalism’s erosion of democracy. Bonnie Honig draws on Winnicott’s “hard-earned, war-tossed appreciation of the importance of stable, worldly *things*” to develop a theory of democracy as reliant on the “public things” that form our holding environment (40). In Honig’s words, “[p]ublic things—objects of both facticity and fantasy—underwrite our collective capacities to imagine, build, and tend to a common world collaboratively . . . [and] achieve stability, integrity, and adhesion to things and to each other (Honig 38, 40). Honig’s conceptualization of public holding environments only makes more poignant Wendy Brown’s critique of neoliberal capitalism’s attack on all things public and other scholars’ descriptions of the Anthropocene as manifesting the consequences of an aggressive relation towards our planet as a holding environment.

18 Such theoretical perspectives not only reposition humans among non-human actants, but usefully foreground object-relations as the arena in which the neoliberal imaginary plays itself out. As self-investing neoliberal subjects, our relation to space has become one of temporary inhabitation, use, and mobility, an ethos that “Chandelier” dramatizes through barren and destitute interiors. But individualization and a democratic shared life depend, according to Winnicott, Honig, and Brown, among others, on our trustful reliance on and careful consideration of good enough environments. This ontological perspective is rendered invisible in the dominant ideology of neoliberal self-investment.

19 The neoliberal girl is a subject position of material and relational disconnection, whose agency in the world is supposed to manifest as individual mastery and environmentally-depleting

consumerism. Maddie performs visually the physical mastery of a top girl, while lyrics have as protagonist the consumer top-girl. Indeed, lyrically, the song references the oblivious rhythm of partying familiar to both music stars and to “the phallic girl,” a praised subject position for young women in neoliberalism since the 1990s (McRobbie 83). To Angela McRobbie, the postfeminist phallic girl is glorified for adopting masculine views of sex “as light-hearted pleasure, recreational activity, hedonism, sport” and risky behaviors such as heavy drinking. At the same time, she is to still observe norms of feminine embodiment that gratify the male gaze (McRobbie 83).

20 The lyrical protagonist of “Chandelier” alludes to the phallic girl and exposes such ideological demands as experientially painful. Thus, she moves from gleefully accepting the rewards of her social role (“I’m the one ‘for a good time call’ / Phone’s blowin’ up, they’re ringin’ my doorbell / I feel the love, feel the love/. . . I’m gonna live like tomorrow doesn’t exist”), to the end of her night (“Sun is up, I’m a mess / Gotta get out now, gotta run from this / Here comes the shame, here comes the shame”) and the addiction and desperation that accompany this cycle (“I’m gonna swing from the chandelier,/ And I’m holding on for dear life, won’t look down won’t open my eyes”). Unlike the hegemonic glorification of the phallic girl, “Chandelier” exposes the self-destructive cycle of drinking, partying, and oblivion as a painful one.

21 Read melodically and visually, the music video of “Chandelier” belies neoliberal ideals for girls and young women by dramatizing the anxiety and fragility that come with the territory of being a hegemonically-recognizable top girl. By placing Maddie’s mastery in spaces that hold her just enough for her to demonstrate her excellence, but not enough for her to carry a livable life, “Chandelier” dramatizes the demands placed on women and the emotional and environmental costs of neoliberalism in the Anthropocene.

22 Sia’s music video refuses to position the girl as either a conqueror of her conditions, or as their victim. Instead, this strained girl displays willful persistence as much as desperation, she exudes pleasure in exercising her capacities and subjecting herself to the camera’s gaze as much as she reproaches the spectator for intruding and then for deserting her. And instead of the satisfaction of seeing a normalized pacifying femininity at the end, Maddie delivers the final customary curtsy with an unsettling zany smile (see fig. 3). By dramatizing Maddie’s frantic and defiant interaction with space, “Chandelier” exposes our ideological attachments to not seeing our environments and their insufficient ability to ‘hold’ us.



Fig. 3. Maddie's unsettling curtsy. "Chandelier" (Youtube)

Vigilantly Alive

23 Another masterful strained girl is featured as protagonist in Sia's music video "Alive." The girl looks much younger than Maddie. She wears the signature shiny wig, and a white karate uniform tied by a black belt. During the duration of the video, the girl performs a karate training sequence interspersed with free style fragments, in a public setting that looks like a deserted underground section of a building.

24 The girl seems to have made a home in this space: she squats by a two-burner stove, stirring a pot and brewing tea, with a vigilant expression that she maintains for the duration of the five-minute music video. If Maddie in "Chandelier" flickers between enjoyment, desperation, reproach, and mockery, the girl of "Alive" has only one affective register: controlled vigilance and focused expressions of well-contained anger (see fig. set 4).



Fig. Set 4. Expressions of controlled vigilance. "Alive" (Youtube)

Alerted by a threat coming from outside the frame, in the deserted public building, the girl launches into a karate choreography. Gestures of strength come into focus, as the camera pans, sometimes in slow motion, over her hand perfectly energized, her foot intently placed and swiftly moving, and her frowning face (see fig. set 5). Her gestures never fail or hesitate, even when exhausted by the effort of self-defense.

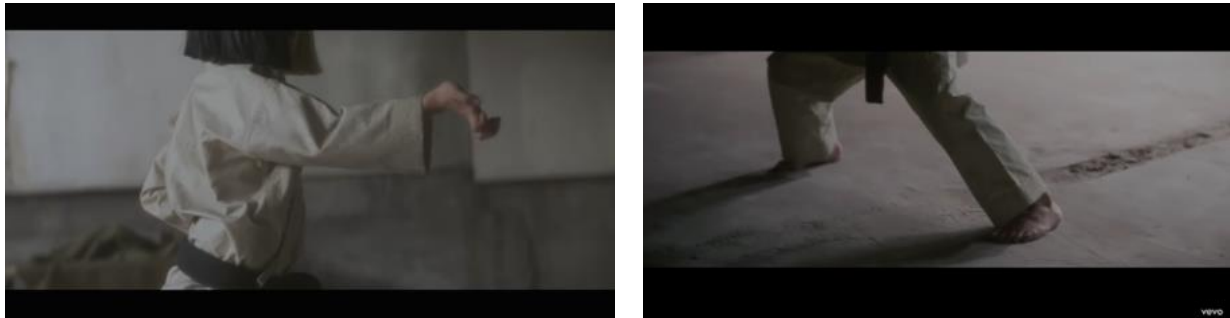


Fig. Set 5. Vigilant gestures. “Alive” (YouTube)

Her composure comes through especially when her poised movements are superimposed over outcries of Sia’s powerful voice. Composure is not an easy state, we are to understand, but an exercised skill of redirecting one’s fear and frustration into more skill, like in the martial arts she practices. As such, the girl’s composure aesthetically manifests a double demand on neoliberal subjects: to both do ongoing emotional labor and to be stoic.

25 Lyrically, “Alive” is a song about survival against all odds: “I was born in a thunderstorm / I grew up overnight / I played alone / I played on my own / I survived.” The theme of survival is frequent in Sia’s songs—from “Elastic Heart” to “Bird Set Free,” “Reaper,” “Unstoppable,” “Broken Glass,” “The Greatest” and, of course, “Alive”—a preoccupation born out of the artist’s experience. As Steve Knopper describes Sia’s survival story in *The New York Times*, the artist’s introvert personality clashed with the rhythm of touring and promotion of popular singers, and with the perfectionist pressures of star visibility. Like many, Sia adopted the industry’s coping rituals: drugs, alcohol, and consumerism, which brought her on the brink of suicide. Saved by a limited visibility (as the wigged Sia), the artist’s presence on the social scene remains minimal. In the few interviews she gives, Sia diplomatically voices anger at the star culture and its un-interrogated consumerism:

anywhere you go now where there’s a camera, it’s actually work . . . [Y]ou realize, ‘If I’m going to go [to an event], I’m going to need to get a tan. I’m going to need to have my roots

done. I'm going to have extensions, probably. I'm going to get a stylist for sure. I'm going to have to work out five times that week with Jennifer Aniston's trainer.' This is commerce and I'm \$5,000 in the hole just to go to a party . . . That is not what I'm going to be doing in the future. But it's funny to hear people in the biz say, 'Oh, it's nice you showed your pretty face.' You, of all people, should know. (Wiig n.p.)

Such criticism is uncommon in the industry, as anger expressed by women in defense of their wellbeing is culturally punished.

26 In the industry, we have seen female musicians critical of industry practices either marginalized or pilloried for their criticism (Frith and McRobbie). In the larger culture, Soraya Chemaly writes, women's expression of anger provokes aversion. They are perceived as more "hostile, irritable, less competent, . . . unlikeable" and even "'crazy,' 'irrational,' and 'demonic' . . . , the kiss of death for a class of people expected to maintain social connections" (xvi, xvii). As a result, Chemaly notes, girls and women learn to "contain" themselves: "our . . . hair, clothes, and, most importantly, speech" (xix).

27 Angry speech as the epitome of truth speaking about "trespass, violation, and moral disorder," (xx) remains that dimension of traditional femininity that postfeminist subjects are still to refrain from (McRobbie). While otherwise encouraged to exhibit virtues palatable to neoliberal consumerism, such as the glamor, the work flexibility, the can-do-attitude, Angela McRobbie explains, the postfeminist girl is to keep her quietness.

28 Sia's critical voice in the press and her distinctively intense singing voice breaks through the quietness required of neoliberal subjects. Under the guise of the wig and the child's body, she is able to express musical outrage that is a meaningful commentary both about the music industry she knows so well, and about demands on young women, more generally. Sia performs musical anger in both body and voice. Musically, the contrast in pitch and emotional intensity between verses, on the one hand, bridge and chorus, on the other, performs the tension between composure and expressed anger, respectively. The opening silence that establishes the girl as alone in the unwelcoming public space is interrupted by strong bases accompanying, in emotional tone, lyrics about endurance and the suppression of hurt: "I had a one-way ticket to a place where all the demons go / Where the wind don't change / And nothing in the ground can ever grow / No hope, just lies / And you're taught to cry into your pillow / But I survived." The repetition of "I'm still breathing" in the bridge and of "I'm alive" in the chorus lets grief and rage reverberate in Sia's voice.

29 The artist's voice has become famous for its ability to convey deep emotion, which popular commentators reductively describe as "gritty and frequently scream-y" (Cliff n.p.). Roland Barthes's notion of "the grain of the voice" affords a more productive perspective (179). Borrowing from Julia Kristeva, Barthes contrasts the aspects of a voice we can easily communicate about (style, ideology, mastery), on the one hand, and the "grain of the voice," on the other (179). The latter seduces and "sways us to *jouissance*" (183). Barthes's difficult-to-represent characteristics of the grain of the voice would be characterized by the more recent vocabulary of affect studies as the affective dimensions intimately lodged into our embodiment:

the tongue, the glottis, the teeth, the mucuous membranes, the nose . . . The 'grain' of the voice is not—or it is not merely—its timbre; the *significance* it opens cannot better be defined, indeed, than by the very friction between the music and something else . . . The 'grain' is the body in the voice as it sings, the hand as it writes, the limb as it performs. (Barthes 183, 185, 188)

Sia's vocal performance suffuses songs with the characteristics of her embodiment and with an affective intensity only partly tamed by her pop accessibility. Such embodied affective intensity erupts in the girls's explosive martial arts movements. Indeed, the paradox of Sia's performance persona is that, as she denies herself embodiment to avoid the tabloid spectacle of the mature woman's 'degradation,' she becomes, for other singers, the model for embodying one's voice.

30 The martial arts girl of "Alive" performs an extreme composure—not letting go of her intent facial expressions while engaging in a carefully executed choreography—that renders Sia's eruptive voice capable of performing an anger otherwise denied to mature women. Anger comes through in the long bridge toward the end of the song, which conveys the frustration of a postfeminist subject who has trusted neoliberalism's siren calls only to pay its hidden costs: "I have made every single mistake/ That you could ever possibly make / I took and I took and I took what you gave/ But you never noticed that I was in pain." At this time more than any in the song, the ensuing chorus, "I'm alive," conveys the wailing exhaustion of a pyric victory, rather than any celebratory victorious emotion. It is in this strained quality of her voice that we may locate the appeal of Sia's brand of 'victory' songs. There is no easy idealization in the victory of staying 'alive,' quite the contrary. We hear in Sia's clarion-like melodic yells and in her raspy, coarse, and broken intensities, as well as in the girl's vigilant gestures, that staying alive is difficult.

31 Both bodies 'speak' from a habitus of a resilience well ingrained in their flesh. The girl intensifies and delivers for audiences an affective questioning of the neoliberal pyric victories sold

to girls and women as strength. Such stylization of agony gives public language to untenable modes of being and feeling at risk—always adapting, desperately searching, manically self-investing, and constantly vigilant—that have otherwise not found expression in popular music.

Zany Habits in “Big Girls Cry”

32 Maybe no music video dramatizes the demands of neoliberalism on its subjects more than “Big Girls Cry.” Here, Maddie’s ‘dance’ consists of mostly upper-body movement and facial expressions. The head, the body part most equated with the self, wars with the hands, with hair, and the automatisms of a body that seems to take over and exhaust its subject with capricious animation (see fig. set 6). Gleeful facial gestures, however, also erupt unexpectedly, looking both ‘fake’ and urgent, as performed by a face otherwise expressive of exhaustion, perplexing collapse, or exasperation (see fig. set 7). There is no relief, no stable moment of repose in Maddie’s movements, which seem to follow an inner compulsion brought up by the spotlight. The light, changing in intensity and color during the duration of the video, fails to fulfill its traditional function of showing a comfortably-coherent, ready-to-please performing subject. It delivers, instead, a consumed girl who cannot stop her movements.



Fig. Set 6. Uncontrollable animation. “Big Girls Cry” (YouTube)



Fig. Set 7. The strained girl depleted. “Big Girls Cry” (YouTube)

33 This aesthetic is strongly indicative of what Sianne Ngai identifies as zaniness. To Ngai, zaniness is about performing “dangerously strenuous activity” incessantly (8). Such performances have “something impotent and ‘reactive’” about them, that distance the spectator (187, 8). A zany aesthetic, Ngai proposes, expresses late capitalism’s demands for constant flexibility and adaptation. It stands in clear contrast with the rigidity required by the Fordist/ Taylorist capitalism of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, one “Bergson famously captures in his image of ‘something mechanical encrusted on the living’” (Ngai 174). As Ngai explains:

In contrast to the isolation of workers, the fragmentation of the production process into individualized tasks, and their close supervision in the Fordist/ Taylorist factory, the new capitalist work paradigm . . . places a premium on the autonomy and self-management of workers and emphasizes creativity, communication, and networking as opposed to control. . . . [H]uman competences once viewed as outside capital—affect, subjectivity, and sociability—are systematically put to work for the extraction of surplus value. (202)

Twenty-first century’s economy produces subjects who frantically try to satisfy, in their elasticity, ongoing demands to produce value on fluctuating markets. Thus, the zany is an aesthetic about work, speaking “to a politically ambiguous erosion of the distinction between playing and

working,” between private and work lives, and between “affective bonds” and “useful relationships” (Ngai 188, 203).

34 Relying on Anthony Giddens and Eving Goffman, Ngai explains current economic exchanges as rooted in modernity, where increasingly “abstract systems” interact with laypeople (197). These systems have not stayed abstract and impersonal, but became ‘personable’ by employing what Giddens calls “access point” service workers: people who, through “front region” performances of friendliness, reliability, and even intimacy, create trust in corporations and other mass institutions of modernity (Goffman in Ngai 197). This work of deriving profit out of the flexibility of one’s emotional, relational, and intellectual labor is doubled by the expectation that one would self-regulate and know when to put boundaries between labor and non-labor. Ngai cites Hochschild’s study of Delta Airlines’ flight attendants as demonstrating the “difficulties [of] ‘coming down’ from their deep acting when their shifts ended,” and speaking of a common affective challenge for service workers (200). The labor “of producing affects like trust and conviviality . . . at access points” spills into people’s time away from work (200). Like the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study cannot stop being friendly, Sia’s girl here cannot stop her “adjustments and adaptations to one situation after another” (Ngai 174). The internalized spotlight seems to follow her in all environments, undermining neoliberal assumptions that boundaries between labor and non-labor can be easily set.

35 In a 2009 interview on French television that preceded her retirement into anonymity, Sia explains the emotional labor stars have to do, when the industry’s rhythm of promoting a new album is marked by the repetitiveness of interviews. Such repetitiveness, however, is not expected to be affectively-flat, but emotionally ‘genuine:’

And you, know, people care, people actually care about this stuff . . . Just the attention . . . And, you know, you want sunshine to come out of your nose, and your eyes, and your ears when you’re making friends with people. And most people don’t have to meet, like, fifty people a day and make sunshine come out of their nose and their eyes and their ears. So, if you’re having a shit day, it’s like, oh my god, I’m gonna die. And I think that’s why, I imagine that’s why Amy [Winehouse] was doing some crack and I imagine that’s why Britney [Spears] was on the uppers or the downers. (Nagui)

Sia’s explanation of the music industry only underscores the popular artists’ similarities to the affective labor of neoliberal subjects at access points. “Big Girls Cry” dramatizes the affective experience of these “absolutely elastic subject[s]” (Ngai 174).

36 Lyrically, we are encouraged to read the dark setting as the private space of a top girl who has to experience the relational deprivation brought by (over)investing emotional energies in work: “Tough girl in the fast lane / No time for love, no time for hate / No drama, no time for games / Tough girl whose soul aches / I’m at home, on my own / Check my phone, nothing, though / Act busy, order in / Pay TV, it’s agony.” Maddie’s movements, instead of performing the quiet desolation indicated by the lyrics, dramatize instead an inner life still caught up, like the flight attendants in Hochschild’s study, in deep acting of social interactions. Despite being spent, she continues to live in the emotional automatisms of her thoughts and body.

37 Maddie performs the emotional ‘externalities’ of service labor like a twenty-first century Charlie Chaplin who leaves the social scene of work and continues adapting and ‘keeping busy’ to the point of exhaustion. The engulfing darkness of the setting speaks to the totalizing logic of neoliberalism that Brown emphasized, one that cannot be escaped. Under the spotlight’s pressure and expectations, Maddie performs endlessly. The girl is delivered to viewers consumed by an animation that does not have the intentionality of agency, but the automatism of emotional habit. Sia’s song illuminates how zany exertion and adaptation becomes the norm for women when a culture of compulsory success, a service economy, and a gender socialization in maintaining relations coalesce in neoliberal capitalism.

Conclusion

38 ‘The strained girl,’ as the face of Sia’s on-stage persona, signifies multiply. For Sia, the girl catalyzes an aesthetic that protects her against the music industry’s practices of consuming and sacrificing celebrities. It allows the artist to comment on the ruinous effects of those practices while containing the risks of the mature woman’s visibility. Sia’s powerful voice and counter-cultural demands to privacy already position her as an unruly woman. By foregrounding the girl’s body, Sia eschews the visual spectacle of the unruly diva that the industry likes to deride and marginalize.

39 At a broader cultural level, Sia’s use of the idealized postfeminist girl illuminates the dark side of both this idealized subject position and of the neoliberal ideology gaining legitimacy from it. In our cultural moment, celebratory of the girl, Sia’s music videos bring into focus the vulnerability and desperation of a neoliberal youth subsumed to the logic of self-investment in a culture of compulsory success. Both the culture of celebrity and the culture of self-investment

direct our attention only to top subjects who are joyously pursuing their value, or to objects enjoyed for their value. Sia, by contrast, renders visible the labor and ‘externalities’ of a neoliberal economy. She facilitate an imagination of the conditions of possibility for the girl’s celebratory demonstration of power, pointing to those “public things” that a neoliberal economy actively dismantles (Honig). Sia articulates visually the subject’s reliance on such “holding environments” (Winnicott) by consistently featuring drab or conspicuously unsupportive settings. Such settings become an integrative part of the girl’s choreography, affectively intensifying her vulnerability, while spotlighting her exceptionalism.

40 In addition to foregrounding the materialities and the work involved in the production of valuable subjects and objects, Sia’s music videos also articulate aesthetically the depletion brought up by an economy with porous boundaries between private and public selves. While the videos do not overindulge in the girl’s performance of victimization—only in “Big Girls Cry” do we see her completely distraught, while in “Alive” the girl is mad and composed and in “Chandelier” she enjoys her strained power—they do articulate aesthetically the ongoing labor of the girl, as well as the unfairness of her condition.

41 Such ongoing labor takes on the qualities of zany exertion and automatism. Sia’s music videos expose the hailed subject of neoliberal capitalism as exhausted, overactive, and too elastic for her own good. A subject who, like her environments, remains spent and unable to regenerate. If Sia’s vision for the future is dire, the aesthetic of interdependence between self and environments, between professional and emotional selves, and between the girl and the woman, that she constructs, opens productive avenues for other popular voices to develop.

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A Lesser Human Future: Posthuman Monstrosities in *World War Z* (2013) and *Annihilation* (2018)

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Abstract

World War Z's (Palestinianized) zombies and *Annihilation*'s anthropocenic Shimmer *post* or *rework* conceptions of humanist and anthropomorphic monstrous bodies as sociologically knowable and biologically bound entities, as they are monstrosities of entanglement in nonhuman, informational, technological, ecological, and geological Latourian actor-networks. The monstrous of canonical monster theory, as a nonindividual discursive network of power, mediates a specific cultural body, whilst, in a conceptualization of monstrosity as actor-network, the monster would not be monstrous because it is the othered, not-quite-human alterity-body of humanity, but because it demonstrates (*monere*) the transcorporeality and nonhumanness of humans in the first place, as well as their status as nonexceptional and non-autonomous actors and actor-networks within larger-than-life actor-networks. The Jerusalem scene from *World War Z* links the posthuman *terrorist* becomings and resistances of the zombie and the (Palestinian) suicide bomber: the zombie bite, which collapses undeath into undeath, body and flesh into body and flesh, is comparable to the explosive death of the ballistic suicide bomber confusing boundaries between flesh, metal, life, death, and undeath. *World War Z*'s zombie and the racialized suicide bomber share the monstrous potentiality of posthuman contagion and networkability. In *Annihilation*, the Shimmer, the Alienocene as analogy of the Anthropocene, is a demonstrative monstrosity, cautioning that it is not simply humans changing the *morphism* of the Earth, but that the Earth itself is a nonhuman actor-network whose alterations effect alterations in the *morphisms* of the human. The monsters of climatological and geological change, the monsters of *what-we-have-done-to-the-earth*, will ultimately get *us*, precisely because we irreducibly intra-act with *our* Anthropocene.

1 The monsters of Marc Forster's *World War Z* (2013) – zombies – and Alex Garland's *Annihilation* (2018) – the Shimmer – lend themselves to two conceptualizations of posthuman monstrosities: zombies as the swarm-like excess of humanity, always-already “post(mortem)” (Lauro 233), as terrorist flesh-weapons and anthropocenic actants, and the Shimmer as an agential ecosystem-shifting force, an allegorical Anthropocene. Both zombies and the monstrosities of the Anthropocene *post* conceptions of humanist and anthropomorphic monstrous bodies as knowable and sociologically and biologically bound entities, as they are monstrosities of entanglement in nonhuman, informational, technological, ecological, and geological Latourian actor-networks.

2 In “Technologies of Monstrosity,” Jack Halberstam; writes that “monsters are over-determined, and open therefore to numerous interpretations, precisely because they transform the fragments of otherness into one body” (337). Halberstam's remarks are insightful in that they call

attention to the nonhuman or impersonal technologies of mediation that constitute monsters and monstrosities. Yet, the embodiment of the numerous technologies of monstrosity (which are/remain discourses of otherness) is still located in a body that remains a *bounded humanimal body*, a corporeal entity. Arguably, ‘monster movies’ have a longstanding history of subverting such logics of coherent monstrous physicality in the form of interplays between agential spatial formations, e.g. haunted houses or fogs, and small-scale embodied monstrous agents. In a sense, mediatic monstrosity has always-already been a network of irreducible, entangled posthumanist agencies, posting the cohering humanimal¹ body (vampire, werewolf, etc.) so prevalent in monster theory. The monster of monster theory is an unstable (yet stable enough), discursively constructed, permeable, liminal, becoming, but still strangely localizable, coherent, sociological, and organic body (Cohen, Shildrick). In as much as it disturbs self-presence, the Cartesian subject’s reduction to a(n) (anthropo)morphic body reinstates self-presence: it announces itself as *the body, the embodied as-such* of discursive monstrosity. Derrida agrees that “[the] presentation of the other as such, that is to say the dissimulation of its ‘as such,’ has always already begun and no structure of being [étant] escapes it,” which is a process of naming, categorizing, and mediating presence as the truth of being (Derrida, *Grammatology* 51). However, that “which can [...] only announce itself, *present* itself, in the species of monstrosity,” is never fully there, fully present, fully embodied, but a *presenting* trace of an event that will come to disrupt *present* and *presence* (5). The bound monstrous body is not really a monster but rather a *trace* of an irreducible absent present monstrosity (50-51)

3 This paper is aimed at theorizing posthuman, and in that sense post-anthropocentric, post-body, post-personal, irreductionist, monstrosities, whilst keeping with Neil Badmington’s caution that “[t]he ‘post-’ is forever tied up with what it is ‘post-ing’,” what it is *reworking* (20). Monstrosity is not transformed into one body; rather this one reduced body, which is never just one bounded body, but an irreducibility of relationalities, is an actor and itself a network within an actor-network of monstrosity via Latour: “what is doing the moving and what is moved have no specific homogenous *morphism*. They can be anthropo-morphic, but also zoo-morphic, physio-morphic, logo-morphic, techno-morphic, ideo-morphic, that is ‘x-morphic’” (Latour, “Actor-

¹ Here, I use this term to designate not so much human-animal relationalites, but the visual blurring *and* fixing of human-animal boundaries in a single body of monstrosity, such as that of the werewolf as the definite corporeal unit from which monstrous effects and affects spread. The fixture of monstrous affectivity only reinstates the humanist notion of a reducible body, from which alone agency can emanate.

Network Theory” 380). The morphic body of agency is a retroactive attribution and reduction of an irreducible net of nonhuman agencies and interconnections to a homogenously agential humanoid shape. For Latour, agency exceeds “the *social* relations of *individual human* actors” in that it also belongs to actants, that is “*non-human, non-individual* [agential] entities,” and exceeds a privileged morphology and corporeality, meaning that, within an(y) actor-network, agencies are attributable to various corporeal and noncorporeal actors, which are actively networking, and radically open to being networked by other actors and networks: actors and actants are both actors within actor-networks and actor-networks themselves (380). The Halberstamian monstrous, as a nonindividual discursive network of power, mediates a specific cultural body, whilst, in a conceptualization of monstrosity as actor-network, the monster would not be monstrous because it is the othered, not-quite-human alterity-body of humanity, but because it demonstrates (*monere*), per Cohen (4), the transcorporeality² and nonhumanness of humans in the first place, as well as their status as nonexceptional and non-autonomous actors and actor-networks within larger-than-life actor-networks.

4 I would like to expand on monstrosity as actor-network by linking it to Deleuze and Guattari’s suggestion *to define bodies by counting their affects*:

In the same way that we avoided defining a body by its organs and functions, we will avoid defining it by Species or Genus characteristics; instead we will seek to count its affects. [...] We know nothing about a body until we know what it can do, in other words, what its affects are, how they can or cannot enter into composition with other affects, with the affects of another body, either to destroy that body or to be destroyed by it, either to exchange actions and passions with it or to join with it in composing a more powerful body. (299-300)

Counting affects and conceiving of actors in terms of their affective relations displaces anthropocentrism of agency, and rather speaks to compositions and arrangements of human and nonhuman affectivity (as that which affects and is open to being affected), or what has been translated as *assemblage*.³ This does not just provide an understanding of nonhuman and material affectivity and activity, it also points to the ways in which human affectivity and activity are augmented or diminished by what exceeds human consciousness and embodiment. Jasbir K. Puar

² This is term Stacy Alaimo uses in her *Exposed: Environmental Politics and Pleasures in Posthuman Times* to refer to the radical openness of (human) bodies in their exposure to and entanglement with various bodies and networks, human and nonhuman.

³ *Arrangement* is a better translation of the original French *agencement* than Brian Massumi’s *assemblage* (Philipps 108-109). I will, however, retain *assemblage* due to its wider accepted usage.

theorizes, in this vein, “multiple bodies”: “the visual, representational body,” the body of visible, potentially intersecting identitarian integrities, and “the affective body,” the assemblage of “multiple registers” of affectivity that exceed the biological and sociological coherent human body: things, media(tedness), information, surroundings, etc. that are not simply *extensions* of a biologically bounded body, but, on the contrary, overlapping constituents “of organic and nonorganic machinic” assemblages: the monstrosities and terrorisms of these assemblages lie in their affectivity or their potential to enter into new networks of affectivity, which are always-already uncountable, becoming, however, the target of surveillant counting (199-200). This sense of incalculability and futurity is also reflected in Derrida’s remark “that the future is necessarily monstrous: the figure of the future, that is, that which can only be surprising, that for which we are not prepared, you see, is heralded by species of monsters. A future that would not be monstrous would not be a future; it would already be a predictable, calculable, and programmable tomorrow” (“Passages” 5). The monstrous is not there, not here and now, it is necessarily breaking with the *present* and *presence*, “a world to come,” a constant deferral (*Grammatology* 5). Networking and being networked are the preconditions for imagining the body-as-actor-network (or the body-as-assemblage), as the stuff of futurity, or as radically open to futural entanglements and futural (nonhuman) events. This can also be related to Jane Bennett’s new materialist negotiation of *impersonal affect* and *affective materialities* in her book *Vibrant Matter*. Bennett’s “focus [is] less on the enhancement to human relational capacities resulting from affective catalysts and more on the catalyst itself as it exists in nonhuman bodies. This power is ... impersonal, an affect intrinsic to forms that cannot be imagined (even ideally) as persons” (xii). Thus, nonhumans and matter can be designated as affective, whilst their affects are of an impersonal nature, for what is affective or possesses affective capacity is not a human *person* alone, but the nonhuman arrangement with which the latter is in ontological relation, such as the stuff of both material culture and the environment. The notions of the assemblage and impersonal affectivity help understand bodies as posthuman – that is human-nonhuman reworked – nonexceptional actor-networks within wider nonhuman actor-networks and help accentuate acting as a networking and coextensive activity, and an ongoing consequence of being networked again and again by *beyonds*.

5 In *World War Z* zombies are monsters of impersonal and incalculable affectivity, as well as actor-actants – questionably human-nonhuman, corporeal-noncorporeal – in the actor-network monstrosity of an agential Anthropocene. The opening sequence of the film already negotiates a

relationship between *culture* and *nature* or *environment*, and, in that sense, life-worlds imagined as either exclusively human or nonhuman.⁴ The editing suggests relationalities as well as (enforced) *cuts* and *dissolves* between culture and nature, human and nonhuman, which, however, are thereby revealed as the consequences of (Derridaean) writing, of cinematography, of a humanist mediation of dualism. The medially recycled *talk* and denial of environmental catastrophe and *the doomsday* – in its talkshow, expert interview, news footage, wildlife documentary mediality – and the intermixing of images of *strange* occurrences among both humans and nonhuman animals, points at once to the mediation/mediatedness of human life-worlds by nonhuman media technologies, which also make the very human vs. nonhuman dualism possible in the first place, as well as to the surfacing of an epistemologically sidelined yet ontologically relevant collapse between cultural or human and natural/environmental yet also technological or nonhuman worlds and agencies. What is foregrounded is the impersonality and nonhuman mediation of humans, as well as the *undeath* of the Anthropocene, the repressed natureculture – both given form through the coming zombie and the zombie apocalypse. For this paper, I will relate the *terrorist* posthuman becomings of the zombie and the (Palestinian) suicide bomber, rather than focusing on the eco-zombie as a materialization or actant of the Anthropocene.⁵

6 I specifically turn to the scenes in which the zombies make their way into the city of Jerusalem, which, because of its walled protection system, remains one of the few zombie-free zones in the world. When Gerry (Brad Pitt) arrives in Jerusalem, a Mossad agent, Jürgen Warmbrunn (Ludi Boeken), tells him that Israel built its wall(s) preemptively, after receiving information about a potential zombie outbreak from India, which constructs an implicit analogical relationship between the monstrous futurities of Palestinian (terrorist-coded)⁶ and zombie (terrorist-coded) risk. Following Sherryl Vint, the zombie-Palestinian analogy manifests itself in their status as “object posthuman figures—most evident in the reconfiguration of zombies from

⁴ Donna Haraway deconstructs these retroactively constructed dualisms by insisting on the ontological relationality and inseparability between nature and culture, coining the term *natureculture* (see Haraway’s first chapter, “Emergent Naturecultures,” in her *Companion Species Manifesto*)

⁵ There are two outstanding papers which work through this relation, namely Phillip McReynold’s “Zombie Cinema and the Anthropocene: Posthumanist Agency at the End of the World” and Sarah Juliet Lauro’s “The Eco-Zombie: Environmental Critique in Zombie Fiction.”

⁶ After all, Israel has built and is building walls to keep out Palestinian *threats*. Warmbrunn also states that Israel’s tactics of Zombie pre-emption stem from having learnt from previously misrecognizing or underestimating looming Arab-terrorist and Arab-military threats, such as the Munich massacre or the Jom Kippur War.

the living-dead to the infected-living—[that] deconstruct the binary of living and death: surviving, but not really alive, they persist in a future without hope, a paradoxical future without a future” (174). Agreeably, the zombies and Palestinians (or more generally, populations on the wrong side of the biopolitical and necropolitical caesura⁷) are posthuman and (figuratively and literally) quasi-posthumous in their shared abject state of life-in-death. But I wonder how the *infected-living*, as actor-networks of risk and contagion, and thereby futural monstrosity, are *without a future*: both zombie and Palestinian resistance fighter/suicide bomber are monstrously futural in that their *undeath* or *death* might collapse others into *undeath* or *death*, in that they are monstrously contagious and networking. For Vint, the zombie is an allegory of dehumanization under biopolitical racism and late capitalism, but the question is whether that makes it posthuman or speaks to posthuman ontologies and entanglements. In a different vein, Sarah Juliet Lauro and Karen Embry write that what makes the zombie posthuman is its “irreconcilable body (both living and dead) [which] raises the insufficiency of the dialectical model (subject–object) and suggests, with its own negative dialectic, that the only way to truly get posthuman is to become antisubject” (396). The antisubject, here, is what disrupts bounded corporeality, puts into question clear-cut boundaries between subject and object, and rather figures as a an open and networkable body, an actor-network whose agencies and interactivities exceed the supposed coherence of the body-as-organism and the autonomous subjectivity of Man.⁸ *Undeath* is a form of (involuntary) resistance that is thoroughly posthuman because it collapses the boundaries between life, death, and undeath, the organic-corporeal and inorganic-incorporeal (the contagious virus embodied), flesh and/as weapon, as well as body, space, and time; a body that is spatially and temporally out of itself in that it is spatially and temporally between life and death, spatially dependent on both the multitudinal being of the zombie herd and on the act of transcorporeal feeding, and temporally dependent on the futurity of infecting others.

7 Jasbir K. Puar’s (Mbembe-influenced) comments on the Palestinian suicide bomber are insightful when trying to read the *terrorist* suicide bomber into the *terrorist* zombie:

[A] a body machined together through metal and flesh, an assemblage of the organic and inorganic: a death not of the Self nor of the Other, but both simultaneously, and, perhaps more accurately, a death scene that obliterates the Hegelian self/other dialectic altogether. Self-annihilation is the ultimate form of resistance, and ironically, it acts as self-preservation (216).

⁷ See lecture eleven in Michel Foucault’s “*Society Must Be Defended*” and Achille Mbembe’s “Necropolitics.”

⁸ This very much in line with Herbrechter’s proposal of a critical posthumanism in his *Posthumanism*.

[...]

Fully modern, animated through technologies of sound and explosives, this body does not operate solely or even primarily on the level of metaphor. Once again, to borrow from Mbembe, it is truly a ballistic body. Contagion, infection, and transmission reign, not meaning (220).

When the zombies climb the wall and topple into the *World War Z*'s Jerusalem, they are animated by tonalities, a song performed by a hijab-wearing (thereby machined as Palestinian or Arab) woman. The scene metaphorically links zombies and suicide bombers on the three posthumanizing levels outlined by Puar. 1. They are animated and networked by sensorial and impersonal technologies, the soundwaves of the woman's song, that are agential beyond the woman's body and beyond their bodies, which creates an actor-network or an assemblage that is neither reducible to the woman's body nor the song nor the zombies, but rather forms an impersonal affective network of monstrous futurity. 2. They fall into the city as ballistic bodies, as zombie-bombs, as flesh-weapons ("body-weapon[s]" per Puar [217]) whose ontology (rather than metaphoricity) makes distinctions between flesh, body, weapon, and machinic (metaphorical) bomb untenable. The zombie really *is* the bomb, meaning that its *fleshy organicity*, which is always-already self-destructively put on the line, works as a *perfect* analogy of the organic-inorganic ballistic suicide-bomber-assemblage (217). 3. The zombie's contagious undeath, in the act of infecting through the bite, is a death scene without a terminal death which, however, does away with the self/other dialectic within the 10 seconds it takes to become infected/zombified, a scene in which the death of the human becomes the shared undeath of zombiehood. If, in the unfolding event of suicide bombing, "there are no sides, and [...] the sides are forever shifting, crumbling, and multiplying, disappearing and reappearing, unable to satisfactorily delineate between here and there" (218), then the zombie bite, which collapses undeath into undeath, body and flesh into body and flesh, is comparable to the explosive death of the ballistic suicide bomber confusing boundaries between flesh and metal, as well as a self-other binary where everyone supposedly *dies alone*: rather, the death-scenes are thoroughly posthuman in that multiple human-nonhuman and life-death boundaries dissolve, constantly mutate. An actor-network of death becomes analogized by an actor-network of undeath. It is not my aim to celebrate murder and violence here, but I do intend to stress the significance of death- and undeath-events as posthuman resistances that dispel Vint's *no-future* argument: both the zombie and the suicide bomber "overcome[s] [or at least mobilize] his [sic!] own mortality," "laboring under the sign of the future" (Mbembe 37), in that their deaths

and undeaths posthumanize the futural play of resistance. I have not so much embraced the zombie (uncritically) as a posthuman monstrous promise but simply shown that theorizing the zombie as posthuman must go further than the act of pointing to its dehumanization as disposable (non-)life, especially when linking it to bio- and necropolitical racialization. What is at stake is both the zombie's and the racialized suicide bomber's monstrous potentiality and posthuman contagion and networkability.

8 Alex Garland's *Annihilation*, based upon Jeff VanderMeer's eponymous 2014 novel, constructs an incorporeal extraterrestrial force, the Shimmer, that causes human and nonhuman life forms on earth to mutate and to refract each other and be refracted by the Shimmer. Despite its designation as an alien or extraterrestrial force, I would argue that the Shimmer can be read as an agential Anthropocene, as a moving and moved Earth (Latour, "Agency" 2-3), that effects biological, ecological, and geological wide-scale changes beyond human control (Davies 1-8), managing these changes through monstrous appearances, such as mutated nonhuman animals, plants, as well as becomings-nonhuman of humans, whilst being an irreducible Anthropocene monstrosity. The term Anthropocene suggests an epoch, a rewriting of geological time, measurable in stratospheric changes, and how humans have effected a change in history or histories that are purely relational – both human and more so nonhuman -- and beyond their control (Davies 1-4), a shared *geostory*, as Latour would have it ("Agency" 3). The Anthropocene is as much about human exceptionalism and its (self)destructive effects, as it is about the non-exceptionalization of the human and a redistribution of agency and *life* to nonhumans, small- and large-scale, as well as the interactivity of humans and nonhumans in human-nonhuman actor-networks composed of always newly emergent actor-networks. The Shimmer's designation and turn-out as extraterrestrial or alien is telling in that it works in line with designations of terrestrial or -terrestrial agencies, nonhuman agencies that displace human exceptionalism, as alien and unthinkable, precisely because they put into question the centrality of humans as exceptional agents of change as well as nonhuman passivity: the idea of a living and effecting Earth as actor-network, which goes beyond human control and re-networks humans into human-nonhuman networks, is so monstrous that it can only be imagined as alien and thereby as at once quasi-human and nonhuman, higher-human, alien-specific. Intervention from the planetary outside works as an analogy for intervention from the inside (human capitalism), which, however, claims a radical *outside* to, disentanglement from, or ontological superiority over the nonhuman (in all its varieties), but is unprepared and shattered

by a sudden posthumanization of what counts as agency. I will turn to selected scenes to make clear how the monstrosities of *Annihilation* are those of *bodies tumbled into bodies*⁹, of human-nonhuman relationalities and entanglements, and the incorporeal Shimmer's re(net)working and diffracting of supposedly distinct corporealities, species, biologies, and ecologies.

9 In *Annihilation*, Lena (Natalie Portman), a biology professor at Johns Hopkins University and ex-Armed Forces member, is brought/abducted to Area X after her husband, Sergeant Kane, an Armed Forces soldier, returns home almost-terminally ill from a covert mission into the Shimmer. The Area X facility, run by the government agency Southern Reach, is located close to the Shimmer, a steadily expanding force-field whose boundaries are *shimmering* nebula-like iridescences, and sent-in missions have a history of not returning from it: in fact, Kane is the first life-form to reappear alive from the Shimmer. Given the state her husband is in and driven to get behind its cause, Lena decides to join an all-female mission, consisting of Dr. Ventress (Jennifer Jason Leigh), Southern Reach's head psychologist, Cass (Tuva Novotny), a geomorphologist, Anya (Gina Rodriguez), a paramedic, and Josie (Tessa Thompson), a physicist, headed into the Shimmer/to a lighthouse in it from which said Shimmer is said to have expanded. The scene of going into the Shimmer – visualizing a sense of human exceptionalist expedition spirit, of the penetration of a nonhuman (eco-)system by knowing or at least knowledge-seeking subjects -- is radically contrasted with the first scene of *being* in the Shimmer, where human agencies are completely *at the whim* of the nonhuman Shimmer: the women suffer memory and temporal loss, as their food inventories indicate that they spent three days in the Shimmer, whilst neither the women nor the spectator, given the on-screen absence of these three days, can experientially recollect these three days. Further, they are unable to communicate with the *outside world*, as the Shimmer blocks, or as we later learn, refracts, or probably rather diffracts, “through one another,” per Karen Barad (30), radio signals (their networking activity is reduced by their implication in a wider actor-network, the Shimmer, which networks them inadequately, or rather in a way that is at odds with human, anthropocentric intentionality). In Barad's agential realism, both (self-)knowledge and knowledge production and transmission are “matter[s] of differential responsiveness,” which do not come “from above or outside or even seeing from a prosthetically enhanced human body,” rather [k]nowing is a matter of intra-action” (149). Knowing as intra-

⁹ See Heather Swanson, Anna Tsing, Nils Bubandt, and Elaine Gan's “Bodies Tumbled into Bodies,” in *Arts of Living on a Damaged Planet: Ghosts and Monsters of the Anthropocene*.

action, as “the mutual constitution of entangled agencies” between the human expeditioners and the Shimmer, which, at least after entering it, “recognizes that distinct agencies do not precede, but rather emerge through, their intra-action” (33), is monstrous in that it renders obsolete and nonexistent, non-ontological in some way, the distinct agencies and autonomous subjectivities (of knowing) structuring the expeditioners’ epistemological framework of being-in-the-world, their anthropocentric *world picture* in Heideggerian terms.¹⁰ Not-knowing and not-remembering what happened, when something clearly happened (indicated by the food inventory), gives human agency and intentionality over through their intra-acting with the Shimmer: the expeditioners do not know what happened because they were not the primary actors but rather actors within the actor-network of the Shimmer, within an intra-agential/intra-active human-Shimmer activity, which renders (purely) individual acts irretrievable, thereby epistemologically and ontologically impossible.

10 What the team discovers in the Shimmer are, above all, what Lena, the biologist, identifies as *mutations*: different plant species growing from the same branch, an oversized crocodile with the concentric teeth rows of sharks, a bear-like creature which, after killing Cass, absorbs the pained, agonic sounds of her last moments, deers on whose antlers flowers bloom, microscopic samples of Lena’s blood cells parting at increasing pace and *shimmering* in iridescence, as well as Anya realizing that her hands begin to *shimmer*. The Shimmer is radically changing the morphic structure of the beings it encompasses, and much to the surprise and shock of the expeditioners, their DNA, causing the expeditioners, as Gry Ulstein points out, to enter relationships of *kinship* with the Shimmer (71-73). The Shimmer functions as what Timothy Morton would call a *hyperobject* in that it is at once *nonlocal* and incorporeal but also *viscous* in that it manifests itself and sticks to all kinds of being, human and nonhuman, altering their genetic and structural being, not by eliminating it but by diffracting it through itself (1-3). At one point, the expeditioners discover plant structures that have grown in the shape of human bodies. The following dialogue (mostly between Lena and Josie) ensues:

Josie: That leaf in your hand ... do you know what you’d get if you sequenced it?

Lena: What?

Josie: Human Hox genes.

Anya: Hox? What is ... ? What’s Hox mean?

Lena: They’re the genes that define the body plan, the physical structure.

Josie: And the plants have human body plan. Arms attached to shoulders, legs to hips.

¹⁰ See Heidegger’s “The Age of the World Picture.”

Lena: It's literally not possible.

Josie: It's literally what's happening. The Shimmer is a prism, but it refracts everything. Not just light and radio waves. Animal DNA, plant DNA, all DNA (1:04:30-1:05:55).

For Lena, Josie's explication (which is not just anthropomorphic, as different morphisms overlap) summons "an event" of "the form of the unacceptable, or even of the unacceptable, or even of the intolerable, of the incomprehensible, that is, of a certain monstrosity" (Derrida, "Passages" 387), precisely because it summons a radical becoming-nonhuman of the human, displaces the human exceptionalism of an autonomous subject, and *promises* not so much a future without humans as a lesser human future. The refraction or rather diffraction (which is probably more fitting a term as multiple DNA *waves*, plant, human, and potentially more overlap when meeting the shimmer) of distinct human and nonhuman species agencies, leading to their heightened and absolute intra-action (Barad 30). What is evoked here is (strangely) reminiscent of Deleuze and Guattari's (somewhat Darwinian) rendering of "a becoming-wasp of the orchid and a becoming-orchid of the wasp": "There is neither imitation nor resemblance, only an exploding of two heterogeneous series on the line of flight composed by a common rhizome [...]" (9). After all, what Josie describes is an intra-acting of DNAs, a becoming-human of the plant and a becoming-plant of the human, something all-together and neither-nor, emanating from the same rhizomatic structure of the Shimmer; monstrosities that *post* human singularity and exceptionality in their becoming-nonhuman.

11 The ending scenes of the film help sum up the monstrosities of the actor-network, intra-action, and becoming-nonhuman: when Lena returns from the lighthouse as the sole survivor, having supposedly defeated the alien life form, the question of whether this is Lena or not looms large. First, the alien, which is scripted as the force behind the Shimmer, mirrors and diffracts Lena, creating itself as a Lena-look-alike. Second, when Lena meets her recovered husband, Kane, they answer each other's respective questions "Are you Kane?" and "Are you Lena" with "I don't know." In either case, a becoming-Shimmer of Lena and a multispecies diffraction of her DNA, which Lena discovered herself under a microscope, has happened and is under way, the coming of a monstrous, both alerting and promising, human-nonhuman future is under way.

12 I tried to sketch out a theory of the monstrous which posts a bounded and coherent humanoid (sociological and biological) body; in that sense, a theory of monstrous futurity in Derridean terms. In my analysis of the Jerusalem scene from *World War Z*, I have drawn

comparisons between the posthuman *terrorist* becomings and resistances of the zombie and the (Palestinian) suicide bombers. In their posthuman becomings, life and death fuse into each other, just as being a body and being a weapon become one in a transcorporeal contagion/infection: networks of undeath become a resilient way of life (or undeath). Zombie-ism and terrorism are monstrosities of a human-nonhuman future, that might collapse into the present at any point and without fore-warning. In *Annihilation* the Shimmer, the Alienocene as analogy of the Anthropocene, is a demonstrative monstrosity, cautioning that it is not simply humans changing the *morphism* of the Earth, but that the Earth itself is a nonhuman actor-network whose alterations effect alterations in the *morphisms* of the human. The monsters of climatological and geological change, the monsters of *what-we-have-done-to-the-earth*, will ultimately get *us*, precisely because we irreducibly intra-act with *our* Anthropocene.

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Drude Dahlerup: *Has Democracy Failed Women?* Cambridge: Polity Press, 2018.

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1 In recent years, researches have been conducted from different perspectives—such as cultural differences, economic influences, and institutional policies—to investigate the existing obstacles limiting women’s participation and leadership in political institutions and organizations worldwide (Thames and Williams 3). There are numerous research literature tackling the topic on the representation of women in politics: for instance, *Women, Politics, and Power: A Global Perspective* by Pamela Paxton and Melanie M. Hughes has a broad discussion on all factors relating to the political representation of women and presents regional studies on women in political institutions around the globe; *Contagious Representation: Women’s Political Representation in Democracies around the World* by Frank C. Thames and Margaret S. Williams explains the contagious influences of women’s political participation on both institutional and societal levels; and Torild Skard’s *Women of Power: Half a Century of Female Presidents and Prime Ministers Worldwide* gives regional analyses and case studies of women’s political leadership in national institutions. Contributing to the research on women and institutional policies, Drude Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* focuses on political institution *per se* with a global perspective and critically engages with the disconnection between women and political institutions both on national and international levels. In particular, Dahlerup investigates how the traditions and policies in political institutions and organizations have resulted in women’s underrepresentation in the political field, why it is of great significance to promote gender equality by adopting gender quotas and women-friendly policies, and what difference can be made in policy-making if national and international political institutions and organizations become more gender-balanced. Moreover, apart from the analysis on political governance, the scope of this book extends further to address women’s representation and perspectives with regard to economic governance and peace-building in transnational or international organizations (121-34).

2 Dividing her book into five chapters, each of which concentrates on a particular issue and leads to the next topic progressively, Dahlerup argues that current political institutions and organizations have continued to form a male-centric hierarchy and have become the major obstacles which prevent women from entering political professions and reaching for leadership positions. In Chapter 1 “Exclusion Without Words,” Dahlerup points out that democracy has

failed women from the beginning and has constituted male-dominance in political structures from various dimensions. Based on “a historical neo-institutionalist perspective,” Dahlerup considers “the ‘stickiness’ of institutions,” or the inertial influence of the pre-existing gender-biased traditions before women’s participation in political institutions, to be a main factor responsible for unbalanced gender power relations and women’s under-representation in democratic regimes (3-4). The early exclusion of women from the political field during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has made it a common phenomenon for the democracies to divide social and political roles based on gender difference, limiting women’s roles in the private sphere. The new ideas and arguments emerged in the feminist movements have promoted the transformation of women’s roles into real citizens, have improved the unequal gender relations in society, and have also made up the incomprehensive transitional process to democracy (22-23).

3 In Chapter 2 “Breaking Male Dominance in Politics,” Dahlerup proceeds to discuss the process and reality of women’s inclusion and participation in politics, and points out that the realization of global suffrage cannot fully guarantee that “democracy [can stop] failing women” (27). Due to the “inertia of the old democracies” (37), namely “the ‘stickiness’ of the political institutions” in continuing the male-centric traditions in the political world, women are often considered as intruders and face obstacles from the institutional level (30). Hence, Dahlerup questions the validity of the gendered claim which doubts the professional capability of women to work in the political field, and argues that the electoral systems and political parties are gender-biased and unsupportive of female candidates. Concerning the future of gender equality, Dahlerup adopts “the time-lag theory” and “the modernization theory” (56) to demonstrate that it will take some time for value-changing and culture-transforming in order to end the male dominance and women’s underrepresentation in political institutions (30). Meanwhile, factoring in the possible obstacles, “the theory of continuous reproduction of patriarchal structures” shows that the stagnation and fluctuation of women’s representation might appear and bring some unexpected changes challenging the realization of gender parity; and “the theory of shrinking institutions” depicts the worries and debates regarding the relationship between the power of political institutions and the influence of women’s representation (56-58).

4 To further tackle the problem of women’s underrepresentation in politics, Chapter 3 “The Impact of Gender Quotas” introduces the definition, discourses, and debates regarding the three quotas waves and the implementation of gender quotas in all types of political institutions and organizations. Dahlerup stresses that people may have their own understandings of gender quotas, while few of them know how they function (61-63). Dahlerup sees gender quotas as

“an affirmative action measure” and “a fast track policy” to guarantee equality (63). Currently, there are two different categories of top-ranking democracies with women’s high representation in electoral offices—the majority of these countries are from the Global South, while the others are from the well-developed Northern European countries (61). Particularly, Dahlerup discusses whether gender-based quotas interfere with the basic principles and progress of democracy (71). After an analysis of the status quo of gender quotas worldwide, Dahlerup concludes that, even though that gender quotas “cannot solve all the problems women encounter in politics,” they still play significant roles in raising women’s representation in the political field and contributing to “democratization in terms of who is included in political decision-making in all types of societies” (89-90).

5 Chapter 4, “Gendering Public Policy”, mainly deals with policy-making in the situation when women’s representation in politics is generally increased, and then explores the influence of female leaders on the political policies of women’s welfare, women’s rights, and gender equality (93). Nowadays, policies on gender equality have been institutionalized with government branches globally to enhance “gender relations and gendered structures”; and as a result of the lack of “male equivalent” and the overlook of measuring levels, the concept of gender equality has been argued and discussed for further improvement (100-01). Based on “the critical mass theory,” only when the number of women reach a considerable higher percentage in political institutions and organizations, can they really be influential in the process of political policy-making and be able to promote and ensure gender equality. Nevertheless, female leaders often face more constraints as the leadership positions have been “masculine-coded” (107), and they are challenged by many invisible barriers—“glass ceiling and glass cliff”—on their way to the top leadership positions (108). Therefore, women leaders often consider gender parity as one of their political commitment and actively promote gender equality policies. Lately, terms such as “state feminism” and “gender mainstreaming” have emerged in some nations, widely planting the idea of gender equality in the political discourse on the one hand, and imposing possible danger that “the transformative force of the demands of the women’s movements disappears” on the other (114). After all, no matter whether as individuals or as groups, women need “well-functioning and open democracies” to perform state interventions to end discrimination and inequality in the workplace and in society at large (114-16). Besides, as a consequence of the newly emerged global politics and governance structures, the democracies’ power is weakened, and women’s status in global politics becomes an essential issue to concentrate upon (116-17).

6 The final chapter “Women in Global Politics” continues with the question raised in the previous chapter and forms a gendered perspective to investigate women’s roles in the global arena, especially women’s representation and inclusion in transnational and international political institutions and organizations. Admitting that the global political field is much more gender-imbalanced, Dahlerup devotes most of this chapter to three cases. Firstly, in global economic organizations, such as the IMF, the WTO, and the World Bank, the male dominance still prevails and women are largely underrepresented. This aspect also connects with current debates on “the utility argument” concerning women’s representation and inclusion in economic sectors and organizations (122-23). Secondly, as women’s presence and inclusion in global organizations have increased recently, women “have made substantial contributions to peace-making and constitution-building” despite the indifferent attitude of “many negotiating parties and mediators” (131-32). Thirdly, transnational women’s organizations can strongly influence not only “global and regional governance organizations and institutions,” but also “national and local initiatives” (135). Specifically, the UN plays the most vital role in women’s political participation globally by “developing new global gender discourses” (138). In her conclusion, Dahlerup emphasizes that it is of great importance to eliminate all forms of discrimination against women and prevent “the revitalization of democracies,” and states that gender parity remains as a long-term task which asks for relentless efforts from women all around the world to accomplish in the future (147-48).

7 Drude Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* presents an insightful and logical analysis regarding the reasons of women’s underrepresentation in political institutions and organizations by supporting her discussion with a variety of theoretical references, historical facts, and latest data of women’s status in politics. Dahlerup successfully introduces a wide scope of knowledge on women and political institutions in the global context with convincing statistics, and offers compelling arguments with regard to women’s roles and influences on policy-making, political leadership, and transnational governance in different democratic regimes and global organizations. The book chapters are closely connected and provide concise contents for researchers not only to understand the structural problems of different democracies in failing to provide women’s opportunities to enter the political field, but also to question the outcome of women’s underrepresentation as well as men’s overrepresentation in political institutions and organizations. Hence, Dahlerup’s *Has Democracy Failed Women* can be a rewarding reference to any researcher with an expertise in feminist studies, gender studies, leadership studies, and political science studies.

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