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Neoliberal Darlings: the Commodification of Grotesque Children in Contemporary Comics and Literature

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NEOLIBERAL DARLINGS: THE COMMODIFICATION OF GROTESQUE CHILDREN IN
CONTEMPORARY COMICS AND LITERATURE

by

Mark Heimermann

A Dissertation Submitted in
Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements for the Degree of

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ABSTRACT

NEOLIBERAL DARLINGS: THE COMMODIFICATION OF GROTESQUE CHILDREN IN CONTEMPORARY COMICS AND LITERATURE

by

Mark Heimermann

The University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016
Under the Supervision of Professor Peter Sands

This dissertation analyzes grotesque depictions of children in contemporary, speculative comics and literature: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, Jeff Lemire's *Sweet Tooth*, Ben Marcus' *The Flame Alphabet*, and Richard Starkings' *Elephantmen*. It argues that the grotesque in these texts embodies the tension between children as economic objects and children as social beings, as the protagonists' nonhuman elements are used to justify their commodification. Because commodification metaphorically transforms people into hybrids, part human/part commodity, the grotesque, with its emphasis on hybrid forms and ontological destabilization, is uniquely suited for representing this tension. Concern over the transformation of childhood reflects anxiety over the dominance of neoliberalism, which subsumes everything under market logic. Realms that were recently considered social, like family and childhood, are increasingly understood in economic terms. These texts turn to the grotesque as a way to visualize the effects of an abstract ideology.

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To
Becky,
For your love and support

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
List of Figures	vi-vii
Acknowledgments.....	viii
I. Introduction: Childhood, Neoliberalism, and the Grotesque	1
II. The Grotesque Child: Animal/Human Hybridity in <i>Sweet Tooth</i>	33
III. Beautiful Monsters: The Grotesque and Postmodernism in <i>Elephantmen</i>	77
IV. “We Are Masterpieces”: The Commodification of Grotesque Children in <i>Geek Love</i>	137
V. Less Than Human: The Commodification of Clones in <i>Never Let Me Go</i>	170
VI. Unsettling Language: Grotesque Description in <i>The Flame Alphabet</i>	202
Bibliography	232
Curriculum Vitae	247

LIST OF FIGURES

	Page
Figure 1.1	64
Figure 1.2	65
Figure 1.3	66
Figure 1.4	67
Figure 1.5	68
Figure 1.6	69
Figure 1.7	70
Figure 1.8	71
Figure 1.9	72
Figure 1.10	73
Figure 1.11	74
Figure 1.12	75
Figure 1.13	76
Figure 1.14	76
Figure 2.1	112
Figure 2.2	113
Figure 2.3	114
Figure 2.4	115
Figure 2.5	116
Figure 2.6	117
Figure 2.7	118

Figure 2.8	119
Figure 2.9	120
Figure 2.10	121
Figure 2.11	122
Figure 2.12	122
Figure 2.13	123
Figure 2.14	123
Figure 2.15	124
Figure 2.16	125
Figure 2.17	126
Figure 2.18	127
Figure 2.19	128
Figure 2.20	129
Figure 2.21	130
Figure 2.22	131
Figure 2.23	132
Figure 2.24	133
Figure 2.25	134
Figure 2.26	135
Figure 2.27	136

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Introduction: Childhood, Neoliberalism, and the Grotesque

Childhood is a social construction which varies according to time and place (Jenks 7; Olson and Rampaul 23; Stearns 4). Understanding how childhood functions within a culture reveals as much about the culture as about childhood (Jenks 60). This dissertation argues that contemporary Western representations of grotesque children are a metaphor for the commodification of children and that these representations reflect cultural anxiety regarding the shifting conception of children from emotional assets to economic ones. These grotesque depictions give form to concerns over neoliberalism, the exploitation of children, and the changing nature of childhood. The grotesque bodies of children not only provide both a metaphor and justification for the exploitation of children, they also broaden our cultural understanding of childhood, neoliberalism, and the grotesque by revealing the ways in which these categories intersect.

Childhood in Contemporary Western Culture

The Western world, the United States and England in particular, is dominated by two conceptions of childhood: the innocent or idealized child and the evil or chaotic child. The innocent or idealized child is innately good and deserving of protection to help maintain its innocence. The evil or chaotic child requires strict regulation and oversight to restrain its natural tendency towards mayhem and disorder. Both constructions exist simultaneously, although the innocent child dominates the contemporary imagination despite evidence that its idyllic innocence cannot be maintained.

Contemporary understanding of the innocent child can be traced to Romantic conceptions of childhood. James Kincaid explains,

The Romantic idealization of the child ... was meant as a poetic figure, a metaphor, but it soon developed a quite literal, material base. For the Romantic poets, the child packaged a whole host of qualities that could be made into a poetics and a politics: the child was everything the sophisticated adult was not, everything the rational man of the Enlightenment was not. The child was gifted with spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God; but that's as far as its positive attributes went. More prominent were the negatives, the things not there. The child was figured as *free of* adult corruptions; *not yet burdened with* the weight of responsibility, mortality, and sexuality; *liberated from* 'the light of common day' (*Erotic Innocence* 14–15)

The innocent child is defined by its lack of experience. This is why the innocent, Romantic child is in need of protection (Pressler 19). It must be sheltered because experience chips away at the veneer of innocence and robs it of "spontaneity, imaginative quickness, and a closeness to God." The unburdened nature of childhood is also why Western society categorizes a child who begins puberty as an adolescent: he or she is henceforth burdened with sexuality. The Romantics used this figuration of the child as a reaction against Enlightenment virtues such as "adulthood, sophistication, rational moderation, [and] judicious adjustment to the ways of the world. The child was used to deny these virtues, to eliminate them and substitute in their place a set of inversions: innocence, purity, emptiness. Childhood, to a large extent, came to be in our culture a coordinate set of *have nots*, of negations" (Kincaid, *Erotic Innocence* 15). Children's freedom from "adult corruptions" positions them as idealized cherubs unsullied by the unclean world. This, of course, is a fiction. Childhood illness and mortality, for example, didn't end when the Romantics reconfigured childhood to suit their ends. Other scholars also note the existence of the

innocent child within Western society. For example, Anne Higonnet refers to the Romantic child as “naturally innocent” and explains that it “makes a good show of having no class, no gender, and no thoughts – of being socially, sexually, and psychically innocent” (15; 24). Higonnet is specifically talking about visual depictions of innocent children, which began in the mid-eighteenth century with British portrait painters but proliferated during the nineteenth century due to the development of image technologies which expanded access to paintings and illustrations to a wider audiences (9).¹ Higonnet argues that the innocent child gradually gives way to the “knowing” child, a child cognizant of adult realities. However, her conception of visual depictions of the Romantic child, that it lacks class, gender, or even interiority, aligns with the “emptiness” that the Romantic poets imagined.

The innocent child remains lodged in Western culture. Marina Warner, who critiques the feasibility of childhood innocence, writes, “The nostalgic worship of childhood innocence ... is more marked today than it ever has been: the difference of the child from the adult has become a dominant theme in contemporary society” (45). Warner believes the Western investment in the innocence of children is due to the desire of adults to live through children, “including Romantic and Surrealist yearnings to live through the imagination, with unfettered, unrepressed fantasy” (54). This is perhaps why the idea of the innocent child has been so irrepressible in contemporary times.

Warner’s assertion that adult desires shape cultural understandings of childhood is echoed across a range of scholarship. Virginia L. Blum argues that psychoanalysis, with its

¹ Higonnet’s mid-eighteenth century timeline coincides with Jean-Jacque Rousseau’s publication of *Emile* and *The Social Contract*. Both texts were published in 1762 and argue “that one finds in childhood humanity’s original state of natural goodness ... Children, according to Rousseau, begin life neither brutish nor blank slates but naturally wise, just, and good” (Wall 22).

narratives about how the adult self is subconsciously shaped by experiences in childhood, subordinates the child to adult needs. She notes that “in psychoanalysis’s very articulation of the child as an object of study it tells the story not of the child itself but of why the adult talks about the child—what it is that the adult imagination pursues through the child” (4). This puts the child in service to his or her adult self. Blum continues, “In the effort to present the ‘reality’ of the child and its perceptions, we cannot help but interpret the child in light of adult motives; we cannot help but interpret *ourselves* through the child. The study of the child thus becomes a perpetual reenactment of the suppression of the actual child in favor of adult imperatives” (5). The study of the child, as undertaken by adults, is always viewed through an adult lens, and it becomes difficult to prevent this lens from becoming distorted by the imperatives, conscious or unconscious, of the adult. While this is important to keep in mind regarding any study of children and childhood, it especially resonates with Blum’s discussion of psychoanalysis, which leads Blum to question psychoanalysis’ privileged status over literary analysis. Both psychoanalysis and literary analysis provide narratives that help people better understand themselves and navigate the world. The suppression of actual children and childhood in favor of adult imperatives is a common occurrence even beyond psychoanalysis. Cindi Katz argues that concerns over various futures (political economic, geopolitical, and environmental) are “in part channeled in and through concerns about children and the nature of childhood” (“Cultural Geographies” 6). These concerns lead adults to think of children as bulwarks against disaster in a variety of ways. For example, some argue society must improve things for future generations, while others believe future generations will be the ones to save or redeem society; children are also responsible for the future economy; and we expect our children to take care of us as we age. These considerations blur the line-between childhood and adulthood (“Cultural Geographies”

13). Some adults, however, want to cement the boundary between adulthood and childhood. Warner believes, “Grown-ups want [children] to stay [innocent] for their sakes, not the children’s, and they want children to be simple enough to believe in fairies too, again, for humanity’s sake on the whole, to prove something against the evidence” (54). The desire for children to remain innocent may be especially powerful when one believes childhood is threatened, like when boundaries between adulthood and childhood are blurred. Ellen Pifer notes that adults’ relationship with childhood in contemporary fiction is an ambiguous one: we find children innocent and vulnerable, yet we see them as fearsome. This is because children are a mirror in which we see ourselves, but always from a distance. For example, we fear children experimenting with drugs and sex, yet, as a culture, we may see it as a reflection of adults’ behaviors in the 1960s. She observes that “the child represents the other side—original or shameful, beautiful or monstrous, forgotten or repressed—of the adult self” (16). In this articulation of the child, it isn’t glorified or denigrated because that’s what it deserves, but because of the complex way in which adults see themselves reflected in the child. What all these scholars have in common is the assertion that childhood is filtered through the adult imagination. They also point to society’s ambiguous relationship with childhood.

This ambiguity becomes even more apparent when considering Pifer’s reference to the monstrous child. This reference invokes the dark twin of the innocent child: the evil or chaotic one. Marina Warner notes that “the Child has never been seen as such a menacing enemy as today” (56). Even as society idealizes the innocent child, it also harbors its dangerous doppelganger, which is in large part a legacy of the Puritans. Puritans “emphasized original sin” (Warner 20). Only through strict training and oversight can children overcome their tendency towards original sin. Steven Mintz, in his meticulous account of the history of childhood in

America and the active role children played throughout America's history, discusses this Puritan tradition. The Puritans left England in the early seventeenth century amidst a host of challenges, including inflation, population growth, and a more youthful population (10). As real wages declined, many English children left their homes and sought employment or apprenticeships elsewhere. This resulted in a rise in "youthful vagrancy and delinquency," which Puritans associated with "youthful vice" (10–11). As a result, many Puritans migrated in the hopes of improving their children's lives: "When English Puritans during the 1620s and 1630s contemplated migrating to the New World, their primary motives were to protect their children from moral corruption and to promote their spiritual and economic well-being" (10).

Although Puritans were not "unusually harsh," with their children, they did not "sentimentalize childhood" either (10). The notion that children's natural impulses should be suppressed and that children do not deserve indulgence positions Puritan childhood as diametrically opposed to Romantic conceptions of childhood, where childhood is celebrated precisely for being free of adult burdens.² Others see the Puritan discipline as exceptionally cold. Kathy Jackson writes, "In colonial times the idea of the bad child prevailed. The Puritans, mindful of the doctrine of original sin, regarded children as innately depraved and requiring strict control. Thus, they treated their children with little tenderness or affection; instead, they disciplined them, sometimes harshly, in order to teach them to be obedient, respectful, hardworking, and god-fearing" (14). But Mintz isn't arguing that the Puritans weren't sometimes harsh, but that they weren't "unusually harsh" when compared to other child-rearing practices of

² The Romantics came after the Puritans, but these are the two dominant conceptions which linger today. And, as we shall see, the notion that children exist in a state that can provide a model for adults to follow, whether through innocence or wisdom, wasn't invented by the Romantics.

the day. Kathy Jackson's assertion that children didn't receive much "tenderness or affection" is predicated on its opposition to discipline, but these aren't mutually exclusive.

The Puritans believed their attitudes toward their children were a benefit to both their children and to the larger society. Daniel Thomas Cook, in his analysis of the dialectical relationship between children and the United States clothing industry in the twentieth century, writes, "Children, especially infants, [according to Cotton Mathers, a Puritan minister] are in a state of depravity and require *conversion*, and an early conversion at that, lest they die before they are saved ... Infants were seen as a danger to both the cosmic and social orders, their crawling placing them in postural proximity to members of the animal kingdom" (28). Not only did American Puritans have a different conception of childhood than the Romantics, but they saw the innocent conception of childhood as dangerous because "childish innocence and weakness were an invitation for Satan to do his works" (27). The Puritan construction requires adults to train children to restrain their natural tendency towards sin and disorder, and is, to John Wall, a top-down approach. A top-down approach "suggests that human nature starts out essentially unruly and therefore requires a higher moral purpose and order to be imposed throughout life upon it from above. What childhood demonstrates above all, according to this view, is humanity's original natural state of moral disorder or corruption. Moral life requires, as a result, humanity's careful disciplining into strong moral communities" (15). The Puritan's legacy remains strong. Steven Mintz asserts, "Their legacy is a fixation on childhood corruption, child nurture, and schooling that remains undiminished in the United States today" (10).

The Romantic and Puritan legacies leave us with conflicting ideas about the nature of childhood. Kathy Jackson notes, "Traditionally, two opposing viewpoints have been associated with childhood. On the other hand, the child is wild and needing to be tamed; on the other, the

child is tender and innocence ... In America, both of these images have persisted” (14). Jenks uses the terms Apollonian and Dionysian to describe childhood. The Apollonian child is the innocent child who is naturally good (73), which equates the innocent child with a god of art and knowledge. The Dionysian child is one who contains evil and corruptions (70), which associates such children with a god of wine and revelry, who glorifies in chaos and is worshiped by centaurs and satyrs, beings who straddle the line between animal and human. Jenks writes, “These two images of the child that I have designated as the Dionysian and the Apollonian are not literal descriptions of the way that children intrinsically different; they are no more than images. Yet these images are immensely powerful, they live on and give force to the different discourses that we have about our children” (74).

It may seem schizophrenic that such diametrically opposed ideas regarding childhood can still persist, even thrive, today. However, there are similarities between Romantic and Puritan conceptions. They both see the child as malleable. Puritans believe the child can change for the better by controlling their natural state, Romantic traditions believe the child becomes burdened by the erosion of its natural state and its contact with the wider world. Both traditions see childhood as a stage which is passed through; even if Romantics might embrace an innocent adult, their experience tells them this is fleeting. Both conceptions also believe children require oversight. Puritan parents must prepare children to control themselves and become productive members of society, while Romantic parents should help preserve childhood innocence. Ironically then, Romantic and Puritanical conceptions of childhood share some general attitudes though they radically differ in specifics. But the Puritan’s overall attitude towards children isn’t just opposed to Romantic attitudes, rather it directly works to protect children and the world from the danger of Romantic conceptions. To Puritans, the Romantic conception is not just a different

perspective: it opens the door for further corruption. Despite the substantial differences between the Puritan and Romantic child, both exist in contemporary Western society (Pressler; Warner). Both groups see something innate in childhood, but that innateness does not, or need not, define the child throughout its life. Furthermore, these two conceptions are often reconciled within the same society by applying them simultaneously. For many people, their own loved ones follow Romantic trajectories, while other children, especially poor and minority children, may be dangerous. Shirley Pressler argues that Romantic and Puritan constructions of childhood should be jettisoned in favor of constructions that emphasize children as people in their own right. She writes, "Children are ... seen as following a natural development aligned with a Romantic discourse – unless there is some deviation from the expected Romantic trajectory, in which they are constructed through a Puritan discourse" (22). Thus, all children are innocent, Romantic children, until and unless they reveal their true nature as evil or chaotic children. This, of course, has its limits. Even contemporary, Western society can only allow so much deviation from Romantic conceptions. This is why when a child commits an especially gruesome act, like murder, he or she may be tried as an adult. Society cannot countenance such a heinous act from a youth so it revokes the mantle of childhood. There has also been a tendency to argue that innocent conceptions of childhood have increasingly been shown to be under siege in American culture since the latter half of the twentieth century, as images of evil or knowing children proliferate (Bruhm; Higonnet; Jackson; Pifer). Steven Bruhm, for example, believes that twentieth-century, Western culture increasingly depicts evil children because it's inherited or invented too many contradictory theories about children (98). Bruhm argues that we have inherited both the child of Rousseau and the child of Freud: the former full of innocence, the latter full of internal conflict. This conflict manifests itself in depictions of evil children. Bruhm

writes, “The binary opposition between innocence and possession/corruption – which I am suggesting is no opposition at all, but rather a dialectic – produces in contemporary culture a panic about who children are and what they know” (103). Bruhm considers the innocent and evil child dialectical because innocence is only knowable in relation to corruption, and vice versa (108), and he notes that we fear children in part because although we might like children to absorb the best examples we can give and lessons we can teach, there’s no way to predict exactly what will stay with them: “But how do we know,” Bruhm asks, “What will get imitated or identified with?” (105).

While Romantic and Puritan conceptions of childhood were passed down to contemporary Western society, they were themselves influenced by earlier periods.³ Wall notes that bottom-up approaches like that of the Romantics’, where children are innately good and wise and can provide models for adults to follow, saw thinkers as diverse as Rousseau and John Chrysostom share similar thoughts on children. Rousseau thought children “naturally wise, just, and good” and Chrysostom championed “the ethical ideal that children are not objects to be molded by society but subjects toward which society should mold itself. He enjoins adults especially to recognize in children a deeper moral wisdom, wonder, and openness than adults themselves tend to attain” (22; 21). Top-down approaches, like the Puritans’, include philosophers like Plato, Augustine, and Kant. Plato understands children “as irrational animals in need of rigorous ethical training” (15). Augustine uses “childhood as the prime example of his new doctrine of ‘original sin.’ ... Augustine confesses that ‘in your [God’s] sight no man is free from sin, not even a child who has lived only one day on earth’” (16). Immanuel Kant argues,

³ Philippe Ariès argues that paintings reveal that prior to the eighteenth century there wasn’t really a conception of childhood that was distinct from adulthood. Children were depicted as mini-adults, no different from their parents. Other scholars, however, reveal specific constructions of childhood throughout Western civilization.

“childhood shows that the human will is first and foremost the plaything of want, instinct, and desire” (18). Wall also outlines a horizontal/developmental approach to childhood that he associates with Aristotle and Locke that emphasizes the child’s progression over time, but he rejects all these views in favor of a society where the child would be equal to the adult.⁴ This type of society would emphasize the needs of its most vulnerable citizens and lead to more social inclusiveness (103–104). However, Wall’s emphasis on the range of thinkers who share similar conceptions of childhood, whether they align with Romantic or Puritan constructions, demonstrates the prevalence of these constructions throughout Western society. The Romantics and Puritans are simply the filters through which these conceptions most distinctly pass through to the contemporary Western world. Wall is not alone in recognizing the longer history of thinking about childhood, either. Ellen Pifer notes, “Since the Middle Ages, at least, children have been alternately regarded as innocent or depraved, the most vulnerable or the most vital representative of humankind” (20). Ewa Kuryluk argues that childhood involves both “loveliness and horror: spontaneous goodness and equally sudden evil” and notes that both of these conceptions can be traced back to Christianity (160). While the Christ child is seen as innocent, and children themselves are at times praised for their wisdom within Christianity, the non-canonical Gospel of Thomas tells a story of Jesus, as a child, killing another child who bumped into Jesus by reprimanding him that he would go no further. Kuryluk writes,

This picture of Jesus mirrors more accurately than the ideal biblical portrait with the psychology of a child ... The Gospel of Thomas expresses its concern with a child equipped with supernatural powers and points not to the innocent paradise

⁴ The developmental model of childhood is further discussed in relation to *Elephantmen* and *Never Let Me Go*. See pages 85-86 and 174.

of childhood but to the hell created for others by a selfish, juvenile god. As if unaware of good and evil, young Jesus takes advantage of his magical powers and behaves like a trickster. Like Childhood itself, the reverie of it is characterized by ambiguities and contradictions. (160)

Kurlyluk finds in the Gospel of Thomas a depiction of Jesus that more accurately captures the ambiguities of childhood and the ambivalence we may feel towards it, both of which continue to this day. Contemporary ambivalence over childhood also extends to the changing nature of childhood under neoliberalism.

Neoliberalism, Childhood, and Commodification

In *A Brief History of Neoliberalism*, David Harvey outlines the rapid rise of neoliberalism and its transformation from a fringe theory to a mindset embraced by both major United States political parties and governments around the world. Harvey defines neoliberalism as “a theory of political economic practices” which involves “strong private property rights, free markets, and free trade” (2). Neoliberals and their theoretical forerunners argue that free and unrestrained markets increase quality of life, while also spreading democracy and even providing a new way to understand social relationships (Becker and Murphy; Bhagwati; Friedman; Hayek). Critics note that the practice of neoliberalism diverges from these theoretical underpinnings. Rather than raising quality of life for everyone, neoliberal globalization concentrates wealth in the hands of a few, increasing inequality and causing other deleterious societal effects (Colas; Giroux; Harris and Seid; Heilbroner and Milberg; Nieuwenhuys and de Kort; Saad-Filho and Johnston; Shaikh). For critics of neoliberalism, “corporate welfare substitute[s] for people welfare” (Harvey 47). This substitution destroys social safety nets and undermines communal values by emphasizing individuality and bringing all aspects of life under market control.

Steven Shaviro defines neoliberalism as both production and government influenced by economic imperatives, like the dominance of financial institutions, “the privatization and commodification of what used to be common or public goods[,] ... the extraction ... of a surplus from all social activities[,] ... The subjection of all aspects of life to the so-called discipline of the market[,] ... [and] the redefinition of human beings as the private owners of their own ‘human capital’” (7–8). When Shaviro refers to “all aspects of life” being disciplined by “the market,” he specifically means leisure activities, even sleep;⁵ but the dominance of the market and the interest in extracting “a surplus” from the social are central to understanding how children and childhood are being redefined (although many of the texts in this project posit a world where humans aren’t “private owners of their own ‘human capital’” because others already own or control them). This economic imperative, where humans and social activities, like raising a family or going to school, become subject to economic logic is what I am referring to when I use the term “neoliberalism.”⁶

Henry Giroux discusses the relationship between neoliberalism and children in his book, *Disposable Youth, Racialized Memory, and the Culture of Cruelty*. For Giroux, neoliberalism threatens childhood in new ways (4). One threat is the placement of children into an increasingly privatized system of oversight that regulates their lives (Fass 11; Giroux 5): a system which views children as commodifiable and disposable (Giroux 4–5, 45).⁷ This is due to the application of economic matrices to areas beyond the economy, a central tenet of American neoliberalism

⁵ To generalize, you could always be working instead; or, perhaps more accurately, why aren’t you being more productive?

⁶ Shaviro finds the redefinition of humans as owners of their own capital lamentable. People must constantly redefine themselves so as to maximize their value. He writes, “There is never enough ... we always need to keep running, just to say in the same place. *Precarity* is the fundamental condition of our times” (8).

⁷ For example, rather than investing in education and social systems, poor and minority children are increasingly placed into the criminal justice system; a system which is sometimes privatized, in which case the incarceration of children leads directly to the profit of companies.

(Foucault 243; Harvey 3). Under neoliberalism, it becomes acceptable to view children in increasingly economic terms,⁸ which contradicts the mid- and late- twentieth century emphasis on the emotional and social value of children. The increasingly economic view of children and childhood reverses the trend of sacralization which took place in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Zelizer 11). Sacralization is the movement from valuing children as economic assets to valuing them as emotional assets. It was facilitated by economic and industrial changes including the advent of a living wage around the beginning of the twentieth century.⁹ This movement came to a head with the transition of youth from the workforce and into the educational system: a transition which was hastened due to the lack of jobs during the Great Depression (Mintz 236).

Neoliberalism's relationship with children is fraught. Cindi Katz argues that children across the world are trained for professions that are disappearing, as globalization spreads neoliberalism across the globe (*Growing Up Global*). She observes children in New York and Sudan to demonstrate how the pace at which the economy has transformed economic and political landscapes has left children without the skills, training, or access to succeed in a neoliberal world. Children often use play to internalize, practice and develop skills they'll need in their future professions; but, for Katz, the heartbreaking reality of this internalization is that the skills children develop are often related to careers that are or will soon be unavailable. Katz

⁸ This happens in a variety of ways. For instance, in many schools, standardized tests are emphasized so that children can do well on exams, to get into good colleges, to get good (meaning well-paying) jobs. There's also a number of reality shows that commodify children and childhood. The child is not just a consumer, with billions of dollars of purchases made by them or on their behalf, their bodies themselves can be grist for the mill.

⁹ Sacralization and the social conditions which allowed it probably also paved the way for the dominance of the Romantic conception of childhood in contemporary times, as they lessened then removed economic imperatives from urban, middle class childhoods and instead emphasized children's emotional value.

also argues that neoliberalism destroys social investment, which negatively impacts children. She writes,

The demise of the social contract as a result of neoliberalism, privatization, and the fraying of the welfare state is a crucial aspect of this shift [towards “intensification of capital accumulation and exacerbating differences in wealth and poverty”]. Children, among others, suffer from these changes, as all manner of public disinvestments take place—including in education, social welfare, housing, health care, and public environments—as part of and in concert with a relative lack of corporate commitment to particular places. (“Vagabond Capitalism” 710)

Helen Penn’s study of childcare in England gives a specific example of how the de-investment in social programs effects children and their families. Beginning with the Thatcher government, and accelerating after the 1997 election of the Labour government, childcare is increasingly a for-profit industry in England. This shifts the costs of childcare from the government to parents. Penn concludes, “In the case of the UK where the for-profit sector has been the main vehicle for implementing government policy, it is particularly problematic. For-profit care is volatile, dependent on local markets for uptake of places, expensive for parents, and frequently of poor quality” (Penn 159). The UK’s shift to privatization of this social service led to deteriorating, yet more expensive, quality of service. Furthermore, Penn believes the expansion of economic logic into social spheres undermines a vibrant society. She writes, “Market precepts have expanded into spheres where they have not previously operated – such as education – thereby undermining traditional social norms and values such as citizenship, social justice and social inclusion, and treating as irrelevant personal values and attributes such as sharing, caring, loving, intellectual

curiosity, honesty, moral obligation or duty, etc.” (Penn 158). These social and personal values and attributes are the sort of communal ideals which individualistic and short-term economic imperatives fail to nurture.

The preceding examples of the ways in which neoliberalism effects childhood has focused on the lack of investment in childhood, but neoliberalism can turn children themselves into economic vehicles. Many scholars discuss children being assigned economic value. When they do so, they are generally referring to the direct targeting of children as consumers. Markets geared towards children go back a long ways. David Grylls, for instance, writes that children’s literature in England emerged in the mid- to late- eighteenth century and was soon followed by other entertainment for children, like “circuses, puppet shows, exhibitions and educational games” (20). However, over time products for children were increasingly created for and marketed directly to them, sometimes due to external factors. From 1890 to 1940 in the United States, children were considered as a new market because the mass-production of goods outpaced (adult) consumer demand (Chan 141). The Great Depression contributed to the emphasis on children as an emerging market. Negative effect on jobs and wages “led financially hard-pressed marketers and manufacturers to target children as independent consumers” which resulted in a variety of products geared towards youth, such as “comic books ... movie serials ... children’s radio shows ... and new kinds of children’s toys” (Mintz 236) This had lasting repercussions for childhood: “By the end of the decade a new age category, the teenager, had emerged ... One of the Depression’s lasting legacies was nationalizing and commercializing childhood” (Mintz 236). Since then, spending on products aimed at children also boomed. For example, toy sales in 1940 were \$84 million. Two decades later they were \$1.25 billion (Mintz 277), and the emphasis on the commercialization of childhood has only intensified. By 2002,

four to twelve year olds made \$30 billion in purchases and by 2004 advertising and marketing aimed at children was \$15 billion (Schor 23; 21). The immensity of products aimed at children leads Marina Warner to note, “The child, as a focus of worship, has been privatised as an economic unit, has become a link in the circulation of money and desire” (61).

The child as economic unit is not a cause for concern to some. David Buckingham writes, “Over the past few decades, children have become increasingly important both as a market in their own right and as a means to reach adult markets” and argues, “Contemporary childhoods are always-already commercial childhoods” (54, 59). Buckingham doesn’t lament this because even as the market can shape childhood and “its meanings and pleasures,” children may “define and appropriate them in very diverse ways” (59). This is evident in Daniel’s Cook’s examination of the children’s clothing market from 1917-1962. Cook argues that there is a dialectical relationship between children and the market. While children’s clothing was originally meant to be purchased by adults for children, the market gradually began deferring to children. He argues that through the marketplace “children become recognized, treated, and even deferred to as persons by adults on something other than an episodic basis (beyond the confines of the home, playground, or classroom),” and that “through consumption, children’s ‘wants,’ ‘needs,’ and ‘desires’—be they framed as ‘authentic’ and arising from within the child or ‘manufactured’ and created by profit-making industries—gain legitimacy as worthy of large-scale social action, such as the creation of business and industries based on them” (68). In this way, Cook “adds to the chorus of those who deny the pragmatic separability of culture on the one hand and markets on the other” (6). I do not know if childhood could be separate from the market or even if it should

be;¹⁰ but while Cook does demonstrate that the children's clothing market led to considerations of the children and their preferences, he doesn't explore whether the marketplace is an ideal venue for this. What is insufficient about the home, playground and/or classroom? What about other social arenas that might recognize children more directly, like the community or the government? While not Cook's intention, his argument aligns directly with neoliberal attitudes towards the market and its emancipatory potential, and as the relationship between childhood and consumer culture intensifies, there may be cause for concern.

Juliet Schor represents an alternative perspective. She explores some of the negative effects of the commodified or commercialized child. She writes, "Although children have long participated in the consumer marketplace, until recently they were bit players, purchasers of cheap goods. They attracted little of the industry's talent and resources and were approached primarily through their mothers. That has changed. Kids and teens are now the epicenter of American consumer culture" (9). Schor believes that the widespread influence of corporations on children is altering childhood in new ways. This is evident in how advertising infiltrates schools and electronic media replaces other forms of play. She laments, "We have become a nation that places lower priority on teaching children how to thrive socially, intellectually, even spiritually, than it does on training them to consume" (13). For Schor, this consumption isn't the emancipatory exchange which Cook notes. She writes, "Far from being a consumers' mecca ruled by diverse and rich choices, children's consumer culture is marked by bigness and sameness" (27). For Schor, the most ominous sign of the commercialization of children and childhood is in the way corporations have bought access to the captive bodies of children within

¹⁰ Kathryn Bond Stockton notes that some believe children are more vulnerable in our society because they lack money, though she questions whether having more money would make children more or less vulnerable (38).

the educational system, via product placement and educational products. Overall, Schor finds that the more caught up in consumer culture children become, the greater the negative outcomes: “The more they buy into commercial and materialist messages, the worse they feel about themselves, the more depressed they are, and the more they are beset by anxiety, headaches, stomachaches, and boredom. The bottom line on the culture they’re being raised in is that it’s a lot more pernicious than most adults have been willing to admit” (173). Schor’s lament may not be as bad as it seems. The emphasis on electronics in the play of children, for example, may help children participate in a post-Fordist economy and alleviate some of Katz’s concern over children being trained in skills that are disappearing. Nonetheless, Schor provides a counterpoint to arguments that uphold the relationship between the child and the market.

While the relationship between childhood and consumption intensified during the twentieth century, the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries escalate this relationship and continue to transform it. Children are becoming even more entwined with economic logic and imperatives. Anne Higonnet writes, “The ideal of the child as object of adoration has turned all too easily into the concept of the child as object, and then into the marketing of the child as commodity” (194), and Julian Gill-Peterson argues that the neoliberal child is viewed in terms of futures trading. Investments in children and childhood are measured in future economic value, which is why society has de-invested in teaching poor, minority children; they have a riskier return-on-investment. As a result, children are sometimes cast as entrepreneurs who must demonstrate their earnings potential in ways outside of the educational system. This is evident in the United Negro College Fund’s decision to include information on its website showing how much a donation will return in future economic development. Or in the documentary *Ten9Eight*’s depiction of African-American entrepreneurial children in New York, which recasts “education

as an entrepreneurial labor” (Gill-Peterson 186). Or in the prevalence of the Youtube “haul” video where children and adolescents post videos of the items they purchase. These videos monetize the viewers by forcing them to watch ads, kick back some of that money to the creator of the video, and encourage people what to buy or not.

Neoliberal children are investments. Gill-Peterson writes, “The value of the future contracted through neoliberal child labor assigns and speculates on the future of kids as the incorporation of race, gender, and class—economic coefficients that materialize as the growing bodies of children ... Under this neoliberal social contract childhood becomes a form of futures trading” (Gill-Peterson 185). The neoliberal child thus becomes an individual investment, which is subsequently how cuts to social programs like education are justified. This has an especially pernicious effect on poor and minority children. Gill-Peterson also sees childhood as futures trading because children can generate revenue streams during childhood, which supplement or replace future earnings (189). Cindi Katz also argues that children in the neoliberal world are an investment. They “secur[e] the economic future for their parents and other members of the extended family ... The child as commodity is niche-marketed to secure success in the insecure future. ” (“Cultural Geographies” 10).

The transformation of children and childhood from emotional assets who consume to drivers of consumption and investments undergirds this project. As children become economic assets to be utilized, it challenges the dominant twentieth century notion of the child as emotional investment who should be sheltered, as least somewhat, from the adult world. Neoliberalism, by extending market logic into all aspects of life, including social arenas, facilitates this transformation. The texts in this project exhibit concern over the unrestrained economic transformation of childhood: what I mean when I refer to the commodification of childhood.

Commodification refers to a specific type of objectification. Martha Nussbaum, in her attempt to understand the varying ways in which objectification works, defines it as “the seeing and/or treating of someone as an object” (251). Nussbaum complicates this definition by insisting on the need to understand objectification within specific contexts and objectification’s various manifestations (256–257). For example, parents usually deny their children autonomy, a type of objectification, but this is fine in contemporary American parenting. On the other hand, the denial of a child’s bodily integrity, another type of objectification, whether involving “battery or sexual abuse,” is morally reprehensible (262). Regardless of the scenario, however, objectification always involves treating a person as a thing by denying them subjectivity (257). Commodification, in the context of this project, is the treating of a person as a commodity: a valuable entity capable of generating monetary, scientific, or material benefit for others; someone forced into an objectifying system of exploitation without their approval. The term “commodification,” as opposed to “objectification,” emphasizes the type of *thing* the children are turned into. Because commodification involves seeing a person as a thing,¹¹ it is grotesque.

The Grotesque and Childhood

The grotesque comes from the word *grottesco*, which initially described paintings on the walls and ceilings of Nero’s “*Domus Aurea* (Golden Palace),” which was unearthed “around 1480” but built as early as 100 BC (Chao 1). The paintings “offered images of a jumble of human and animal forms, strangely interwove with fruit, flowers, and foliage” (Chao 1). Key to this description is the combination of human forms with animal and natural forms and images. The Renaissance understood *grottesco* as an ornamental style that was “playfully gay and carelessly fantastic, but also something ominous and sinister in the face of a world totally

¹¹ Whether an abstract thing, like a market, or a material thing, like an object.

different from the familiar one—a world in which the realm of inanimate things is no longer separated from those of plants, animals, and human beings, and where the laws of statics, symmetry, and proportion are no longer valid” (Kayser 21). The marriage of disparate forms not only refers to the playful marriage of seemingly incompatible elements, but also the dreadful imposition of chaos upon order. The grotesque spread throughout Europe over the sixteenth century and became prominent in a variety of artistic forms: including drawing, engraving, painting and sculpture (Kayser 22). As the adjective “grotesque” came into use, it retained similarities to its origin. Its first German usage “refers to the monstrous fusion of human and nonhuman elements as the most typical feature of the grotesque style.” Its French usage retained these associations, as well (Kayser 24). Frances K. Barasch notes that in 1639 or 1640 the word grotesque, in English, was used to refer to fantastic characters and concepts (81; 83–87). The use of the term “grotesque,” in both art and literature, remained popular for centuries, and its conceptual underpinning were relatively stable, even though “new perceptions and conceptions of the grotesque occurred with every new generation of artists and critics; each created its own grotesque art, understood the past in its own way, and invested the world with its own meanings” (Barasch 152).

Successive generations can employ the grotesque in their own, often unique ways because the grotesque, like childhood, is culturally constructed (Carroll, “The Grotesque Today”; Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 6–7; Connelly, *The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* 4; Edwards and Graulund 11–12; Schulz 3). This can make it difficult to apprehend the grotesque, as what is considered grotesque in one cultural-historical moment may not be grotesque to others. For example, some African and Indian art was considered grotesque by Europeans but not the makers (Connelly, “Introduction” 5), and Andrew Schulz laments that Francisco Goya’s *Los*

Caprichos has irretrievably lost some of its meaning over time (3). Despite the importance of context in apprehending the grotesque, it retains some common associations. The grotesque challenges our conceptual categories. It “derives its effectiveness from paradox, from the fusion of numerous and seemingly incompatible elements – the horrible with the laughable, the sinister with the ludicrous, the mundane with the bizarre” (Uruburu 8). For Paula Uruburu, this incompatibility is present in the incompatibility between pragmatism and romanticism in American culture. American authors employed the grotesque to get readers to confront the disjunctions in society, such as violence in the name of democracy or racism during the formation of a national identity (3). “The fusion of numerous and incompatible elements” that Uruburu references undermines ontological divisions by combining what society thinks of as separate. Other scholars define the grotesque in similar ways. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund write, “Grotesque fiction, in a general sense, violates the laws of nature. Here, clear-cut taxonomies, definitions and classifications break down and, as a result, there is a built-in narrative tension between the ludicrous and the fearful, the absurd and the terrifying” (4).¹² By undermining ontological divisions, such as that which separates animal from human, the grotesque inspires ambivalent emotional reactions. A human with a pig’s head may be laughable because of its incongruity, but it may also be fearsome because of its unnatural existence. The grotesque takes the familiar (the human, the pig) and make it strange (the human-pig/the pig-human). This estranges us from the world we thought we knew and recreates the world as a place where ontological categories are blurred and rules no longer apply; this new world is central to definitions of the grotesque. The combination of unlikely or oppositional elements remains central to understanding the grotesque. Scholars of the grotesque emphasize the juxtaposition or

¹² These reactions need not be equal.

fusion of the familiar with strange or oppositional elements, or the transformation of familiar elements into something strange (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 6; Edwards and Graulund 3; Gysin 28; Harpham 9). The grotesque's unsettling juxtapositions and combinations are often lauded for their disruptive and subversive qualities because they have the potential to force viewers and readers to reexamine the ways in which they order the world (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 8; Edwards and Graulund 3; Gysin 28; Harpham 12).

Wolfgang Kayser and Mikhail Bakhtin provide examples of the different ways the grotesque may be received. The mixture of the familiar and unfamiliar can be fearsome. For Wolfgang Kayser, the grotesque is violent and destructive. He writes, "The grotesque world is—and is not—our own world. The ambiguous way in which we are affected by it results from our awareness that the familiar and apparently harmonious world is alienated under the impact of abysmal forces, which break it up and shatter its coherence" (37). Kayser's description privileges order and considers its violation dangerous, but Mikhail Bakhtin glorifies in the disruptive and subversive qualities of the grotesque. Bakhtin identifies these qualities within the carnivalesque: a cognate to the grotesque involving medieval carnivals. Medieval carnivals provided people with respite from the feudal and ecclesiastical hierarchy that dominated the political landscape (5–6). In the carnival, with its emphasis on folk humor and laughter, hierarchies are overturned and everyone is considered equal, regardless of their station outside of the carnival world (10). The legacy of the carnivalesque and its subversive folk humor carries into subsequent iterations of the grotesque, such as grotesque realism, which Bakhtin argues is primarily concerned with positive images of bodily excess (18–19). Kayser and Bakhtin present two starkly different conceptions of the grotesque. Kayser's emphasis on the infernal and disorienting is a far cry from Bakhtin's interest in laughter and excess. What they have in common, however, is an interest in

fusions or juxtapositions (human/nonhuman, high/low) and systemic subversion of the natural order. Furthermore, while the grotesque is often associated with bodies, any fusion or juxtaposition which subverts the “natural” order or calls into question the schema on which we categorize the world may be grotesque. As Istvan Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. so eloquently puts it, “The grotesque is life set free of law” (*The Seven Beauties of Science Fiction* 190). It refuses to acquiesce to the political, religious, or cultural norms, and instead creates the space for challenging them.

Twentieth-century American culture is rife with the grotesque. It’s present in comic strips like *Dick Tracy* from the 1940s and in comic books like *The Fantastic Four* from the 1960s (Berger 113; 199). Arthur Asa Berger writes that the grotesque in *Dick Tracy* allows us to release our aggressions, guilt-free, on grotesque characters because the comic strip uses the grotesque to represent moral absolutes like good and evil (127), whereas grotesque figures in Marvel Comics like *The Fantastic Four* represent concerns over science and technology (202). Nancy Bombaci argues that the American modernists Nathanael West, Djuna Barnes, Ted Browning and Carson McCullers utilize the grotesque “to foster a social criticism that explored issues of class, ethnicity, and gender” (134). Mark Fearnow demonstrates that the grotesque was the dominant mode of Depression Era theater, as a result of the world “not-making-sense” to audiences at the time, a common feature during times of “rapid social change” (7). John R. Clarke believes the satiric grotesque is the dominant mode of the twentieth century because “the ideal of inevitable progress came terribly crashing to the ground, shattered by monumental world wars, revolutions, indeterminacy, atomic energy, the Freudian id, and the Holocaust” (18). As the world changes and our ideas are increasingly challenged, the grotesque represents these distortions. Dieter Meindl considers the metaphysical grotesque, with its juxtaposition of concepts like life and

death, the thread which runs throughout American literature; while Gilbert H. Muller considers the grotesque to be an “informing principle” in American literature and the dominant motif in Flannery O’Conner’s work especially (4). Istvan Csiscery-Ronay, Jr. asserts the grotesque is arguably the “dominant sensibility of modernism” and postmodernism. The difference being that “anomalous deviations” were monstrous during modernism, but became the norm during postmodernism (“On the Grotesque in Science Fiction” 72–73).¹³ Noël Carroll asserts that the grotesque has proliferated in contemporary American culture and is now present “on the A list of mass culture,” although Carroll believes this is because of the ever-increasing market for leisure and not a reflection of the contemporary zeitgeist (“The Grotesque Today” 293; 309). Kathryn Hume argues that contemporary fiction actively seeks to cause discomfort in readers so they might question their values and more critically engage with a text’s message. The grotesque is one of the mechanisms by which authors achieve this. She writes, “Novels presenting the grotesque drive home the point that our conventional ideas about meaning are inadequate. Meaning, after all, frequently comes from predictable form, both in plots and in physical shape; it relies on firm boundaries. The grotesque exists to break patterns, in particular the pattern of what it is to be human” (166). By extension, the question of what it means to be human is then also a central question in contemporary fiction.

I argue that a strain of the grotesque, as depicted in certain speculative narratives, represents concern over the changing nature of childhood and the increasing obviousness that parents cannot always shelter and protect children as much as they may prefer. The grotesque

¹³ All of the texts I write about have postmodern elements. These elements include hybridity, pastiche, a-historicity, and playing with language. However, I only write specifically about postmodernism in relation to *Elephantmen*. This is because postmodernism is central to understanding this text, but not the others. I focus on the grotesque in each chapter instead of the postmodern because the grotesque in these texts always connects to the children’s commodification, whereas the postmodern does not.

bodies of children in the narratives within this project represent the way in which the proliferation of neoliberal values have overtaken what were recently considered social realms, thus changing conceptions of children and childhood. Children are often idealized as innocents and are currently the dominant symbol in political discourse; ciphers through which politicians and other adults assert their own values (Edelman). The ability of neoliberal logic to invade the supposedly sacred space of childhood is theorized through the warped and unfamiliar bodies of grotesque children. As society's ideas about childhood change, the grotesque children metaphorically embody this change. Grotesque depictions of children have the power to show the extremes to which neoliberalism dehumanizes people by showing its invasion of one of society's most sacred institutions: childhood. At the same time, however, the metaphor ends up justifying the exploitation of the children by depicting them as radically different from our idealized conceptions of children. Thinking about children as economic assets validates itself by transforming children into bodies suitable for exploitation. The grotesque bodies used to illustrate dehumanization also create a systemic loop where they end up providing the justification for their abuse. The grotesque children aren't considered *fully* human. In this way, the logic of the grotesque in these texts offer the means to consider the humanity of the characters, while always effacing this humanity. Just as neoliberalism always becomes the solution to its own problem. When neoliberalism creates economic disparity, neoliberals call for *more* neoliberalism, thus worsening economic inequality. When grotesque bodies illustrate the horror of neoliberal commodification upon the body, they can't help but acknowledge the plausibility that these bodies *need* economic justification because they are different.

The grotesque is suited to representing tension over the commodification of bodies in part because it already can be understood in relation to the economy. Tensions rooted in "categories

of religion, polity and commerce” may be displaced into the grotesque (Webb and Enstice 96), and vast economic inequality and government spending on war and defense rather than combating poverty may also be understood as grotesque (Adams 72). The grotesque is also an apt metaphor for the changing nature of childhood because of their shared interest in liminality. In *Childhood*, Chris Jenks observes, “The child is familiar to us and yet strange, he or she inhabits our world and yet seems to answer to another, he or she is essentially of ourselves and yet appears to display a systematically different order of being” (3). Jenks’ description of the child emphasizes his or her liminal nature as a creature existing between worlds. The liminality inherent in Jenks’ description is strikingly similar to definitions of the grotesque. For example, Leonard Cassuto writes, “The grotesque is born of the violation of basic categories. It occurs when an image cannot be easily classified even on the most fundamental level: when it is both one thing and another, and thus neither one” (*The Inhuman Race* 6). Cassuto’s definition of the grotesque is similar to Jenks’ definition of childhood in its emphasis on the problems of simply categorizing something as one thing or another. But Jenks’ description of the child, and its similarity to definitions of the grotesque, does not challenge our ability to classify children because of startling juxtapositions or fusions. It relies on the liminal nature of childhood itself. Ewa Kuryluk directly connects childhood to the grotesque. She considers childhood an “anti-world” governed by adults, and she notes that children, along with women and animals, are often positioned in opposition to the church and state (3; 319). It is the conceptualization of children as grotesque, as creatures belonging to multiple worlds (social and economic, child and adult) but fully belonging to none, that this project employs in an attempt to better understand contemporary depictions of childhood.

Project Description

Within the context of the preceding framework, the following chapters each read a single text as illustrative of how the grotesque depiction of children or childhood embodies the transformative aspect of commodification, which turns people into commodities. Shun-Liang Chao writes, “As a metaphor, the grotesque body, whilst demanding figurative interpretations, makes *visible* the superficial or literal level of dissimilarity and thereby gives rise to a powerful effect of the biologically horrible *and* the logically absurd,” thus making metaphors literal (57). The texts under examination literalize the metaphor regarding how commodification changes people, and, as a whole, show a persistent interest in how changing conceptions of children and childhood transform both bodies and relationships. Sometimes this commodification is for money, sometimes it provide adults with materials, like organs or test subjects, but it always sacrifices children for the benefit of adults. The grotesque pervades all these instances of commodification. Therefore, each chapter is also an argument for the primacy of the grotesque as the dominant aesthetic in the text under examination.

This project follows the example of Karen Renner and considers childhood to be anyone below the age of eighteen (5). Any attempt to draw a clear cut division is fraught with issues. Most people consider children those who have yet to reach puberty, after which children become adolescents. However, puberty comes at different times for different people, and grouping adolescents with children acknowledges the political dimension of childhood, where anyone under age eighteen cannot vote and is not (usually) tried as an adult if they commit a crime. It also helps smooth over the problem of aging in the narratives. The characters in the texts under examination are often depicted over a period of years. Some narratives spend more time on the characters as adults than others, but it is in childhood where the characters are forged in the crucible of exploitation and commodification.

Because the grotesque originated in the visual arts before migrating into literature and because images can be especially helpful in depicting abstract concepts, this dissertation begins by focusing on two comic book series: Jeff Lemire's *Sweet Tooth* and Richard Starkings' *Elephantmen*. *Sweet Tooth* is an inherently conservative text in spite of its emphasis on nonhuman characters. It argues that children are inherently innocent, but that it becomes impossible to shelter them from the wider world, where there are always people interested in exploiting them. To demonstrate this, *Sweet Tooth* draws on the discourse of the innocent child but shows how borders are incapable of preventing crossing, which metaphorically represents the impossibility of preserving childhood innocence. The comics eventually replace the hegemony of humanity with a community of animal/human hybrids, but this community is vastly similar to previous conceptions of human communities, as it reestablishes children as social creatures to be protected from exploitation. *Elephantmen*, on the other hand, utilizes the racial grotesque to demonstrate that the attempt to dehumanize a person or group of people is a process that can never be fully completed. In the midst of dehumanization, people always reassert their humanity. The series draws upon the experiences of slaves and immigrants and mashes them up into a postmodern pastiche, where the specifics of the individual experience of outsiders are forsaken for a collective emphasis on a homogenous outsider trying to leave his or her past behind and forge his or her own future.

After analyzing the comics, the project shifts to novels: Katherine Dunn's *Geek Love*, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go*, and Ben Marcus' *The Flame Alphabet*. *Geek Love* and *Never Let Me Go* draw upon the female grotesque to show the way in which female bodies are

marginalized.¹⁴ Women in *Geek Love* take ownership of their deformities to sexually commodify themselves. While these moments come with possibilities for self-expression and agency, they risk drawing the wrath of the powerful. Furthermore, this chapter examines the relationship between the freak and the grotesque. While the freak is commonly referred to as grotesque, the reason for this tends to be taken for granted. This chapter argues that conceptual similarities between the freak and the grotesque are at the heart of the relationship between the two concepts. In *Never Let Me Go*, moments of true agency are less common than they are in *Geek Love*, and the characters, who engage in feminized labor in addition to being organ donors, are overworked to exhaustion and lack the capacity to resist. Furthermore, while *Geek Love* draws upon a typical representations of the grotesque—deformed bodies—*Never Let Me Go* recalls the ontological uncertainty of the grotesque, as clones challenge what it means to be human by being indistinguishable from humans. The final chapter on *The Flame Alphabet* complicates the dynamic of the first four chapters. While children are commodified in the novel and are metaphorically grotesque due to their association with animals and objects, it's the adults whose bodies are warped beyond comprehension. The novel posits a world where adults are at the whims of children, until they forcibly reassert their dominance. In doing so, *The Flame Alphabet* draws upon the power of language and metaphor to depict the grotesque and to explore what happens when meaning breaks down.

Together these texts demonstrate the perverseness of the commodification of children by depicting it in relation to military and scientific communities and corporations (*Elephantmen*,

¹⁴ While Bakhtin's emphasis on the carnival would make sense as a frame for *Geek Love*, Bakhtin over-emphasizes, I think, subversion and positivity. But *Geek Love*, while it has moments of subversion and encourages bodily acceptance, reflects a dominant ideology rather than upending it. There are subversive moments within the novel, but, as a whole, it leaves little room for alternatives.

Sweet Tooth), the state (*Never Let Me Go*), and the family (*The Flame Alphabet*, *Geek Love*).

Whether children should be kept separate from markets or not, they are sacred social beings (as fraught as these constructions are) in contemporary culture. Therefore, objectifying them causes anxiety even as it reflects a potentially disturbing reality. The grotesque provides a way of thinking about childhood in uncertain and confusing times due to the relationship of the grotesque with incongruity and opposition. All of the chapters demonstrate that not only are the children grotesque metaphors, but that adults can be metaphorically grotesque due to their actions. In this way, the theoretically value-neutral concept of the grotesque also works in tandem with the linguistically pejorative adjective “grotesque.” The texts draw upon various Western conceptions of childhood, some innocent, some chaotic, but situate them in worlds that posit how neoliberalism fundamentally changes our understanding of humanity and social relationships. This is done by estranging us from children, who are commonly considered symbols of reproductive futurity and are simultaneously some of the people most in need of protection. Because of the emphasis on Western conceptions of childhood and on the Western tradition of the grotesque, the texts under examination are themselves Western. Jeff Lemire is a Canadian, and *Sweet Tooth* was published by an American comics publisher for a primarily American audience. It takes place in the Western United States. Richard Starkings was born in England but immigrated to the United States, and *Elephantmen* is also published by an American comics company and takes place primarily in the United States. Katherine Dunn and Ben Marcus are both from the United States, and Kazuo Ishiguro is British. They all foresee a world where the invasiveness of neoliberalism transforms and dehumanizes.

The Grotesque Child: Animal/Human Hybridity in *Sweet Tooth*

*Sweet Tooth*¹ is a serialized comic book that takes place in a post-apocalyptic United States approximately seven years after a plague ravages the human population. The beginning of the plague coincides with human newborns being born as animal/human hybrids. These hybrids are immune to the plague. The titular character, Gus (nicknamed Sweet Tooth), is a mostly human-looking hybrid with antlers and deer-like ears. Some hybrids appear predominantly human, some animal, but all blur the line between the categories of animal and human, unsettling their ontological status. Gus is raised in isolation in Nebraska by his religious father, Richard, who hides him from hunters. These hunters trade the hybrid children, alive or dead, to a military/scientific compound for resources. In the compound, pregnant women and hybrid children are experimented upon in the hopes of unlocking a cure for the plague. These experiments often kill the women and children. Richard eventually dies from the plague, and Gus is left alone. He decides to go with a man named Jepperd who promises to take him to a wildlife sanctuary where other children are kept safe. Instead, Jepperd takes Gus to the compound where he trades Gus for the body of his dead wife. Jepperd regrets his actions and enlists a hybrid-worshipping cult to attack the compound. During the attack, Jepperd and Gus are separated, but Gus and some other hybrid children escape. This escape sets off a chain of events in which Jepperd seeks to reunite with and protect Gus. Gus, meanwhile, learns he may have been born or created before the onset of the plague and that his father was a worker at a scientific compound in Alaska. Gus travels to Alaska in search of answers, while being pursued by the men he escaped from. Gus eventually learns Native American gods once walked the Earth. Scientists found these gods buried in Alaska and cloned them to create the first hybrid babies. This,

¹ Contributing artists, including colorists and letterers, include Pat Brosseau, Matt Kindt, Emi Lenox, Carlos M. Mangual, Nate Powell, and José Villarrubia

according to Singh, a scientist turned religious devotee, led to retribution in the form of the plague and the accompanying birth of the hybrids to humans (*Wild Game* 88–90).² A showdown then occurs between Gus and his fellowship and their pursuers. Some friendly adults, including Jepperd, give their lives so that Gus and some of his companions escape. They eventually join with other hybrids and form a community that outlasts the humans.

While *Sweet Tooth* take place in a speculative future, this future is a commentary on the contemporary, Western world. This is commonplace in science fiction and other speculative fictions. David Ketterer argues that science fictional worlds are related to the real world through “rational extrapolation and analogy or of religious belief” (13). Science fiction deals with the contemporary by considering its logical development or placing it in new contexts. The comic book’s narrative fits neatly within the post-apocalyptic genre which currently figures so prominently in contemporary United States entertainment. The narrative complicates the post-apocalyptic genre, however, by focusing not on the survival of the human race, but on the survival of the replacement for the human race: the hybrids. In doing so, the series utilizes the animal/human hybridity of the children as a metaphor for contemporary anxiety over the exploitation of children. The grotesque bodies of *Sweet Tooth*’s animal/human hybrids provide a metaphor for commodification; they literalize what the abstract concept of commodification does to corporeal bodies.³ The pressures that neoliberalism places on children as it reverses the twentieth century’s emphasis on children as emotional assets in the Western world are theorized

² Gus is one of the hybrids initially created at the Alaskan facility. After the plague ravages the facility, Richard, who is a janitor there, finds and takes the infant Gus. Gus is raised without any knowledge of his origin. The hybrids experimented upon for a cure are all born of human parents. The specific origins of the hybrids and the plague are not fully revealed until the end of the series, years after the series began, and the scientists and military at the compound where the experiments on the hybrids and pregnant women take place are not aware of the origins either.

³ I borrow the language of Evan Calder Williams in his analysis of how zombie films depicting late capitalism demonstrate “how real abstractions affect real bodies” (73). However, the grotesque bodies I examine extend beyond the single and specific figure of the zombie.

in *Sweet Tooth* via the grotesque, manifested in the representational hybridity of the child characters as part animal/part human. This “making” of the hybrid is effectuated through the commodification process itself, in which children function as commodities. This leads to a never-ending “cross between a human” and something else (an animal, an object), which is grotesque (Chao 45). This causes some adults to no longer consider the children human.

Animal/Human Hybridity and Exploitation

Katherine Kelp-Stebbins argues that the series participates in a renegotiation of what it means to be human by destabilizing traditional hierarchies, such as word/image and human/animal relationships. This destabilization involves the hybridity of the comics form and the comic book’s narrative. This renegotiation allows for a post-humanist reimagining of being. Kelp-Stebbins notes, “The boundaries between nature and culture, human and animal, man and god, and mind and body are sketchy and seamy ... expectations about the diegetic world are frustrated or overturned so that the knowledge of the world it presents is always only speculative” (339). This speculation is the result of the indeterminacy of the narrative. Because boundaries in the narrative are “sketchy and seamy,” clearly classifying the “diegetic world” is difficult. The liminality between elements that one might consider separate (nature/culture, human/animal, etc.) is analogous to the grotesque.⁴

The hybrid boy Gus cannot be easily classified because he is a cross between animal and human. Furthermore, he often looks older than his age. He is under ten years old, but the long, sometimes angular line-work of Lemire ages Gus, which reinforces some adults’ refusal to see Gus as a child (Figure 1.1). This refusal is partially because Gus is part animal, but it is also

⁴ More broadly, Michael Chaney observes that comics’ association with childhood and their “resistan[ce] to maturity” make them “uniquely suited to representing what early anthropology defined as liminality, the condition of being on the boundary par excellence, in the penumbra between youth and adulthood” (133).

because, in the society in which Gus lives, adults are always cognizant of Gus's value as a commodity. While Lemire's use of long lines when drawing faces is a common aesthetic across his work, the style works particularly well here: Gus's older appearance reflects the harsh world in which he lives, where hunters trade children for resources and adults battle each other.

The implications of this grotesque hybridity create provocative tensions that speak to larger social questions and concerns about childhood. In one panel, for example, Gus and five other hybrid children are caged and waiting for their captors to return (Figure 1.2). The caging of children is perverse, of course; the caging of animals may also be perverse, but it is acceptable in contemporary United States society. Therefore, there is a clash between what a society may or may not condone that becomes complicated by the hybrid nature of the children. When Gus introduces himself to the rest of the hybrids, Wendy, the human/pig, calls the other hybrids "ignorants" (*In Captivity* 19) because they cannot effectively communicate.⁵ That some of these child characters are incapable of language begs consideration of when the dehumanization of others' bodies is acceptable.

The United States has an abject history involving experimentation on those who lack the power to speak for themselves, literally and metaphorically. Mike Stobbe details some of this history in an Associated Press article preceding a 2011 biomedical ethics commission. In his abbreviated history, Stobbe notes experimentation on United States prisoners increased dramatically in the 1940s and 1950s as the pharmaceutical and health care industries grew. Backlash in the 1970s over the use of powerless populations in experiments led to their decline (3). These experiments were driven by economic considerations: "In 1973, pharmaceutical industry officials acknowledged they were using prisoners for testing because they were cheaper

⁵ The ineffectiveness of communication is discussed further in Chapter 5 in regards to *The Flame Alphabet*.

than chimpanzees” (3). This comparison coincides with the hybridity of the children in *Sweet Tooth* and is indicative of the dehumanizing nature of commodification. Examples of the types of experiments being conducted on humans kept separate from mainstream society abound. American scientists conducting a study from 1946-1948 at a mental hospital in Guatemala “infected prisoners and patients ... with syphilis ... to test whether penicillin could prevent some sexually transmitted diseases” (4). From 1963-1966, administrators of one study at the Willowbrook State School infected intellectually disabled children with hepatitis to test a potential cure (3). Professionals administering these tests may feel the benefits outweigh the risks. Saul Krugman, who was involved in the Willowbrook hepatitis study, defends it. He notes they obtained permission from parents and that most of the child subjects would have contacted the virus anyway in the course of their stay. He also asserts that those who were infected were kept separate from the general population and thus avoided contracting other viruses that were present in the population. He writes, “The fact that the children were mentally retarded was relevant only to the extent that society placed them in an institution where hepatitis was prevalent. The primary objective of our studies was to protect the children and employees while acquiring new knowledge in the process” (160). Even if one accepts Krugman’s rationale, the tests were still only administered on vulnerable populations. Were the children not vulnerable already, they would never have been there. Furthermore, it is apparent that not everyone shared concern for their test subjects. Faculty members in the dermatology department of the University of Pennsylvania Medical School, including Dr. Albert Kligman, had a “cavalier attitude toward using institutionalized groups as research subjects” and would sometimes joke about them (Hornblum 35). Dr. Kligman was the force behind experiments on prisoners in Holmesburg Prison from the 1950s-1970s. Upon entering the prison for the first time, he recalls: “All I saw

before me were acres of skin. It was like a farmer seeing a fertile field for the first time” (qtd in Hornblum 37). The emphasis on people’s skin, rather than their personhood, and the comparison to farming, where soil is worked, sometimes violently, to feed and support people situates the prisoners as objects and resources to be used for the sake of others. This figuration of the vulnerable as resources to be exploited connects to the use of the hybrid children in *Sweet Tooth*. One particularly evocative image of this in *Sweet Tooth* shows a horse/human hybrid on an operating table in the compound in which the hybrids are experimented upon (Figure 1.3). Its chest cavity is ripped open and blood is sprayed everywhere. This panel would be shocking if the hybrid was all animal, but adding human elements, like the human-like body and the positioning of the hybrid on his back, makes these images even more obscene. The panel is especially disturbing because the mutilated body is out in the open, and blood is splattered across the floor and wall, which may indicate the hybrid was cut open while alive when blood still pumped in his arteries. These elements reveal the butchery underneath the clinical setting of the tiled room and dissection table: an artifice meant to add an air of legitimacy to the experimentation taking place on the hybrids.

The experimentation on hybrids in *Sweet Tooth* is a perverse continuation of Western society’s experimentation on not just animals, but humans who have been treated as such due to certain conditions, disorders, or situations. The hybrid’s exploitation is complicated by their uncertain ontological status. Leaving aside the significant ethical considerations of the exploitation of nonhuman animals, the nonhuman aspects of the characters is what makes them ripe for exploitation. It is tied up in their immunity to the plague ravaging adult populations. It also distances them from adults because they can inspire horror as easily as maternal and paternal affection. Regardless of their ability to inspire horror or disgust, however, the hybrids

are the children of humans. While legal institutions that might advocate for them have crumbled into the ruins of the new world, they remain the heirs of humanity. *Sweet Tooth* leaves little doubt that the exploitation of the hybrids is morally reprehensible. At the same time, their exploitation opens up space for consideration of the history of such mistreatment in the United States, as well as readers' own complicity in the exploitation of others. People want to reject exploitation, but people also accept or ignore it.

The comic books consider readers' complicity by utilizing direct address. One example of this is the caged hybrids, all facing Gus, who are drawn at an angle so they face the reader, as if challenging the reader regarding his or her own complicity in what is transpiring (Figure 1.2). Of course the reader is an observer and has no power over the narrative; at the same time, however, the reader's enjoyment of the narrative is predicated on the exploitation of the hybrids. The hybrids' persecution heightens the satisfaction of their escape. When Gus is subsequently questioned by Doctor Singh, the scientist running the experiments, the comic book engages in a series of mostly alternating point-of-view panels as the characters take turns speaking, although Singh's dialogue intrudes into Gus's panel in the second row (Figure 1.4).⁶ In the last row of panels, however, Singh has the first two panels and Gus has the last one. The break in the alternating images extends Singh's narrative space as he continues articulating his reasoning for why he is not a "bad man" (*In Captivity* 65). Singh asserts, "We are the only semblance of order left in this world. And I know it's hard to understand...but the things we do here...we are humanity's last hope." Gus rejects Singh's rationalization: "You cut up animal kids...I saw it! You think you're doing good, but you're just a sinner...the worst sinner" (*In Captivity* 65). Gus's response is part of a panel where Gus is drawn directly facing the reader and pointing his finger

⁶ The alternating series of panels is initially established on the preceding page.

in accusation. The alternating panels are broken so that Gus's rejection is in the final, rather than the middle, panel. This ends the page in rebuttal and subtly reinforces Gus's stance over Singh's. The use of "you" in Gus's accusation, combined with the pointed finger, further confronts the reader. Gus's moral position is all the more powerful because of the tag on his ear, which catalogs him as an object of experimentation and study. From a compositional standpoint, Gus is addressing not only Singh, but the reader, as well (as is Singh).⁷ To the extent that the series critiques contemporary structures of exploitation, this exchange challenges the reader's complicity in processes of objectification. Singh does not give up rationalizing his behavior: He explains that he has done horrible things, but that "we must keep trying" because "soon we'll be gone...all of us." Gus responds, "Not me...Not us animal kids" (*In Captivity* 66). Gus's response is incisive. These adults are engaging in short-sighted thinking that will harm future generations for the sake of the present.⁸ To some extent this is understandable because they are scared and dying; but, for many people, harming others requires some sort of estrangement. Singh excludes Gus from his vision of collective humanity—Gus isn't included in Singh's "us"—not because he's unaware that Gus will live on, but rather because Singh does not consider him fully human. It is striking then that Gus's critique co-opts Singh's rhetoric of difference. By reminding Singh that the "animal kids" will survive, Gus's rebuttal undermines Singh's rationale on two registers. Metaphorically, it rejects short-term ideologies that sacrifice futurity for the sake of the present by announcing that the desires of one generation are not always in line with the desires of subsequent ones; literally, it reorients the rationale for exploiting hybrids—that they are

⁷ While direct address wasn't Lemire's intent, it is an effect of the POV. Lemire's art is also "expressive" and meant to capture "emotional mood." This may contribute to the feeling of being directly addressed (Lemire, "Interview").

⁸ While the villains would argue that they are working towards the long-term good, the narrative undercuts such an argument by showing the butchery the adults commit without any noticeable strides towards curing the plague. In flashbacks, the primary villain is also depicted as a brutal man before the experiments.

different—as an argument for not exploiting hybrids: the problems of the humans are not the problems of the hybrids.

The tension between adults seeing children as nonhuman objects of study and experimentation arises from some adults' objectification and is aided by the grotesque representations of the hybrids, but it also evokes the ways in which society exploits children and others in contemporary society. Treating humans as objects is itself a grotesque hybridization that often benefits the economic elite at the expense of lower classes. But the objectification of people, in reality and in fiction, is never completely realized. The series consistently emphasizes the humanity of the children (Figure 1.5). It would be difficult to argue that the humanity of these characters does not supersede their hybridity. Three hybrids, embracing, with fear and uncertainty etched into their faces, comforting each other against the harsh situation in which they find themselves. All having lost family and friends and believing they will be the next to go. While Gus's argument that the concerns of the hybrid kids are not the concerns of the human adults is persuasive, if ineffective, a more powerful appeal involves their shared humanity. Shared humanity so evocatively expressed by Lemire's interest in "emotional truth" ("Interview"). The hybrids aren't always depicted as humans who happen to have some of the physical features of animals. There are some hybrids that are almost exclusively animal, like a bird/human hybrid and dog/human hybrids; and there is Bobby, a groundhog hybrid who feels the need to hibernate in the winter. Yet in the major cases, Gus and Wendy, the hybrids are shown to be different from humans physically, but not intellectually or emotionally. This is in-line with Michael Chaney's argument that the anthropomorphization of animals and use of animal/human hybridity⁹ in comics almost always connotes otherness but eventually reasserts the

⁹ This has a long history in comics. Consider George Herriman's *Krazy Kat*, Walt Kelly's *Pogo*, Disney's *Donald Duck* (which was especially popular with Carl Banks as creator), or Art Spiegelman's *Maus*, for example.

“superiority of the human” (132). Consider, for example, that these characters often walk as humans do. Such animal or animal/human characters always reinforce the human because the human doesn’t need to be visualized. Rather it functions by being the invisible ideal against which the animal character is judged (133). The animal character is a mask, “beneath which lies the human” (135). In this way, the “visual distortion” behind the depictions of such characters is “radically conservative,” even though it may not appear to be (133). This is part of the reason the humanity of the hybrids is emphasized. They may not be humans visually, but their appearance (and behaviors) are usually re-inscribing their humanity.¹⁰

It is Gus’s humanity which wins Gus his most loyal adult ally. The specific moment when Jepperd recognizes Gus’s humanity is depicted early in the series (Figure 1.6). Jepperd tracks Gus to his home. He will convince Gus to go with him to an animal sanctuary, then instead take him to the compound where these experiments are taking place and trade him for the body of his dead wife, who died giving birth to a hybrid in the same compound: a trade that treats Gus as a commodity. Jepperd will eventually experience regret, stage a break out, and become Gus’s protector; but at this moment, Jepperd is a predator. Jepperd observes, “I ain’t never seen a deer-one before” (*Out of the Deep Woods* 36). This emphasizes Gus’s animal aspect while refusing to recognize the human aspect. He says “one” rather than “child” or “kid” or even “hybrid.” This phrasing positions Gus as other. It reflects the estrangement necessary for Jepperd to harm him. In the first, large panel, which occupies the top two thirds of the page, Jepperd is holding Gus by the antler with one hand and a gun in the other. The next panel is small and thin, focusing on

¹⁰ In addition to Chaney’s assertion regarding the prevalence of animals subjects in comics, the animal/human hybrids in *Sweet Tooth* are also an effective vehicle for representing grotesque children not only because animal elements are, historically, often used in depictions of the grotesque, but also because real animals have the capacity to be grotesque. Wolfgang Kayser writes, “Real animals also frequently recur in the grotesques. Even in animals that are familiar to him, modern man may experience the strangeness of something totally different from himself and suggestive of abysmal ominousness. Certain animals are especially suitable to the grotesque—snakes, owls, toads, spiders—the nocturnal and creeping animals which inhabit realms apart from and inaccessible to man” (182).

Jepperd's eyes. Like the panel, they are narrow, and the suspicion he feels is made evident in their glare. The next panel, composed of the same size and basic composition, cuts to Gus's eyes, which are wide in fear. Despite the longer ears, Gus looks just as human as Jepperd does, especially because in this narrow framing his antlers are no longer visible. The fourth and final panel returns again to Jepperd's eyes, which are now wide in belated recognition of Gus's humanity. In the next page he says "Relax kid...I ain't gonna hurt you" (*Out of the Deep Woods* 37). Of course, Jepperd will take advantage of Gus, but at this moment Jepperd's physical dominance of Gus ends. Over the course of their journey Jepperd bonds with Gus, which sets the stage for Jepperd's rescue attempt. That bond begins here, with Jepperd seeing Gus's humanity through his expressive eyes and recognizing him as a "kid" rather than a "deer-one." Looking solely at a hybrid's animal aspects may allow some to delude themselves into thinking that hybrids lack humanity, but, when confronted with Gus's humanity, Jepperd cannot ignore it.

This sequence is especially interesting coming, as it does, after one from an animal perspective. After burying his father, Gus encounters a buck (Figure 1.7). The first panel is a large establishing image of Gus and the buck, and the entire page has a similar composition to the encounter between Gus and Jepperd: a large panel that takes up most of the page and depicts an initial confrontation followed by narrow panels emphasizing the eyes of the characters. In the large panel, the buck seems to be creeping exceptionally close to Gus. It could be slowly approaching, leg raised in careful consideration of his next step. It could be confidently striding towards Gus, as if Gus were another buck to be challenged for invading his territory. Either way, the buck is approaching incredibly close, something bucks do not generally do around humans. The antlers, of course, tie these two creatures together, but it is the emphasis on the eyes that truly connects them. Gus's expression is hard to trace. It could be sadness at his father's burial or

apprehension regarding the approaching buck. The buck seems focused. Despite these differences, the eyes of Gus and the buck are similar in appearance, as are their other features, such as the angle of their noses and slope of their ears. The placement of these panels beneath the image of the buck potentially advancing on Gus creates a pause allowing for recognition to take place. As opposed to the potential for movement in the top image implied by the buck's upraised hoof, the narrow panels emphasizing their eyes lacks any implied movement. The lack of movement provides the space for consideration between the two beings. It is interesting that the eyes detailed in the previously discussed series of panels convey the shared humanity of Jepperd and Gus, despite Gus's hybridity, while the eyes here emphasize shared animality.

Despite their differences, these scenes are both about potential connections, even if for the briefest of moments. In fact, even though the latter example involves Gus's identification with the deer, the bottom panel actually makes the buck appear more human, too, thus reinforcing the connection between different forms of alterity. Showing Gus looking like a buck and the buck looking like a human is one way to emphasize the fluid nature regarding how one understands both difference and similarity. Sadly, that fluidity gets the buck killed, as hunters who are trying to capture Gus accidentally shoot the buck instead. These moments highlight the uncertain nature of Gus's ontological status, but they also allow for the possibility of recognizing different forms of being based on similarities rather than differences.

Childhood Innocence

Part of the reason the hybrids are so sympathetic is because of their reliance on childhood and innocence. Lemire states, "*Sweet Tooth* was about childhood and innocence and the things that destroy them. Making the children animal/human hybrids added yet another level of innocence to it. What's more innocent than animals[?] They aren't good or evil. They just are[.]

They are nature” (“Interview”). While the hybridity of the animals has ramifications beyond exploring innocence, innocence and its destruction are central themes of the narrative. The butchery present in the earlier image of the dissected hybrid, for example, is purposefully shocking and contrasts with Gus’ personality and innocence (“Interview”). The innocence of children to which Lemire refers is one of the dominant constructions of childhood in the Western world.¹¹ Lemire’s assertion that animals, as part of nature, represent innocence is interesting because it associates innocence with existence unconstrained by morality.¹² In this light, the innocence of nature can be maintained indefinitely because it’s not free from adult burdens and corruptions, but from questions of good and evil entirely.

Lemire depicts the destruction of innocence most concretely with Gus. Gus’s father, Richard, seeks to completely shelter him from the outside world in the hopes of protecting him. Gus is raised in isolation because Richard fears Gus will be kidnapped and stolen for experimentation. At the beginning of the series, Gus, who has never interacted with anyone other than Richard, finds a candy bar and takes it. When Richard finds out, he chastises Gus because candy is sometimes used to lure out hybrids: “Where did you get this?!” Gus’s father asks. Gus responds, “In the woods.” Richard warns, “They’ll try to trick you with these ... you have to be more careful. It’s in me bad now... you know I’m going soon” (*Out of the Deep Woods* 15–16). This incident highlights Gus’s sheltered upbringing. It also notes the inability of Richard to truly protect Gus, as the hunters eventually find Gus in spite of Richard’s best efforts. This exchange begins to highlight the limits of parental protection and the nature of borders and their inability to keep worlds separate: the world outside of Richard and Gus’s home is a place to fear and Richard is powerless to keep others away. The necessity of protecting children and the fluid

¹¹ See the introduction, pages 1-12.

¹² This approach also takes one of the elements of chaotic children, animality, and destigmatizes it.

nature of borders, and the ease with which they may be transgressed, provide insight into the impossibility of keeping childhood separate from adult realities like, in Gus's case, adult predators and knowledge of death and destruction within the wider world.

After Richard dies, Gus must leave the protection of his childhood home: a place where he already knew of certain dangers but where he avoided them. Jepperd offers to take Gus to a wilderness preserve where hybrids are kept safe: a different form of shelter. Gus takes a chance and goes with him. This moment of transition is exemplified in Gus's passing of the borders of his former home (Figure 1.8). Gus, despite being alone, originally refuses to accompany Jepperd; so Jepperd starts to leave without him. The top half of the page shows Jepperd on the highway, saddling his horse, no cars in sight. The highway cuts through the image. The fence that keeps animals from crossing the highway, and people from entering the forest, is missing a section. Telephone poles are leaning and broken. Modern society has collapsed. On the forest side, a forest so neatly rowed it was clearly planted by human hands, is the space where Gus's parents are buried, as evidenced by the graves and the dead buck. The placement of the graves by the highway seem counter-intuitive considering Gus's father hid from others, and so it is strange that he would initially bury his wife by the highway.¹³ Nonetheless, this section of the page shows the porous nature of the divide between worlds. The fence is ineffectual, and no figurative walls could prevent the plague from finding Gus's parents. But this image also shows the encroachment of nature onto society, which the hybrids also represent. Despite the clear planting lines and hollowed spaces humans made, the trees surround the highway; and while the wooden telephone poles crumble, the trees stand erect. The lone tree, particularly, stands tall and straight

¹³ Not because of traffic, there isn't any, but because it seems more visible to travelers than if the grave was hidden further in the trees. Perhaps an explanation for this might be that the grave was put further away from the home. Either way, there are dangers.

above the graves of Gus's parents. These images metaphorically demonstrate that nature cannot be completely subjugated to civilization, just as civilizing influences cannot completely shelter children. Gus must leave behind Richard's legacy and the shelter he provided and make his own way in the world. His father was unable to completely shelter Gus, and now he is gone. Gus can't remain behind; his lone source of protection from the outside world no longer exists.

Inset within the top right of the page are speech bubbles relaying Gus's thoughts. He recalls his happiness and his isolation. However, as Gus tells Jepperd, "I don't wanna be alone no more." Gus's narrative continues on the next, right-hand page (Figure 1.9). These pages are basically symmetrical. The right page continues with the interior monologue of Gus, but also focuses more specifically on his body. In the top panel, the woods behind Gus symbolize both the overwhelming presence this location has had in Gus's life, and also that Gus is leaving. The speech balloons provide narration that justifies Gus's exodus: "My dad said I ain't never supposed to leave the woods. Said if I did, I'd catch fire and burn up forever. Said I'd be safe in the trees, that outside was only sinners and pain and hell. My dad said a lot of things. But my daddy ain't here no more... Now it's just me" (*Out of the Deep Woods* 41). As the narration goes on, the row of three panels emphasizes the importance of Gus's movement past the broken fence. Although the actions in this row of panels could have taken a long or short time, the cut between these panels implies hesitancy as Gus stops directly in front of the fence as he contemplates the ramifications of his actions. The middle panel implies movement, but also a sort of stillness, which slows down the step which Gus takes. Then Gus is depicted from the front, outside the fence. The ending of Gus's narration here, "Now it's just me..." (*Out of the Deep Woods* 41) is juxtaposed by the bottom two panels, where we see Jepperd extend his hand, and then Gus's small hand reaching up to grasp Jepperd's larger one. It is a moment of connection as poignant as

Jepperd's earlier recognition of Gus's humanity. And while Jepperd will betray Gus, this betrayal is due to the complicated history of Jepperd, not any inherent desire to exploit others. The top third of the left page is structurally similar to other images, like the page where Jepperd leaves Gus at the compound (Figure 1.10). A fence crosses the page diagonally. The compound's fence is certainly more secure than the highway fence, and keeps hybrids *in* rather than hunters *out*. Yet the fence cannot protect against the plague and Jepperd will eventually breach it. The difficulty in maintaining borders and boundaries exemplifies how children, and others, cannot be sealed off from the outside world. It provides a metaphor for the impossibility of extended periods of sheltering children from the outside world by depicting their constant transgression; they are unable to keep people either in or out. Roads and streets also serves as a border, especially for younger children. In this light, the crossing of the boundary of Gus's childhood home is not just about the movement into a more dangerous area because of the failure of the boundaries in keeping potential predators out. It is also about the failure of regulation and structure to guarantee safety. It was only a matter of time before Gus's cabin was discovered, regardless of the rules restricting Gus's movements. The implication of this is that the rules Gus's father put in place to protect Gus (don't wander off to far, don't take strange candy) carry short term benefits, but they lack long term viability. Others do not abide by Richard's rules or share his concerns.

The initial connection in *Sweet Tooth* between candy and predators is analogous to contemporary society, and it demonstrates how sometimes the protection of children and the maintenance of innocence are at odds. It was common practice in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and remains so today, to warn children not to accept candy from strangers. Persistent warnings also crop up every year relating to potentially harmful Halloween candy. Reporters warn parents

that some hostile adults might slip razor blades or other harmful items or substances into candy; some parents then warn children. The paradox of these warnings is they destabilize the innocence of children in the hopes of protecting them.¹⁴ By conditioning children to be on their guard, society also creates the conditions by which potential innocence gives way to awareness of the dangers of the world. This awareness is not a bad thing, but it undermines constructions of innocence because it entails knowledge of the world that is at odds with innocence unburdened by knowledge.

The interest in children and spatial borders has historical precedent. Viviana Zelizer argues that around the turn of the twentieth century children in the United States began being valued increasingly for their emotional worth, rather than their worth as economic contributors. She writes, “While in the nineteenth century, the market value of children was culturally acceptable, later the new normative ideal of the child as an exclusively emotional and affective asset precluded instrumental or fiscal considerations” (11). This shift involved changes in the ways children were raised, as adults increasingly sheltered children. For example, concern over automobile accidents in cities led to familial regulations on children’s activities:

Saving child life meant changing the daily activities of city children, pushing them indoors into playrooms and schoolrooms or designing special ‘child’ public spaces, such as playgrounds. Streets were not only physically dangerous, but socially inadequate; the proper place for a ‘sacred’ child was a protected environment, segregated from adult activities. (54)

While not specifically talking about sheltering children from predators, the motivations for protecting children’s lives connects to the transgression of boundaries in *Sweet Tooth*. Sheltering

¹⁴ This is not to say that knowledge should neither be shared to protect children nor withheld until they might process it more effectively. Rather, it illustrates the tension between innocence and protection.

children involves the structuring, or restructuring, of their environment. Children were pulled off of the streets to protect them from cars and from people whom they might encounter outside, including adults (Zelizer 54). Not that all adults were unsavory, but children's lives were increasingly structured so their encounters with all unrelated adults dwindled. The rise of forced schooling in the early twentieth century, which culminated during the Great Depression, helped reinforce this separation and played a role in creating an adolescent culture and life stage distinct from adults (Mintz 239). Marina Warner argues, "[C]hildhood doesn't occupy some sealed Eden or Neverland set apart from the grown-up world: our children can't be better than we are" (60). That Eden or Neverland cannot be sealed is indicative of the porous nature of borders. We cannot provide children with a world unfettered by sin or enlivened by perpetual youth. The metaphor of Eden, however, is more attainable than Warner gives it credit for, when we factor in the fall. We can protect children initially, after all, from the outside world. We just cannot maintain it.¹⁵ In this light, Eden is the appropriate metaphor; it represents innocence one can initially protect, until children inevitable encounter knowledge and thus can no longer exist in their sheltered Eden. This is not to make the loss of innocence sound sinister; children simply grow up, even if it is sometimes sooner than some would prefer.

The inability to construct a sheltered Eden or Neverland, and its association with the inability to shelter children from the outside world, echoes throughout *Sweet Tooth*; but the porous nature of borders is not the only way that the comics accomplish this. Before Jepperd betrays Gus, they encounter a run-down building where a couple preys on other human survivors and forces women into prostitution. Jepperd and Gus are initially unaware of the purpose of the

¹⁵ This is a moment where theory and practice may clash. Most parents probably do recognize that too much sheltering can be harmful to childhood. Yet the idea of the innocent child, for however long parents may try and reinforce it, is still a powerful symbol.

building; they enter after seeing what appears to be a hybrid in a window. The hybrid turns out to be a prostitute wearing animal ears. The prostitute is only a teenager, although there are older women in the building too. But the ears facilitate the fantasy of having sex with a hybrid, which is a fantasy of child abuse. Other than Gus, who is approximately nine at this point, the oldest hybrids are only seven years old. No humans are younger than the hybrids, so the hybrids are the beings most imbued with perceived innocence and purity.¹⁶ The purity of the hybrid child carries additional connotations because they are physically pure because of their immunity to the plague.¹⁷ Children are ideally uncontaminated from the adult world; hybrids are uncontaminated from sickness.

The first clear image of the prostitute, Becky, reinforces the way in which innocence and purity are a façade, a construction easily undermined (Figure 1.11). Becky is positioned slightly to the left of center, and her eye line is another example of direct address. Like Gus's peeping over Jepperd's soldier, the reader peeps over Gus to see Becky. This highlights the seedy nature of the situation in which Gus and Jepperd find themselves, particularly in that the reader is, at this moment, a voyeur seeing something both private and upsetting. Despite Becky's pink make-up and negligee, which reinforce her sexuality, she appears distant. Her bunny ears look realistic, but they are fake, a mockery of Gus's antlers. The juxtaposition of Becky and Gus is highlighted because of their mirroring positions. Becky, however, at fifteen, has long ago lost her innocence despite her adolescent age. She is a dark harbinger of one of the ways in which hybrids might be exploited, of youth forced into a system of exploitation. The dingy room, with muck on the bed

¹⁶ This coincides with James Kincaid's argument that constructing childhood innocence simultaneously creates the desire in adults to possess such innocence (*Child-Loving* 5). Kincaid's emphasis is on how childhood innocence leads to child sexual abuse, but more benign forms of adults possessing childhood innocence can include adults who simply desire to have and raise innocent children of their own.

¹⁷ Richard sees Gus as a "New Adam" who will lead a "new race ... forever innocent and pure" (*In Captivity* 113).

and a broken spring protruding, emphasizes the artificiality of this pretend innocence. The walls are crumbling and the landscape picture is askew, subtly reinforcing the way in which nature is now off-kilter. This moment helps demonstrate the impossibility of maintaining childhood innocence, but it also connects to commodification. To her pimp, Becky is valuable solely for her body's ability to generate income. While Becky isn't as young as Gus, she's still an adolescent who lacks any sort of social agency. It's made clear that Becky and the other women in the house are forced to be there. By depicting Becky with the bunny ears (a nod to the role *Playboy* plays in commodifying female bodies and its association with animals: the playboy bunny), Becky's commodification evokes the hybrids. Becky is sexually commodified; the hybrids are scientifically commodified. Both are more valuable because of their youth, their closeness to innocence and purity (even though these aren't tenable).

Sympathizing with the Grotesque

The narrative posits three approaches to the hybrids: there is a human-led cult that forms around the hybrids and embraces the animal nature of children but uses them for their own purposes; some adults reject the hybrids and experiment on them regardless of where the hybrids fall on the animal/human spectrum; and some adults protect the hybrids, but these adults engage predominantly with the hybrid children who most remind them of human children. The multiple reactions of the adults makes clear that, like our own, these children inspire mixed reactions. There is ambivalence within individuals, like Jepperd, but also within larger groups of people; groups that classify hybrids differently. Ambivalent reactions and ambiguity are part of the grotesque, and these elements are often registered at the point of reception. Wolfgang Kayser argues that the grotesque applies to "the creative process, the work of art itself, and its reception" (180). An artist may set out to create a grotesque work and end up with a product that those who

view the work consider grotesque. But, despite the potentially trivariate approach to the grotesque, Kayser emphasizes reception: “Even in defining the structural properties of the grotesque we have to refer to its reception, with which we cannot dispense under any circumstances” (181). If the grotesque doesn’t impact viewers by unsettling them, it fails to be grotesque. Of course, individual interpretation and response is subjective, so this must be taken in a general sense. The problem of individual reception is perhaps why many scholars note its potential to inspire emotional reactions, often contradictory ones, but prefer to emphasize other aspects, like the grotesque’s corporeal nature. For example, in Edwards and Graulund’s overview of the grotesque, they note that bodies are often depicted as grotesque, such as when limbs are missing or added or when combinations of various types of bodies are created. These corporeal bodies raise ontological concerns:

The discombobulating juxtapositions and bizarre combinations found in grotesque figures in literature and the other arts open up an indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images and figures. A grotesque body that is incomplete or deformed forces us to question what it means to be human: there queries sometimes arise out of the literal combination of human and animal traits or, at other times, through the conceptual questions about what it means to deviate from the norm. (3)

Edwards and Graulund’s description of grotesque bodies implicitly connects with Kayser’s interest in reception. The discombobulating or bizarre nature of the grotesque body impacts how an audience might digest it. Furthermore, these corporeal bodies challenge the audience’s world view by challenging the concept of humanity. Thus, some descriptions of the grotesque acknowledge reception through the emphasis on the effects grotesque bodies or images have.

This does not mean that all scholars focus on the reception of the grotesque, but that some scholars still recognize how an audience may or may not process grotesque elements, such as being repulsed by unusual bodies or attracted to the possibilities these bodies represent, without specifically referencing the “reception” that Kayser discusses.

In *Sweet Tooth* the existence of the hybrids causes various reactions in the narrative’s human individuals and groups, but the hybrids benefit from their verisimilitude to humans because it allows certain characters, as well as readers, to more easily relate to them and see them as human. Shun-Liang Chao notes that verisimilitude has been prominent within the grotesque since early modern depictions. He writes, “fantastic hybrid creatures are rendered verisimilar as though they were real beings” and that “verisimilitude – or rather, making fantastic hybrids look verisimilar – has become a prominent attribute of grotesque representations” (10). That is, hybrids like those in *Sweet Tooth*, by appearing as natural creatures despite their clearly unnatural state, fit into a common category of grotesque depictions, which can take the unnatural and makes it appear natural.¹⁸ This is part of what makes the grotesque subversive, as it unsettles one’s understanding of what is natural or not: “The ability of the grotesque to trigger uncannily our imagination of a monstrous world in everyday reality introduces us to its emotional content. Horror or terror is the emotion most often associated with the grotesque, since the physically in-between fits in the category of the (biologically) impure” (10). Horror or terror may alternate with humor depending on which is the most appropriate reaction at the time, but, in the case of *Sweet Tooth*, the horror the reader feels at the grotesque is mostly based on how the hybrids are treated, not on the grotesque children themselves. The grotesque is turned back upon the abusers. The characters, if they existed in the real world, would be deemed grotesque and potentially

¹⁸ Or vice versa. Making grotesque creatures verisimilar makes the unfamiliar appear familiar, but a grotesque creature may also take recognizable elements and makes them strange.

inspire horror; but in the context of the world of the comic, a world startling similar to our own, they instead inspire compassion.¹⁹ The horror which the comic inspires comes less from the grotesque bodies than from how the grotesque bodies are treated. It is often humans who inspire horror. Only humans can be inhuman.

There are hybrids who can be understood as genuinely horrifying within the context of the narrative, but they are introduced long after Gus and other sympathetic hybrids, so the horror gets relegated to individual hybrids rather than all hybrids. These more horrifying hybrids are the children of chaos. They are more animal than human and cannot or do not master their animal drives. They are hybrid children unrestrained by civilizing influences like Richard. Gus and his cell-mates encounter one such hybrid during their escape from the compound where the experiments take place. After they hear some ominous movement in the sewer water, an alligator/human hybrid jumps out and attacks Wendy (Figure 1.12). Gus kills it with a brick. This alligator/human hybrid is viewed by the other characters as a monster. Despite its human-like arms, the reptilian body is more animal than any of the escapees, even hybrids like the mute Buddy, Jepperd's son. Its attack from underneath the water represents this hybrid as a monster via traditional horror conventions (the children are in a cramped space and the moment is preceded by a darkly colored page with noises coming from the water). Even in death, this hybrid does not elicit the same level of sympathy as do the protagonist and his group. In death, it has a monstrous visage with sharp, angular teeth, an oversized mouth, and long, sharp nails (Figure 1.13); and yet the gator hybrid is an innocent. In light of Lemire's comment that animals *just are*, the gator/child is behaving according to its nature. He's not good or bad; he just is a predator. Wendy laments, "He--he was just a little animal kid like us. Probably scared. Thought

¹⁹ This is due to the visual nature of the hybrids, who look cute rather than intimidating. But prose also often causes readers to feel compassion for (seeming) monsters.

we were gonna hurt him.” Gus responds, “... Don’t matter now. Had no choice” (*Animal Armies* 66). Wendy’s initial shock is based on the recognition that the gator is also a hybrid; but, Gus dismisses this concern by also appealing to instinct. The dead hybrid’s violent, natural action compels a violent action in response. Even if the reader takes this rationale at face value, it still feels inadequate. In this moment, the killer of the hybrid child is not an adult in a position of power, but Gus; and another hybrid child, as well as the readers, forgive him this killing. While this death may seem justified since the gator attacked first, it also reveals some of the moral or empathic limits of the hybrid children. The further on the animal side of the spectrum a hybrid resides, the more alien he becomes. For people to sympathize with the grotesque, they must see a bit of themselves in it. The harder this becomes, the less sympathy a grotesque character can garner.

The cult leader’s canine/human litter exemplifies this too. While Jepperd, Becky and Lucy, another former prostitute rescued by Jepperd and Gus, are traveling with the hybrid-worshipping cult, two cultists try to rape Lucy. The canine hybrids immediately attack and kill the rapists because Lucy is under the protection of the cult leader. While the reader is relieved that Lucy is saved, her rescue at the hands of the hybrids leads to horrific images of animals ripping apart humans (Figure 1.14). Strangely, had Jepperd shot the cultists, or beat them to death, the reader might find that outcome more comforting or satisfying or understandable than the horror of seeing beasts ripping apart men. Jepperd cannot hide his horror: “Oh, Jesus,” he says. Lucy, who was almost raped, comforts the younger Becky by telling her not to look (*Animal Armies* 80). The canine/children inspire outright horror because they appear more animal than human *and* they attack a human. Even though the actions of the cultists are

abhorrent, the primal image of animals ripping apart humans is so disturbing that it produces terror.

The canine/human hybrids entire existence is upsetting. The cult leader, their father, tells Jepperd the story of their birth. After a long labor that nearly kills the mother, the hybrids eat her. The cult leader says, “She was nearly dead by the time the last one came out. I don’t know... Maybe it was cruel of me... But they were so hungry, and we didn’t have any food left. So I let them eat her. She gave her life so they could live. And that was how our great faith was born. It was a beautiful day” (*Animal Armies* 102). Although the language positions the horror of the hybrids’ first feeding as one of a mother’s sacrifice, the language is euphemistic. There is no other indication that the mother would have willingly sacrificed herself, especially because initially many expectant parents, including these ones, had heard of the hybrid children but did not believe the rumors. This scenario is terrifying in its use of primal fears over cannibalism, as well as chaotic and animalistic children.²⁰ It melds the fears in classical mythology of children overthrowing their parent or parents, like Oedipus, or consuming their family, like Tantalus, with the possibility for children who are little monsters. These primal fears are grounded in the transgression of the elementary structure of the family. In these examples, what one fears is an unspeakable, but entirely possible, transgression. A child usurps a parent; a human feeds on another human rather than animal. All of these moments are especially fitting in that they engage with transgressive feelings or behaviors: the fertile ground of the grotesque.

Although the reader isn’t likely to sympathize with all hybrids equally, prompting the reader to sympathize with the freak or reject is subversive. This is not new; there are numerous texts from across media that do similar work, but it is theoretically aligned with the subversive

²⁰ The fear this conception of childhood generates is taken up further in relation to *The Flame Alphabet*.

aspect of the grotesque and its ability to destabilize boundaries. Alan Spiegel argues that the Southern grotesque is epitomized by physically and mentally “deformed” characters capable of connecting with readers (429). Spiegel is primarily interested in differentiating the Southern grotesque and its deformed characters from the Northern gothic and its rebellious characters. Whereas the grotesque character is rejected, the gothic character rejects. One inspires “pity and compassion”; the other “terror and admiration” (Spiegel 433). An implication of Spiegel’s work is that texts by authors like Nathaniel Hawthorne and Djuna Barnes do not fit his definition of the grotesque. Without granting Spiegel this premise, his insight into the way the grotesque is employed in Southern fiction is helpful.²¹ For Spiegel, these pitiable characters reveal something about the society that creates them; “[their] punishments always exceed [their] crimes” (429). Most of the *Sweet Tooth* hybrids are sympathetic characters punished for the sins of their parents, and they highlight fears over unrestrained commodification. But the hybrid’s sympathetic nature is aided by aspects of long-form narrative. When discussing the grotesque in relation to art, like Nero’s underground palace or Arcimboldo’s “Feast for the Eyes,” one does not sympathize with the grotesque. A human face comprised of food might look horrific and blur lines between human and vegetable, the consumer and the consumed, but it probably does not elicit sympathy for the drawn character. But the grotesque in narrative adds another dimension. Victor Hugo and his hunchback, Scylla and her transformation at the hands of jealous Circe, these characters elicit pity. Readers may or may not identify with them, but they are not entirely repulsed by them either. Their bodies may look repulsive, but the character does not have to be. Art can elicit sympathy, but this is more easily done in narrative (whether visual or prose), where the reader is

²¹ Lemire is a Canadian, not a Southern (United States) writer. *Sweet Tooth*, however, takes place in the United States and was published by a United States publisher for a (primarily) United States market.

often given the point of view of one or more characters and where the reader spends more time with the protagonists.

Even with the aid of the narrative, however, the grotesque bodies of the hybrids call attention to their nature; the images draw this attention. Grotesque bodies may exist in a state of transformation. The grotesque involves a “perpetual, never-ending metamorphosis of one substance into another” (45). A human princess turning into a frog is not grotesque; a human princess who is part frog is grotesque. For Chao, another way to think about the state of transformation and its relationship to the grotesque is to consider perpetual metamorphosis as incomplete (168). Chao understands perpetual metamorphosis as incomplete because the metamorphosis appears never to end. However, calling it perpetual metamorphosis implies a process, even if a never-ending one. But not all grotesque bodies exist in a state of constant transformation. It is not that the grotesque body is constantly metamorphosing, but that the grotesque body is not metamorphosing but looks like it is or may have been, even if this is not the case. It exists in a state of in-betweenness (Chao 26). Chao’s understanding of the grotesque as a state of never-ending transformation is well suited to his use of mythology. For example, he describes Scylla as grotesque because she exists between human and monster, but rejects Daphne as grotesque because her transformation into a tree is a complete one (45). Both Scylla and Daphne both start as human before their identities become complicated.

Bakhtin is also interested in metamorphosis. He writes,

The grotesque image reflects a phenomenon in transformation, an as yet unfinished metamorphosis, of death and birth, growing and becoming. The relation to time is one determining trait of the grotesque image. The other indispensable trait is ambivalence. For in this image we find poles of

transformation, the old and the new, the dying and the procreating, the beginning and the end of the metamorphosis. (24)

Both Chao and Bakhtin see the grotesque in transformation or metamorphosis. But whereas Chao emphasizes transformation as an unending process, Bakhtin highlights the way in which transformation, by virtue of its in-between status, suggests both its beginning and its end. That the metamorphosis is “as yet unfinished” leaves the possibility for its completion, even though the metamorphosis never completes. Bakhtin writes, “The grotesque body, as we have often stressed, is a body in the act of becoming. It is never finished, never completed; it is continually built, created, and builds and creates another body” (317). Even though the grotesque body may suggest both a beginning and an end, it cannot, in fact, achieve either. This is why although grotesque bodies may appear as if they have been transformed, they can be biologically complete. The hybrids, for example, are born with their hybridity. It defines them from birth. They look as though they were in a transformative state, but the individual hybrids are not actually transforming.²² The hybrids exist as complete biological entities blurring categories while generating new ones. The hybrids of *Sweet Tooth* exist on a spectrum between animal and human, but they belong to neither group. They form their own category. Yet readers understand the hybrids by comparing them to that which readers already understand: the separate, although increasingly complicated, domains of the animal and the human. To borrow Chao’s wording on classification: The hybrids are not either animal or human. They are both animal and human, (or neither animal nor human) (45). This wording mirrors that of Leonard Cassuto, who writes that the grotesque is “a breach of fundamental categories surrounding the definition of what is human. Neither one thing nor another, the grotesque is instead a distortion, conflation, or

²² One can argue that humanity itself is changing, but I believe the comic is less subversive in that regard than it might appear to be.

truncation that is simultaneously both and neither – and it thus questions the image of the human” (“Jack London’s Class-Based Grotesque” 115). But *Sweet Tooth*, as a relatively conservative text, doesn’t question what it means to be human, so much as it questions the objectifying behavior of certain humans and uses the grotesque to highlight the behavior in question.

Conclusion

The transformative aspect of the hybrids in *Sweet Tooth* seems to extend to society itself. The series teeters between the old, adult guard, and the new, hybrid guard. In the end, traditional humanity gives way to hybridity. At the end of human society, the hybrids escape their exploitation. They establish a haven where hybrids exist peacefully with the dwindling number of humans. Doctor Singh lives among them and teaches the hybrid youths. These youths are no more or less hybrid, no closer to a completed transformation to an animal state or return to a human one, than previous hybrids.²³ But society is transforming. This transformation of society supposedly sets up a new paradigm that depicts the hybrids as more in touch with nature and free from abuse. This conclusion is a hopeful one that resolves contemporary anxieties over the exploitation of children. The new hybrid community does not appear to exploit any subset of their community on behalf of another subset (although there is an initial argument over whether remaining humans should be killed or integrated).²⁴ They have different animal aspects but come together based on their desire to form a community against the remaining adults who would harm them. The hybridity of the characters in light of contemporary issues facing the exploitation of others, often lower-class or racial minorities, helps overcome this exploitation by

²³ Though the children of hybrids sometimes contain multiple animal aspects, depending on their heritage. One of Gus and Wendy’s children has antlers and a pig nose, for example.

²⁴ The pro-violence faction of the hybrids is led by Buddy, who prior to being an adult didn’t speak at all. So the first time we see Buddy utilize language, an integral part of civilization, it’s to call for violence.

acknowledging the otherness of everyone. The hybrids are treated as different from previous generations, but the hybrids also demonstrate that a society sacrificing its children for the benefit of adults is a society on the brink of destruction, but that society can be redeemed when it reevaluates its relationship between generations. This reevaluation is made possible in *Sweet Tooth* because of the hybrid's grotesque bodies. The animal/human hybrids of *Sweet Tooth* exist along a spectrum of alterity that challenges one's ability to classify what it means to be human. By highlighting humanity in the midst of dehumanizing characterizations, *Sweet Tooth* challenges processes of dehumanization. The children are grotesque, yet remain children; and while their grotesque nature may repulse adult characters, for the readers the grotesque elements beg consideration of their altered states.

However, the text is not as radically as one might think. While the series does critique contemporary exploitation of children, it ends with a recognizably society. The tension between animals and humans resolves itself because the hybrids outlive and eventually outnumber humans. Hybrids become commonplace and exist in a communal environment where some surviving humans remain with them until they die. Thus, humanity is replaced by the hybrids. Gus's relationships register this change. He initially loves the human Becky but ends up marrying the hybrid Wendy. This resolution, however, reasserts human systems and structures. The community is led by the hybrids most in touch with their human element, such as those who can speak human language. The comic book does not build a society of those who embrace their animalistic side; it builds a society of those who accept their animalistic side but still behave in recognizable ways. The hybrids live a life more in touch with nature, but not one radically different from current conceptions of humanity.²⁵ This may be because the hybrids are not

²⁵ And the emphasis on nature coincides with the decline of civilization brought on by the plague. This is not to say that the hybrids wouldn't prefer to live in a more natural than industrial setting, but none of the hybrids that we are

supposed to be a radical break from humanity, but a return to Edenic innocence. Metaphorically, they return to a nostalgic state that allows for the protection of their children against unrestrained commodification and exploitation. The series reasserts the desire for childhood to be a protected social space, sheltered from the dangers that adults can pose to children and childhood by treating them as commodities.

aware of have the knowledge of science or engineering to reconstitute the pre-plague world at the ending of the series, though with Singh teaching the children, this might be possible in the future.

Figures



Figure 1.1 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 10)



Figure 1.2 (*In Captivity 21*)

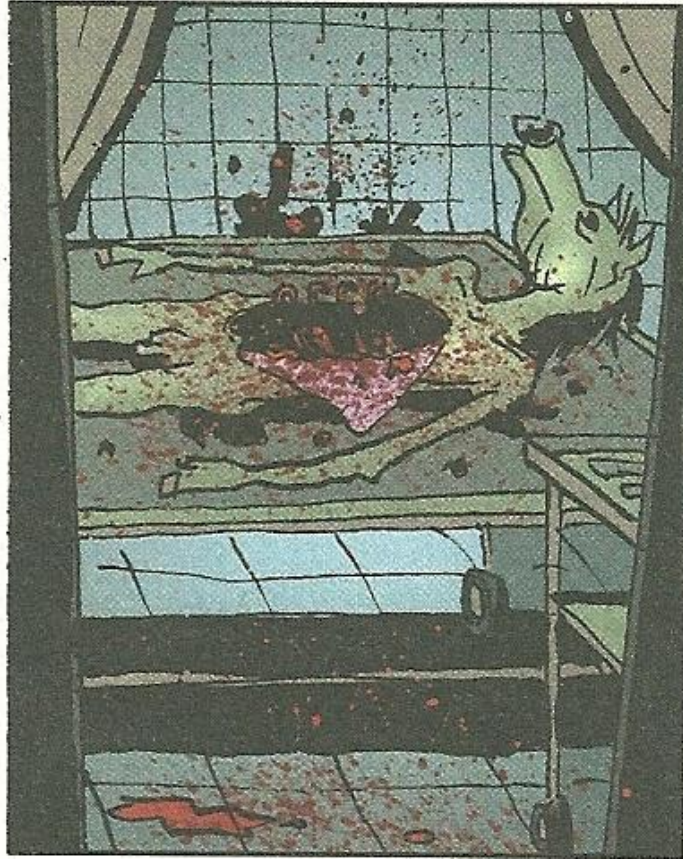


Figure 1.3 (*In Captivity 44*)

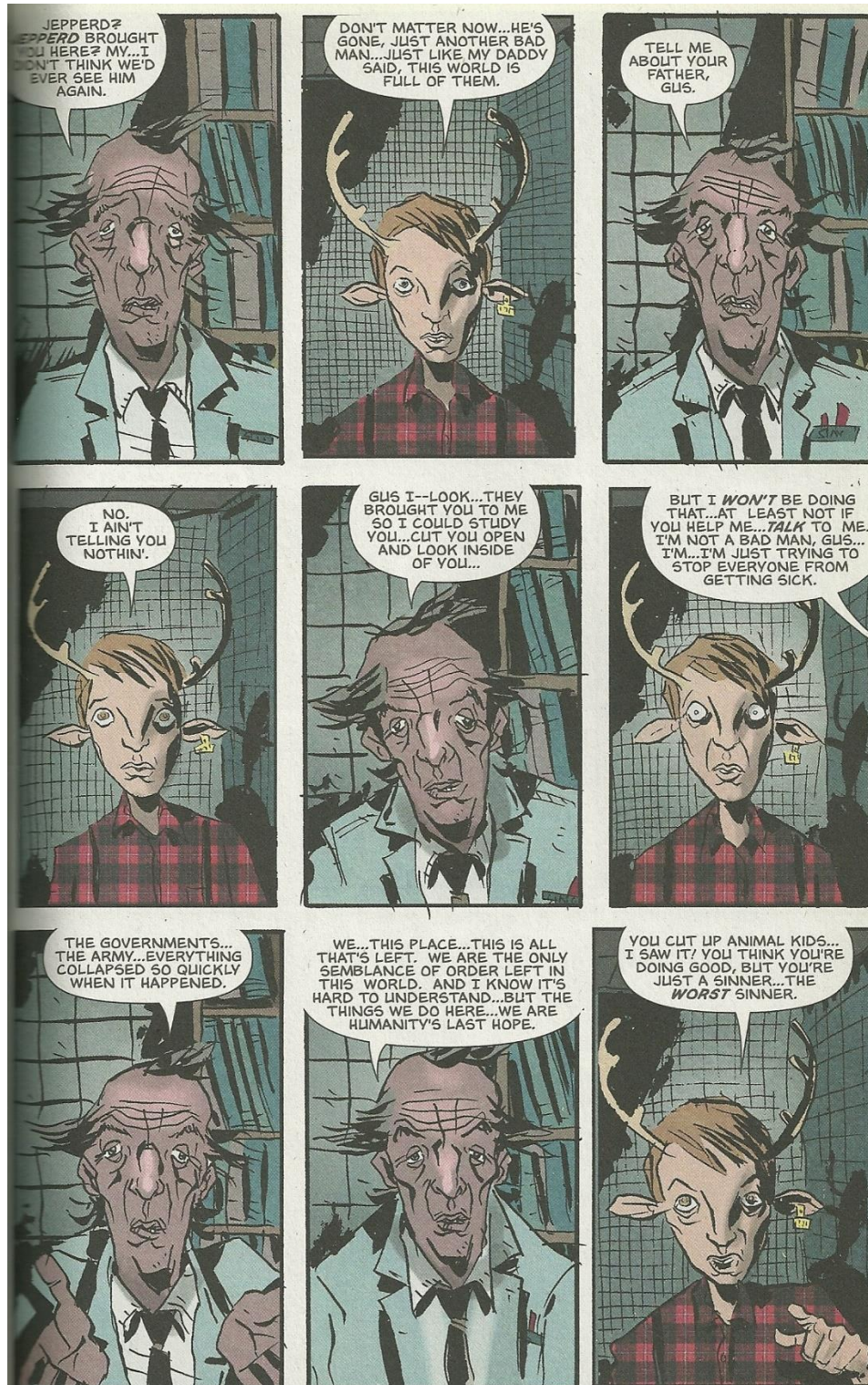


Figure 1.4 (*In Captivity* 65)

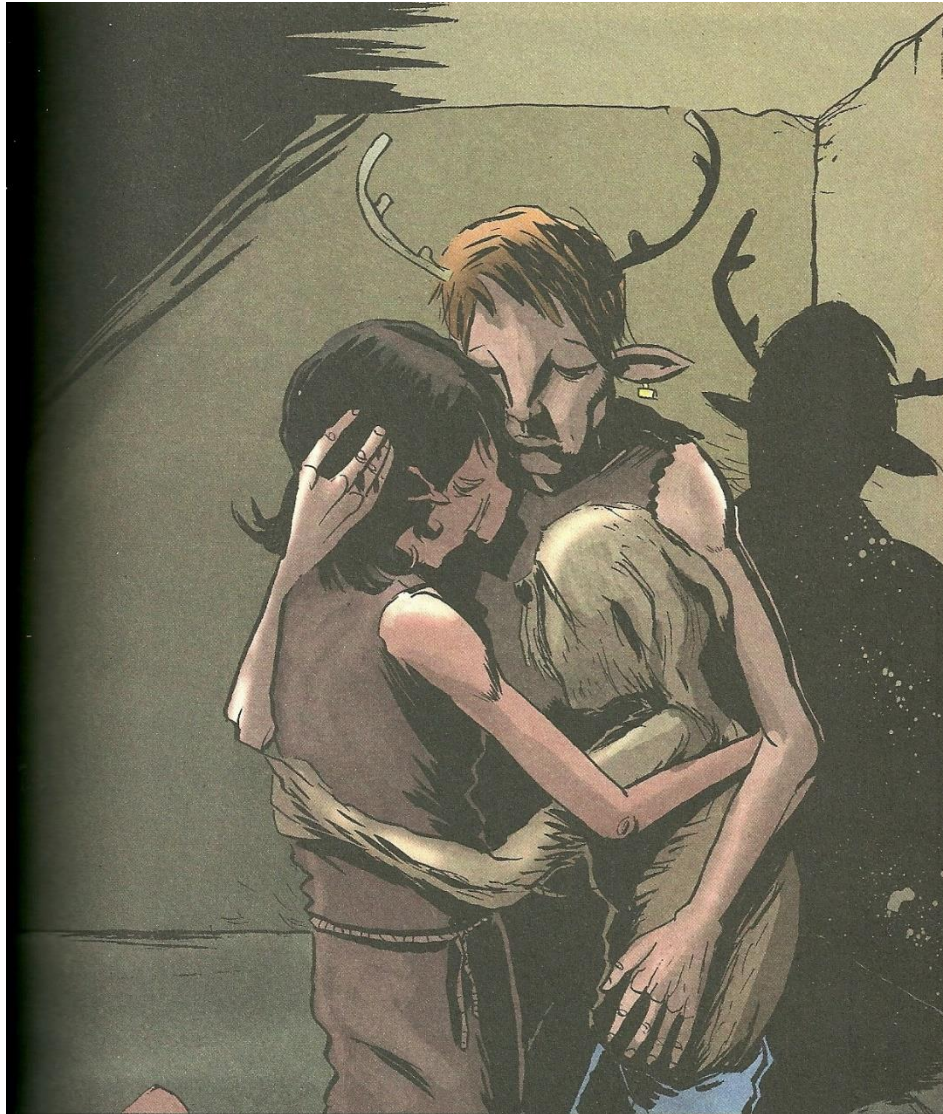


Figure 1.5 (*Animal Armies* 23)



Figure 1.6 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 36)



Figure 1.7 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 23)



Figure 1.8 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 40)



Figure 1.9 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 41)

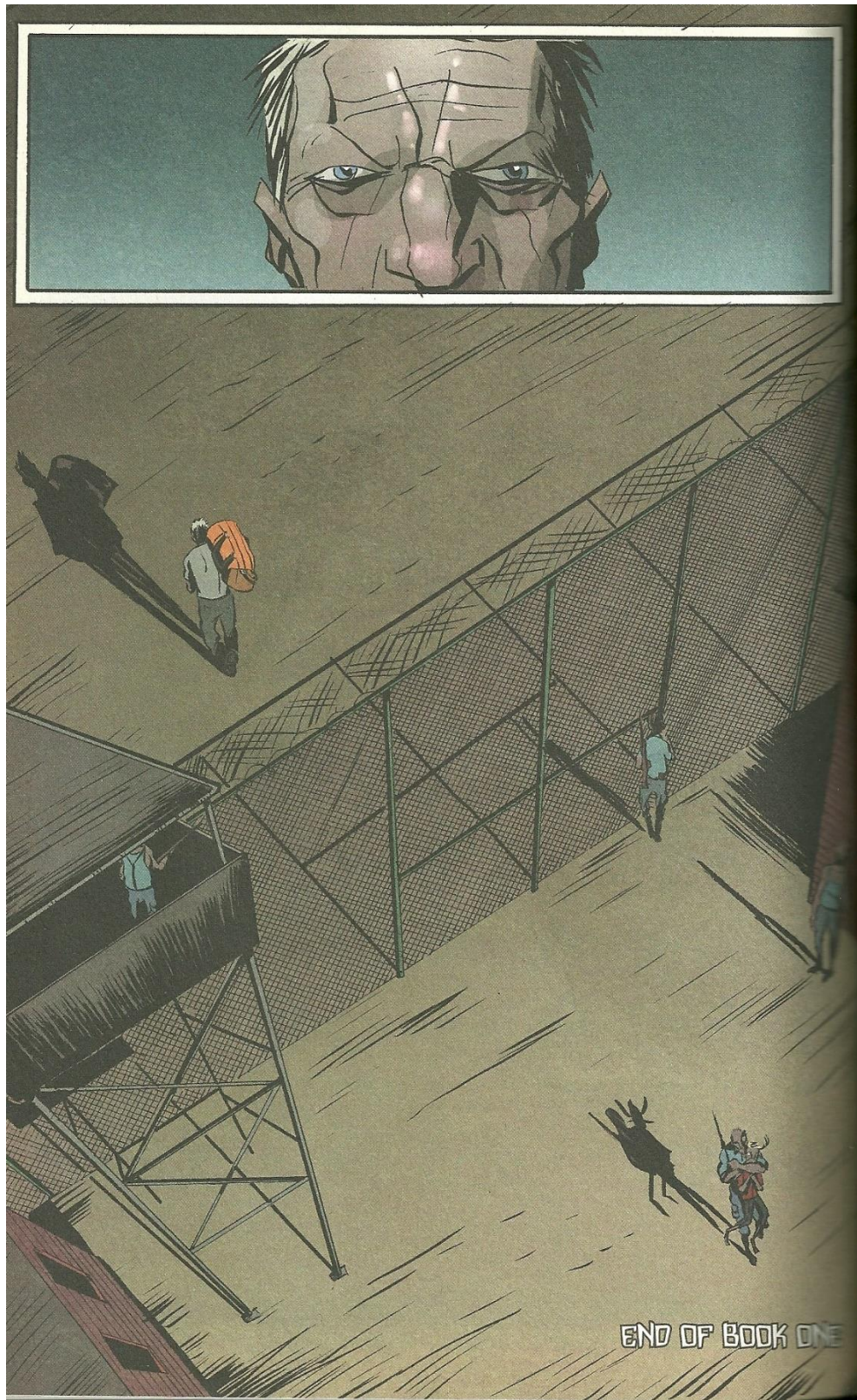


Figure 1.10 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 124)



Figure 1.11 (*Out of the Deep Woods* 77)



Figure 1.12 (*Animal Armies* 63)



Figure 1.13 (*Animal Armies* 67)



Figure 1.14 (*Animal Armies* 80)

Elephantmen and the Racial Grotesque

Elephantmen is an ongoing comic book series launched in 2006, written primarily by Richard Starkings and drawn by various artists.¹ In the series, animal/human hybrids, called Elephantmen,² are created by a transnational corporation in Africa as super-soldiers. The MAPPO corporation, led by a Japanese geneticist named Nikken, creates the hybrids using kidnapped African women as incubators. After coming to term, the women die as the hybrid children are ripped from their wombs. MAPPO then trains the hybrids through childhood and adolescence to be military commodities. Upon adulthood, the Elephantmen are deployed against Asian forces in a war fought on a European battle front. After the war, the United Nations votes to integrate the Elephantmen into mainstream society, primarily in the United States, and rehabilitate them. While this decision is initially considered altruistic, eventually it's revealed that the Elephantmen are allowed to live because they may be of future use. The series primarily focuses on the adult hybrids after the war. However, the hybrids are shaped extensively by their origins, and the comic books, especially early ones, often depict the circumstances surrounding their birth and childhood. This chapter situates these characters in relation to the racial grotesque. Furthermore, The Elephantmen inhabit a world between animal and human, and, as a result, broaden conceptions of humanity.

As adults, the hybrids are commonly referred to as animals or “munts,” a derogatory term for Elephantmen. Even the name Elephantmen, though seemingly benign, is disparaging.

¹ Contributors to the series, including colorers and letterers, include Monifa Aldridge, Blond, Steve Buccellato, Chris Burnham, Greg Capullo, J. Scott Campbell, Keu Cha, Marian Churchland, Boo Cook, Ian Churchill, Camilla D'Errico, Jenny Frison, Brandon Graham, Peter Gross, David Hine, Stuart Immonen, Shaky Kane, Ryan Kelly, Ladrönn, Tula Lotay, Eric Larsen, Ed McGuinness, Axel Medellin, Fiona Meng, Moritat, Tony Parker, Nei Ruffino, J.G. Roshell, Dave Sim, Rob Steen, André Szymanowicz, Shannon Wheeler, and Gregory Wright.

² Elephantmen refers to hybrids of all types, not just elephant/human hybrids. In fact, the primary protagonist of the series is a hippo/human hybrid.

Starkings notes the name “is a derogatory term referring to all human/animal hybrids” (Starkings, “Strange Times, Stranger Heroes in Elephantmen”). Many of the comics contain a panel with the following definition:

El•e•phant•men [el-uh-fuhnt-men]

Noun:

1. Transgenics; human/animal hybrids, genetically engineered by the MAPPO Corporation for military deployment in the Afro-Sino war (2239-2243).

Rehabilitated by the United Nations, these creatures were gradually inculcated into human society.

2. Derogatory term for such. (Issue 58)

The dictionary definition serves two purposes. It introduces readers who may be jumping into the comics mid-narrative to the overall premise of the hybrids. It also adds a sense of legitimacy to the hybrids. By giving them a dictionary entry, the comics give them official recognition. This official recognition, however, codifies the dehumanization they experience. It makes their dehumanization inseparable from their being. To be an Elephantman is to always be inferior. This is because the Elephantmen are created to be used, valued not for their humanity but their purpose.

Leonard Cassuto argues that the grotesque is culturally constructed and often used to dehumanize other races, and it cannot be understood outside of cultural contexts. For example, American Indians were grotesque to American Puritans because American Indians were not “seen consistently as a person in the Western worldview” (*The Inhuman Race* 7). The relentless dehumanization of the American Indians involved European settlers and their descendants assuming Indians “not to be persons,” but rather “savages” (Drinnon 13); savages who,

according to some, were placed “Between man proper and animals in the chain of being” (Drinnon 51). Puritans cast themselves as victims under threat from American Indians (Drinnon 38). The Puritans’ attitude towards the American Indians is an example of the grotesque as an “anomalous embodiment of cultural anxiety” (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 6). Cassuto, however, focuses on Antebellum American literature and culture and the objectification of African American slaves by whites who marginalized and dehumanized them so they could exploit them.

This dehumanization involves liminality, as peoples’ status exist in-between categories. Elephantmen, for example, are both, and neither, animal and human. They have elements of both but do not fit neatly into either category. This liminality creates the space for the grotesque. The grotesque involves the inability to easily classify something because multiple elements make it impossible to fully belong to a single category (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 6). This does not require literal transformation of the human body, it can be figurative transformation (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 3). African American slaves were classified as both human and property, as person and thing, and thus were considered nonhuman. The Elephantmen literalize the figurative transformation of African and African American bodies. Racial objectification, however, “reverberates back to the white subjects, calling their humanity into question in a different way, and thereby making them grotesque also” (Cassuto, *The Inhuman Race* 6). The ramifications of this statement, that those dehumanizing others end up dehumanizing themselves, is central to understanding the racial grotesque in Cassuto’s work and in *Elephantmen*.³ Racial objectification is never complete, it’s always a process: what Cassuto calls “attempted objectification” (*The Inhuman Race* 16). One can never fully turn a person into an object, even if one might treat them as such. Even those who objectify others cannot help but recognize that “human life is at stake”

³ This idea applies throughout this project, but Cassuto, overall, speaks most directly to the issues in *Elephantmen*.

(*The Inhuman Race* 16). Because humans cannot be turned completely into objects, the incomplete process provides a gap wherein questions of humanity can be considered. This causes the grotesque to function on two different levels. Those being objectified are grotesque in the categorical sense. They exist in an “ontological netherword” that denies them complete association with one category or the other (*The Inhuman Race* 16). Calling slaves grotesque bodies, in this sense, is an acknowledgement of the process that dehumanizes them and places them between worlds, not a pejorative aimed at the slaves themselves. However, the grotesque nature of the objectifiers functions in a different way. They too become grotesque for promoting racial objectification. Their actions are repulsive to those who disagree with their treatment of others. Even in the pejorative sense, the term “grotesque” retains meanings associated with liminality and ontological uncertainty. When used to describe ugly appearance or behavior, the term functions as an act of disavowal. If someone’s appearance or behavior seems monstrous, they become metaphorically grotesque. This is because we refuse to acknowledge or accept extreme ugliness, both literally and metaphorically, as part of the human condition. We tell ourselves something is wrong with a person who is pejoratively grotesque; we refuse to allow them complete entry into our shared community. We see them as part human, part monster. They cannot, *must not*, be fully human; yet we cannot ignore that they are human. When the grotesque is used to describe horrific behavior or appearance, it is also an attempt at separating traits we wish were nonhuman from more culturally acceptable actions and appearances.

Other scholars support the notion that the grotesque is sometimes employed to depict racial objectification. Fritz Gysin, in *The Grotesque in American Negro Fiction: Jean Toomer, Richard Wright, and Ralph Ellison*, argues that the authors he discusses use the grotesque to mirror the complexity of African American life. He argues that African Americans live as

outsiders in American society and therefore these authors turn to the grotesque to depict this existence. Furthermore, Gysin believes that studies of the grotesque must concentrate on individual authors because authors employ the grotesque in unique ways. Although Gysin notes the authors' varying success at social criticism, all of the authors criticize racial divides. The grotesque is often used to depict outsiders.⁴ Frances Connelly observes that the grotesque is "the quintessential voice of the outsider, and it is not surprising that it is embraced by artists concerned with issues of gender or race" (*The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* 23). Even though grotesque bodies can be fearsome or provide estrangement, they can also, for Connelly, encourage empathy, a powerful tool for combating racism and objectification. The transformative aspect of the grotesque is also a fresh way to approach topics because "the grotesque's urge to turn the world upside down and to play among broken boundaries is infectious" (*The Grotesque in Western Art and Culture* 23). Connelly's interest in the grotesque as always being at play figures the grotesque as essentially subversive. It tackles serious issues, but glorifies in chaos and disorder.⁵⁶

Cassuto also notes that "economic objectification" shares "many of the complexities" of "racially motivated objectification" but he is skeptical of conflating them. He argues that objectification is about domination rather than profit (*The Inhuman Race* 18–19). While not every instance of dehumanization involves economic objectification, the dehumanization and enslavement of African and African Americans makes it difficult, if not impossible, to completely disentangle racial and economic objectification. In *Elephantmen*, these factors

⁴ This can often be seen in the Southern grotesque as well. Flannery O'Connor and, more recently, Nathan Ballingrud are good examples of this.

⁵ A far cry from Kayser's trepidation over the abysmal world of the grotesque. Connelly is more closely aligned with the subversive view of Bakhtin.

⁶ It would be difficult to overemphasize how playful the *Elephantmen* creators are in their approach to the subject matter too. While the content is serious, the creator's exalt in the pulp-science fictional world.

certainly intertwine: the grotesque bodies of the titular, African hybrids are created for the sake of corporate domination and profit.

Elephantmen and Childhood

Although most of *Elephantmen* takes place when the hybrids are adults, their corporate slavery is established at birth. The horror of the hybrids' birth is depicted in a series of early pages. In one panel, drawn from an overhead perspective, the geneticist Nikken triumphantly holds the first hybrid aloft, as if to heaven, while the light in the room is centered on them like a stage light (Figure 2.1). His eyes look upwards, towards the sky and/or God (although the diegetic world clearly contains a ceiling). Nikken intones, "Welcome to my world, feeble creature. Breathe deep. With each gasp of oxygen, you will grow **stronger**" (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland).⁷ Referring to the hybrid as a "creature" rather than a "child" emphasizes his otherness, but the hybrid is eerily human. He is crying, something most animals do not do. So while the hybrid's first moment outside the womb is a distinctly human one, this is immediately neglected in favor of casting him as nonhuman. This moment also connects thematically with various instances in the series where Nikken positions himself as God, the creator of a new species. This panel comes within the midst of movement, as the other scientists' hands are suspended in applause and the hybrid's mouth is frozen in a cry. The indefinitely suspended cry of the hybrid is a harbinger of their tortured existence, as the hybrids are dehumanized from the moment of their birth.⁸

The birth of the hybrid is juxtaposed against the violent death of his mother; her womb ripped apart. She is positioned behind and off to the side of Nikken and the hybrid. This image and its composition demonstrates the lack of sentimental value given to the mother. The

⁷ *Elephantmen*, both the individual comic books and collected trades, lack page numbers.

⁸ This suspended cry recurs in the second panels of Figures 2.2 and 2.3 as well.

scientists all exalt the child, as the mother's corpse lies splayed behind the hybrid, ignored. The panel which precedes this one explains, "The females indigenous to this region have proven to be excellent engines of **reproduction**... The fact that no one has missed them is merely an added bonus"(Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland). This language dehumanizes the women via the detached anthropological description of indigenous females rather than women or mothers. The "engines of reproduction" metaphor and the reference to the fact that no one misses them positions the women as disposable commodities with no value beyond that which the corporation ascribes. Its rhetoric of science and engineering in relation to human life turns the woman, and others like her, into cogs in a machine; they aren't unique individuals with their own wants and needs, but objects that are made to contribute to the desires of the corporation. The emphasis on the child's life over the mother's dead body is a dark mirror reflecting a contemporary Western world that draws upon the idealized child as the most urgent rhetorical symbol (Edelman). For many, this extends to the unborn, which is sometimes privileged over the health and well-being of the mother. Despite the dead mother being largely ignored within the panel, however, the image's perspective connects her to Nikken and her hybrid child. She is forgotten behind Nikken in the narrative, yet the overhead perspective positions her excavated womb between her child and Nikken. From Nikken's perspective, this composition contributes to the sense that the mother is a means to an end. He needs human wombs to bring the hybrids to term, which provides him with the object of his scientific desire. Yet the placement of the forgotten mother also creates the sense that Nikken cannot completely separate the hybrid child from its human origin.

The subsequent page, which comes after a page turn, continues with the dehumanization of hybrids (Figure 2.2). This page is comprised of three symmetrical panels stacked on top of one

another against a black background, with small gutters between them. The panels focus on the hybrid, but gradually hone in on the corporate brand seared into his flesh. Nikken says, “These animals are completely **unique**. Perhaps the term ‘animal’ no longer even applies. Brand it” (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland). The middle shows the hybrid screaming as his flesh steams. Nikken intones, “MAPPO shall name them. MAPPO will own them” (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland). This reinscribes the hybrids as property rather than individuals. The branding of the hybrid is doubly perverse. On the one hand, the branding of Elephantman is akin to the branding of animals as property.⁹ Even more disturbing, however, is the connection between branding and slavery. Frederick Douglass’s description of the process of slave branding, given in England in 1861, is similar to this scene. Douglass recalls, “A person was tied to a post, and his back, or such other part as was to be branded, laid bare; the iron was then delivered red hot (sensation), and applied to the quivering flesh, imprinting upon it the name of the monster who claimed the slave” (Blassingame 377–378). The second and third panels evoke Douglass’ description of slave branding. The child is held down and imprinted, leaving behind seared and puckered flesh. Douglass’ assertion that the imprint is of the “name of the monster who claimed the slave” resonates with Leonard Cassuto’s assertion that the grotesque can turn back upon those who are doing the dehumanizing. The reader feels empathy for the hybrid, screaming out in pain, but doesn’t connect with the detached scientists in their scrubs who are harming the child. This empathy is built on the powerlessness of the hybrid, which, at this moment, is tied up in his status as a newborn child, which mobilizes the readers’ desire to protect children. The images from the branded child, the hybrid as object, to the swaddled child on the next page (Figure 2.3), the hybrid as human, present themselves

⁹ This also employs a perverse application of corporate branding.

simultaneously and sequentially. When viewing these panels as a tableau, the hybrid is in the process of both asserting and being denied its humanity. Nick Sousanis notes that comics readers make connections “not just from one panel to the next, but across the page and back and forth, in all directions” (Paragraph 2).

The dehumanization of the Elephantmen continues with the indoctrination they experience during their formative years (Figure 2.4). A man tells the hybrids that “thinking for himself is the nature of **man**” but that the hybrids, who he refers to as “monkeys,” are beneath man. When one of the hybrids tries to ask a question, he is punished. The trainer says, “There is no sense of self outside of MAPPO. No independent thought ... Your lives are not your own, Monkeys. You have been born into servitude... and your master is MAPPO” (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland). The final panel is an image of a child or adolescent hybrid, imprisoned in a cell clearly designed to hold adult hybrids. The child is sitting in the corner of his cage, positioned centrally and looking outward, as if to directly challenge readers regarding their complicity in processes of dehumanization.¹⁰ This page depicts the relegation of the hybrids as inferior to humans, but it also subverts the hybrid’s objectification by making MAPPO and their trainer the metaphoric monsters.

The trainer uses language that evokes slavery: “monkey,” their “lives are not their own,” “master,” etc. He focuses on the hybrids’ potential as assets rather than their status as individuals with their own wants and needs. The trainer’s emphasis on what the hybrids will be, rather than what they are, provides a perverse take on the developmental discourse of childhood, which emphasizes the gradual accumulation of knowledge and acclimation to the world and focuses on children-as-becoming. John Wall argues this discourse is problematic because it assumes a

¹⁰ The appeal on behalf of an abused child recalls other narratives, such as Ursula Le Guin’s famous short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas,” as well as similar moments from *Sweet Tooth*.

similar life-path and end result for individuals, which results in a lack of “moral diversity” (29). Wall notes that Western thought has developed developmental approaches to childhood throughout its intellectual history. Thinkers as disparate as Aristotle and John Locke believed that parents, for Aristotle, and society, for Locke, could help children realize and master their potential over time (25–27). This approach has its benefits, specifically “its temporality and realism. It refuses to either demonize or sentimentalize childhood but instead assumes a starting position of ethical neutrality. This allows it to recognize children’s dual goodness and potential for harm” (28). However, the emphasis on the end result of the child—the type of adult a child will be—opens up developmental approaches to criticism. For example, “Childhood, as Rousseau complained, is given value chiefly as a means to adulthood. Childhood is interpreted through the lens of what children are not yet, namely, developed adults. What it means to be a child is paradoxically secondary, for children, to becoming an adult” (29).¹¹ While it makes sense to prepare children to become productive members of society, Rousseau’s concern is that the emphasis on preparation can sometimes lead to the future overshadowing the present. This is what the trainer in *Elephantmen* wants. He wants all the hybrids to be remorseless, killing machines who will obey orders without question, and he values them only for what they become. This is why the hybrids are dehumanized; not because they lack independent thought, but because MAPPO wants to suppress such thought to better turn them into objects by placing them outside the bounds of humanity, along with the rights people might attribute to *human* hybrids,

¹¹ This again places the child in service to the adult, though in a different way. Recall the critique by Warner and others that childhood is constructed through adult desires. See pages 3-5.

as opposed to *animal* hybrids. This is why the trainer refers to Hip by his number rather than his name.¹²

This entire page, however, fundamentally reasserts the humanity of the hybrid children in the midst of their dehumanization. Immediately after the trainer tells the hybrids they lack the “capacity to have an **original** behavioral impulse,” the elephantman Hip raises his hand to ask a question. The act of asking a question is itself a direct rebuttal of the trainer’s logic because it shows Hip is thinking for himself. This second panel would be delightful out of context: six children or adolescent hybrids, all gangly and awkward. Their eyes are large. Some, like the giraffe and camel hybrids, seem particularly skinny. Some, like the elephant hybrid, are chubby. They all look awkward and simultaneously cute and ugly in that strange adolescent way, which Leslie Fiedler argues is a time when humans feel grotesque (32). These are a far cry from the sleek, and often sexualized, bodies of the adult hybrids. They capture the awkwardness many experience in youth, even as they embody a youth drastically different from our own. Hip’s “huh,” which carries with it so much uncertainty and discomfort, also conveys awkwardness. Their humanity asserts itself even in the most dehumanizing circumstances, as the hybrids contradict the trainer in both their behavior and appearance.

Elephantmen and Racial Objectification

The Elephantmen’s arrival in the United States mirrors the arrival of African slaves. Slave ships had cramped quarters, where slaves were confined and chained, sometimes on top of each other (Figure 2.5). Modern slaves ships carry the restrained hybrids to America, which recalls the deadly Middle Passage which so many millions of Africans went through on the way

¹² The dehumanization of soldiers, so they can be molded to obey without question, and even their “enemies,” so they can be killed without remorse, aren’t uncommon; but in the case of *Elephantmen*, the training is an integral part of the hybrids’ childhood.

to the United States (Figures 2.6 and 2.7). In a preceding panel, the narration says, “Obadiah Horn came to America in chains... like a slave” (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). Horn and the others are in chains because they are dangerous military assets, but this moment draws upon the historical reality of slavery even as it redeploys it. Images of slavery give way to images of immigration. Later issues, for example, depict the arrival of the Elephantmen at Ellis Island.

In addition to slavery imagery, the comics also foreground the objectification of African American bodies in the United States in other ways. Tusk is a wart hog/human hybrid, but, unlike the other hybrids, his body is broken down and he’s lost his mental capacity. Ebony Hide tells his friend, Miki, about Tusk:

If we suffered at Nikken’s bidding, we were told that it was for our own benefit... Nikken did not tolerate weakness. His children had to be perfect. The weakest among us were weeded out. And disposed of... Ironically, Tusk was the strongest of the weak links. His body was subjected to every poison in MAPPO’s arsenal. Every nerve agent, every chemical weapon known to man was poured into him. His system was designed to resist and flush the toxins and it succeeded. But not before the poisons destroyed his mind. (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)

This dialogue takes place over the span of two pages comprised of seven panels. The first panel contains a scientist observing a number of Elephantmen in restraints and hooked up to machines. Five of the next six panels contain images of Tusk: hooked up to tubes, or in a straightjacket inside a padded cell. These panels often lack background detail, a minimalism that highlights Tusk’s broken and isolated body. Ebony calls Tusk’s system a success because it rid his body of

toxins, even as *Ebony* acknowledges that Tusk's mind was ravaged before the toxins were flushed. Even with the caveat, Tusk's system is only a success if his body is all that's important. If Tusk's identity and consciousness are important, then his system is a failure because it can't save what makes Tusk an individual. Tusk's system is only successful in relation to MAPPO's perversion of the developmental approach to childhood, the child-as-becoming. MAPPO's plan for Tusk is to use him as a test subject and, if he survives, to use as a soldier. This includes testing his body in ways that might make him and others more powerful and resilient on the battlefield. In that light, he helps MAPPO improve the weaponization of the other Elephantmen. Tusk himself is no longer fit to serve as a soldier, but his role as a test subject helped strengthen his brethren. The objectification of Tusk begins from his childhood, as the hybrid children are trained to think of themselves only in relation to MAPPO and MAPPO sees them as commodities rather than individuals.

While the image of Tusk dominates this scene, one panel doesn't depict him. In this panel, a body is tossed into an unmarked, mass grave, with the text "And disposed of..." (Figure 2.8). That hybrids considered weak are thrown in unmarked mass graves is a horrifying allusion to the way in which people have been disposed of after being subjected to brutal treatment at the hands of others. Of course, the dominant images of the twentieth century involving mass graves are those of the World War II concentration camps that were filled with Jewish people and other Nazi victims, and *Elephantmen* can be read in some ways as an amalgamation of allusions to various atrocities and mistreatments; yet MAPPO's kidnapping of African women recalls the violence and instability of some African countries.

Tusk's trials, and his name, bring to mind another horrifying incident that specifically resonates with the racialized bodies of the hybrids: The Tuskegee syphilis experiment. This

Public Health Services study ran from 1932 into the 1970s. It studied the effects of untreated syphilis on rural African Americans. The subjects and interns involved were not told the real reason for the study (Jones 7). In the 1970s, when this dehumanizing study came to light, some contended that it was only allowed because the subjects were poor and black; some went as far as comparing it to Nazism (Jones 12–13). This comparison, like *Elephantmen*, draws on the association between Nazism and racial objectification. A later storyline returns to Tusk's dehumanization. Tusk is depicted in a pair of panels. In the top panel, he's restrained and attached to various tubes (Figure 2.9). The narration intones the horrors he was put through. The bottom panel shows Tusk in a straightjacket in a padded cell. The cell is dirty, fluids are on the floor and wall. Tusk is missing one of his tusks. One eye is glazed over; it no longer functions. He's drooling. Part of his scalp is missing; the skull is showing. It appears to have been drilled into. He still has a tag on his ear.¹³ Tusk's body, as opposed to the triumphant, muscled bodies of the other Elephantmen, makes his abuse visible. As a result, he's hidden, while the other Elephantmen are free to be seen in society, as their bodies don't overtly display their abuse.

The hybrids all register their African heritage through their animal aspect. The series engages with immigration, miscegenation, and racism. These issues are not exclusive to Africans and African Americans, especially when discussing immigration in addition to slavery, but the series combines them in a post-modern mash-up where the Elephantmen stand in for all fears over racial groups marked as other, while still retaining the complex history of African Americans, specifically. Starkings, though white, is himself an immigrant to the United States and draws upon this experiences while writing (Starkings, "Strange Times, Stranger Heroes in Elephantmen"). This is most poignantly expressed in Issue 50, an issue almost entirely comprised

¹³ Like Gus in *Sweet Tooth*. See page 40.

of pages depicting paintings of immigrant Elephantmen working at a host of labor-intensive jobs, with narration reflecting on their experience. One image, of hybrids sitting on the foundation of a building high up in the air, is reminiscent of a famous image of working-class labor in American (Figure 2.10). This image blends past and future. Its reference to an iconic image that represents the part of laborers in building the industrialized world is placed against a backdrop of sleek, subtly futuristic buildings. It draws upon nostalgia for a past, while the inclusion of both Elephantmen and humans deemphasizes racial differences in favor of immigrant and working-class solidarity.

Animals, Humans, Monsters

Elephantmen draws upon the reprehensible treatment of African and African American bodies as it illustrates what commodification does to people: it attempts to transform them into nonhumans. The hybrids are a metaphor for objectification. Metaphors can be used to exert power. David Punter writes, "the control of public metaphor is a way of gaining and securing power" (47). By creating hybrid super soldiers, rather than human ones, MAPPO ends up creating creatures who metaphorically embody their own dehumanization. This is done by showing how dissimilar the hybrids are from humans. Dissimilarity, like similarity, is also part of metaphor: "[A]lthough metaphor undoubtedly deals in likeness, similarity, it also deals in unlikeness and dissimilarity. Metaphor makes us look at the world afresh, but it often does so by challenging our notions of the similarity that exists between things; how alike they are; and in what ways, in fact, they are irreconcilably unlike" (Punter 9).¹⁴ As metaphors, the bodies of the Elephantmen seem to justify their dehumanization, even as the same bodies constantly work against it. Punter argues, "Where the classical metaphor posits the possibility of furthering the

¹⁴ This dissimilarity might also be necessary because of the uncanny valley, where nonhumans who appear too similar to humans are disturbing because they look human, but slightly *off*.

search for meaning through aligning one object, word or phenomenon with another, this variant on the postmodern metaphor takes as its ground the impossibility of assigning meaning" (61). It is impossible to assign definitive meaning in the hybrids' case because their bodies are in a constant state of tension.

Due the ontological uncertainty over the hybrids' nature, some consider them monsters. Scholars occasionally discuss monsters when writing about the grotesque.¹⁵ Wolfgang Kayser, for example, notes that all monsters are grotesque (181). Mark Dorrian provides a more comprehensive accounting for the similarities and differences between the monstrous and the grotesque. Dorrian uses the classical world and its ideas of beauty and form to discuss these "closely aligned" terms (315). Initially using the terms almost interchangeably, Dorrian understands monsters via Platonic metaphysics: as beings that transgress nature through either fragmentation of the body, such as a being with two heads, or combination, such as man-beasts or hermaphrodites (310). Monsters undermine the cosmic order by transgressing accepted forms, a description which resonates with discussions of the grotesque in contemporary times. As Dorrian explains, "The operative principle of monstrosity might be described as the coming together of what should be kept apart" (313). In their joining of the animal and human kingdoms, the hybrids are monsters. More specifically, humans are part of the animal kingdom, but the joining of disparate animals (human/elephant, human/giraffe, human/hippo, etc) is where boundaries collapse. For Dorrian, "The grotesque enfolds the monstrous," but the terms diverge when "power changes to paranoia" and the monstrous seems to collapse representational distance and appear as if it may enter into the viewer's world (316). Dorrian is referring to the collapse of

¹⁵ The Elephantmen are literally monstrous bodies, as opposed to the clones in *Never Let Me Go* who unsettle others because they look like humans or the children in *The Flame Alphabet* who are compared to animals and behave like little monsters.

representational distance between viewers and art, but this makes sense in relation to the diegetic world of *Elephantmen*. When the hybrids become immigrants who integrate into the Western world, they cease to be an unknown fear that resides far away and instead force those human characters who fear or despise them to confront such feelings head on. The monster, in this case, forces others to confront its grotesque embodiment.

Noel Carroll believes that monsters "are beings whose existence science denies" ("Horror and Humor" 148). This is an elegant conception of the monster, but it feels inadequate for *Elephantmen*. It might be more accurate to say that the hybrids are beings that *current* science denies. Even though there is a scientific explanation for them in the series, it isn't available to us. Jeffrey Jerome Cohen locates the monster within the realm of culture. He writes, "The monstrous body is pure culture" and that monsters "are disturbing hybrids whose externally incoherent bodies resist attempts to include them in any systematic structuration. And so the monster is dangerous, a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions" (4; 6). Cohen's definition of the monster is reminiscent of the grotesque, which is not surprising given their close relationship. Grotesque bodies are anomalous and "'monster' is the oldest word in our tongue for human anomalies" (Fiedler 16). For Cohen, the monster's importance, like the grotesque itself, is to discover what it reveals about society: "These monsters ask us how to perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance toward its expression. They ask us why we have created them" (20). In the *Elephantmen*'s case, they also force people to consider *how* they could have been created in the first place. The hybrids weren't created, fully formed, like militaristic Adams. Instead, they were gestated, birthed, and raised, over the course of years, with the express intent to create monsters capable of

dominating opposing armies. The hybrids are products of their childhood abuse. They rise above it in many ways, but they are the end result of childhood objectification: the culmination of a process of commodification, which shapes their existence from (and before) childhood.¹⁶

Cohen's monsters follow the logic of the Gothic monster, whose "body ... produces meaning and can represent any horrible trait that the reader feeds into the narrative. The monster functions as monster, in other words, when it is able to condense as many fear-producing traits as possible into one body" (Halberstam 21). The way the hybrids become repositories of a cavalcade of fears over immigration and race, while also blurring various racial atrocities, is bound up in their status as monsters. However, Gothic monsters in the nineteenth century combined "the features of deviant race, class, and gender," whereas contemporary monsters emphasize "deviant sexualities and gendering but [show] less clearly the signs of class or race" (Halberstam 3–4). *Elephantmen* is a contemporary narrative that clearly shows the signs of race, class and gender. Furthermore, while the physical difference in the hybrids' being manifests as ontologically confusing bodies, the fundamental reason some consider them nonhuman may include the way hybrids are created and brought into the world and the intent behind their creation. The hybrids' conception and birth are strange and horrifying. This coincides with Peter Brooks' understanding of what makes Frankenstein's monster monstrous:

The creation of the Monster ... takes place on the borderline of nature and culture.

The Monster is a product of nature—his ingredients are 100 percent natural—yet

¹⁶ As opposed to the characters in other chapters, who are valuable as or because they are children. Only in *Never Let Me Go* do we also see children commodified solely for use as adults. In *Never Let Me Go*, however, the protagonist constantly recalls her childhood, and therefore the connection between the commodified child and adult is constantly reinforced. The novel also shows how adults fear grotesque children, and so increases the pathos one feels towards them throughout their life. *Elephantmen*, on the other hand, quickly sets up the hybrid's commodification as one that began in childhood, but spends the majority of its pages on their adult life, with the occasional reference to their past. This reflects the desire of the hybrids to leave their pasts behind, even as the entire trajectory of their lives can be traced to their creation and subsequent childhood.

by the process and the very fact of his creation, he is unnatural, the product of philosophical overreaching. Since he is a unique creation, without precedence or replication, he lacks cultural as well as natural context. (217)

In their science fictional world, the lack of cultural and natural precedent for the hybrids is fearsome. This fear is then displaced onto the chimerical bodies of the hybrids. But just as Elephantmen may appear human despite their monstrosity, so too can humans become monsters.

In the opening pages of an issue that follows Trench, a zebra/human hybrid, during his time as a police officer immediately following integration into the United States, Trench narrates: “MAPPO’s engineers took sovereignty of the animal kingdom even further, they made us **like** man, but not man. We remained creatures to conquer or fear once again, not brothers they could relate to. Better Products ... We became Elephantmen, neither one nor the other” (Schweikert, Kane, and Starkings). Trench articulates a conception of the hybrids that directly coincides with Cassuto’s observation that grotesque bodies are neither human nor object. While Cassuto is dealing with objectification based on race, not species, the animal aspect of the Elephantmen resonate with the racial grotesque because, in addition to their African heritage, they provide a metaphor for one of the ways in which humans are dehumanized: by comparisons to animals. It is for this reason that their status of “like man” is emphasized with bolding.

Trench is called to a crime scene where an African American man high on cough syrup has murdered a child related to him. This leads to a panel that captures the horror of people in dehumanizing circumstances (Figure 2.11). The panel encompasses approximately two thirds of the page. A dead African American child is in bed, his throat cut. This panel juxtaposes what should be a child’s safe space, their bedroom, with the horrors of his circumstance. The boy, were it not for his cut throat, appears peaceful, almost as if he was asleep. His dog is laying

quietly by him, and the boy's hand is touching a stuffed animal. Yet the boy is murdered; blood covers the sheets. There is dog excrement on the bed. Unpacked boxes sit in the corner of the room, while a large bong is on the child's bed. The solid, clearly defined images and lines combined with a bright, rich color palette provides a vibrancy that contributes to the juxtaposition of innocence and violence.¹⁷ The child's face, as well as his upper body, look like that of an adult. His body and face seem larger than his legs, and his face could be that of a young man rather than the child he is, an aesthetic recognition of the inability to shelter his childhood. The following page shows the floor in this room littered with junk and garbage, as the murderer is curled up next to the bed holding a box cutter. The shattering of the illusion of the child safe in his bedroom highlights the grotesque nature of the humans in this story. The series returns to the image of the child to garner sympathy for those trapped in a dehumanizing system. A human police officer enters and says, "What kind of **animals** are they breeding, out here?" This moment contributes to the human becoming grotesque through his own behavior. Trench responds, "Animals. We call them that when we don't understand. When we're afraid of what a man can become" (Schweikert, Kane, and Starkings). The emphasis on what a man or woman can become resonates with the grotesque as transformation. Trench also demonstrates that fear can be a factor in the grotesque. Society may dehumanize or objectify that which scares it so that it becomes unrecognizable. The other officer's question creates a gap between himself and the people he wants to distance himself from, which allows him to project the blame for their heinous circumstances onto the victims, rather than the structural issues at play, like poverty and racial discrimination. By seeing the individual or a small group of individuals as grotesque, he can ignore the larger ramifications. Generally speaking, some people, rather than embracing the

¹⁷ For more on the tension between innocence and danger, see pages 44-52.

idea that the grotesque can force us to more fully explore what it means to be human and/or embrace incongruity, instead reject grotesque beings outright as in- or nonhuman.

While Trench's experience illustrates the way in which humans can be considered animals, one woman transforms her entire existence. Yvette is a French resistance fighter who faces the Elephantmen before their emancipation, when they fight in Europe. Yvette lost family and friends to the Elephantmen, so she fights for her homeland against the foreign military presence. The Elephantmen, engines of death and destruction, fear her. Years after the war, Yvette travels to the United States and begins murdering Elephantmen before confronting her ultimate target, Obadiah Horn. During the war, Horn made it his mission to kill Yvette. During their final confrontation after the war, Yvette commits suicide rather than be spared by the hybrids and their allies. She would rather die than be used as "evidence" of the hybrids' humanity (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). Yvette's inability to put aside her vengeance signifies how she has been reshaped by her circumstances. Shun-Liang Chao writes,

Grotesque *trans*-formation is an *excessive* pursuit of incompleteness and contradiction: it transgresses the natural order of things and produces within itself a self-contradictory (or in-between) physical structure, one that, as we shall see, displeases classicists because of its ability to feed the feelings of (dis)pleasure and to obscure the borderline between life and death, beauty and deformity, the central and peripheral. (26)

Even though contradictory topics, like life and death, often help inform each other, classicists prefer they be kept separate. This is why the grotesque is so displeasing to them. They reject, for example, animal/human hybridity because the classical human body is predicated on its adherence to proportion and symmetry and altering them makes the sacred into something profane. To excessively pursue incompleteness and contradiction warps a person so that his or

her incongruity becomes written on the body. Chao's emphasis on grotesque transformation as an excessive pursuit contextualizes Yvette's experience, as her excessive pursuit of vengeance causes her to forsake all else and changes her into the living embodiment of death. Yvette is initially depicted as a French freedom fighter who can somehow go toe-to-toe with the Elephantmen. In an early recollection of Yvette, the text reflects on the Elephantmen's presence in Europe: "We were confronted by enemies just as ferocious as ourselves, some were perhaps even more deadly" (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). This narration appears in a panel where Yvette slashes the face of a hybrid with a knife (Figure 2.12). Over the hybrid's shoulder we see Yvette: blood on her face, eyebrow raised, mouth open mid-speech or exclamation. Even though the back of the hybrid's head is the centerpiece of the panel, the speech balloons frame Yvette's head, thus facilitating the transition of the viewer's gaze from the hybrid to Yvette. While the narration in this panel doesn't specifically reference Yvette, the positioning of the speech balloons next to an image of Yvette makes clear to whom the narration refers. But the narration seems absurd. While the ferocity of the humans may be equal to the Elephantmen, how could a human be more deadly than a being bio-engineered for war? Yet this is the case. Hip Flask later recalls, "[Yvette] was the scourge of the Elephantmen... We marched into Europe with the most sophisticated state-of-the-art weaponry known to man... We could have easily brushed **armies** aside... But when we were confronted by a young French girl who had lost **everything**... We may as well have raised bows and arrows against the **lightning**" (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). Yvette becomes a force of nature: lightning, able to quickly strike and withdraw. All of the Elephantmen's advanced weaponry is for naught, as it gets technologically reduced from bullets to arrows. Of course, bullets are also no good against lightning, but the metaphor of bows and arrows against lightning highlights,

even more so, the futility and power differential between Yvette and the hybrids. A few pages later, after a description of Yvette surviving being shot and falling hundreds of feet, a panel that captures Yvette's grotesque transformation coincides with Chao's description of the blurring of the border between life and death (Figure 2.13). Yvette is depicted on the left half of the panel from the shoulders up, against a black backdrop. The left half of her face has three tears streaming down it. The right half is a skull, with an empty socket incapable of tears. The left side of the panel includes the narration "It was as if Yvette had become death itself" above the image (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). The panel shows a contradiction within Yvette, as a simultaneously living and dead being. The fully fleshed left half of the face juxtaposed against the skull on the right, without any sort of transition between the two halves, leads to contradictions between life and death and beauty and deformity. She becomes the embodiment of death, at least to the Elephantmen. The right half of the panel is wreathed in flames that seem to be born of, and partially framed by, Yvette's flaming red hair. Her beret also blends into the right half of the panel as it burns. Within these flames is an image of Yvette walking out of a firestorm as she fires her rifle. She is unburnt, an avenging angel or rising phoenix, seemingly immune to and unfazed by the fire she walks out of, come to deliver death and retribution to her attackers. The narration, "The hunted became the hunter," repositions Yvette from a position lacking power to one containing power. Both sides of this panel capture Yvette's transformation: a moment of metaphorical rebirth where Yvette redefines herself as the Elephantmen's enemy.

When Yvette follows the hybrids to the United States to finally kill Horn, she engages in a campaign of terror where she kills other Elephantmen and leaves behind the phrase "No Mercy." This harkens back to her days as a freedom fighter when she carved her name into the flesh of at least one dead hybrid. In the United States, Yvette begins wearing the skull of Tusk

(Figures 2.14 and 2.15). In doing so, Yvette is reflecting back to the hybrids the image of their own death, as she delivers it. But she is also transforming herself. She remains human but becomes so consumed by her role that she transforms a part of herself into something that is less recognizably human. Her excessive pursuit of vengeance requires her to sacrifice much of her humanity and transforms her into a reaper. Two (of six) panels take this even further (Figure 2.14). The emphasis on the eyes of Yvette and her victim create the impression that they are of the same kind. The dimensions of them are the same, and the reader is denied a view of any of Yvette's actual, human body, and is instead forced to confront the mask she wears. The mask is unable to convey emotion; even the eyeholes are inscrutable pits of darkness with no indication of what lies beneath. This is in contrast to the clearly frightened hybrid. He is sweating and appears incredulous. The subsequent panels show Yvette killing him. The living creature of the second panel is dead meat with no future, whereas the creature in the first panel, wearing a mask of death, lives. The mask completes the grotesque transformation that Chao describes. Rather than being half human and half death, Yvette is now all death. This is reinforced when Yvette murders another hybrid in his bedroom (Figure 2.15). In the first panel, Yvette stands against a backdrop of the sky, her bloody axes in-hand, as the dead hybrid collapses on the floor. But the background of Yvette, rather than depicting a discernible daytime skyline, instead looks like a flaming backdrop. It thus resonates with the image of Yvette emerging from flames, guns blazing.¹⁸ Here, she also emerges from flames, but now she covers her face in a full skull. In the bottom panel of Figure 2.15, the image emphasizes the inscrutability of her left socket, which also resonates with Figure 2.13 because in that image it's the left side of Yvette's face that is still human. Yvette's ability to become an instrument of destruction is predicated on her ability to

¹⁸ Figure 2.13 comes after Figures 2.14 and 2.15 in the comics, but occurs before these latter figures, as it describes her time in Europe.

take on the characteristics of that which she kills, which is the Elephantmen at the peak of their war years. She doesn't just hunt Elephantmen, she becomes an agent of their death by embracing the violence she abhorred in them, which the hybrid skull she now wears represents. Just as Elephantmen were created to be perfect military specimens, Yvette has turned herself into a perfect specimen for hunting and killing them. Her self-imposed mission completely defines her.

When Yvette finally confronts Horn, he says, "I know who you are. Yvette. The freedom fighter. At least you were then. Now? Now you are nothing. Look at yourself. You are little more than an animated cadaver. A spectre clinging to delusions of morality" (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). Horn's references to her as an "animated cadaver" and a "spectre clinging to delusions of morality" recognize the transformation of Yvette into a manifestation of death, animated by her vengeance. Horn says, "... I will be **mourned** by the society that celebrates me now and they will marvel at my achievements **long** after I am gone... **You** will be **executed** as an assassin, a **psychopath**. An **animal**" (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). In some respects, it's remarkable that Horn, having been dehumanized throughout his life, calls Yvette an animal. Biologically, Yvette is more human than Horn, and their capacity for logic and emotion is equal. Horn, like Yvette, taps into the pejorative connotations of the grotesque, the unwillingness to associate extremely distasteful behavior with humanity. Yvette rejects this: "I am **not** an animal! I am a **human being** and none of your **bullshit** will stop me from **exterminating** you" (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook). This exclamation, ironically, takes place in a panel that showcases Yvette's mask, which complicates her defense. The red font connotes a rage, more powerful for its rare use in the comics. The words shift from a rejection of her animality to an assertion of her humanity before ending with a dehumanization of Horn, as "extermination" is primarily used when referring to insects or rodents. This refusal to

give into her own dehumanization, even as she dehumanizes others, connects to Cassuto's notion of the dialectical interplay between the objectifier and objectified. It also demonstrate how the grotesque is applied from the center to the margins. This application, however, involves perspective. Yvette's behavior is monstrous, but not to her. To her, the Elephantmen are the monsters for what they did. To Horn, she's the monster due to her murderous tendencies occurring outside the theater of war. This is why a person can be made grotesque by others with the power to redefine them, but it's also why a person can become grotesque through their own behavior. If others see this behavior as abhorrent, they seek to expunge it. Of course, the grotesque most clearly describes images and bodies that trouble dominant paradigms or structures, but its ambivalent nature allows for multivalent possibilities. Even though the Elephantmen's ambiguous bodies embody a lifetime of commodification, Horn's assertion that Yvette is the true grotesque challenges MAPPO's early dominance over the hybrids' lives. The hybrids can be more than soldiers, and Yvette's inability or unwillingness to recognize this turns her into a monster.

Elephantmen as Postmodernism

Brian McHale notes that science fiction literature, which tends to "lag behind canonized or mainstream literature in its adoption of new literary modes,"¹⁹ began in the 1960s, with authors like J.G. Ballard, to engage in and with postmodernism (69–72). The science fictional *Elephantmen* situates the metaphor of racial objectification as grotesque hybridization within a postmodern context. Ihab Hassan finds that in 1982 "no clear consensus about [postmodernism's] meaning exists between scholars" (263). Hassan tries to alleviate this by associating postmodernism with "indeterminacy," or "a complex referent which these diverse

¹⁹ Even though postmodernism has often borrowed from science fiction, especially in its interest in its use of temporal and spatial displacement (66).

concepts [like ambiguity and deformation] help to delineate” and “immanence,” which “designate[s] the capacity of mind to generalize itself in symbols, intervene more and more into nature, act upon itself through its own abstractions and so become, increasingly, im-mediate, its own environment” (269–270).²⁰ In *Elephantmen*, the ambiguous bodies of the hybrids serve as symbols for their own commodification and for the racial objectification they face. While Hassan’s emphasis on indeterminacy and immanence coincides with the function and effect of the grotesque, other scholars help further illuminate postmodernism’s workings.

Fredric Jameson associates the postmodern with depthlessness and an emphasis on commodification. The depthlessness involves a “weakening of history.” Nostalgia films, for example, don’t actually reflect a specific time in our past, but rather an aesthetic or style that invokes a nostalgia for the idea of the past (19). They imagine the past but redeploy it as an aesthetic for consumption. This is why pastiche is such a prominent aspect of the postmodern. It’s the invocation of various forms and styles but without the satiric bite of parody (17). Pastiche is about commodification rather than critique or insight.²¹ Barry Lewis calls “pervasive and pointless pastiche” one of the “dominant features” of postmodernism (171). Lewis reference to pastiche as “pointless” coincides with Frederic Jameson’s assertion that pastiche, like parody, imitates a specific style but lacks subversive edge. On the other hand, John Storey believes that

²⁰ Hassan provides lists of the concepts that illustrate postmodernism, I’ve chosen a few representative examples that fit within the context of this project, even though I do not consider this project an entirely postmodern endeavor.

²¹ Jameson also resists the intrusion of the market into social domains like the family, and the notion that this intrusion is human nature (263-264). He considers the merger of two “separate explanatory systems ... human behavior (preeminently the family or the *oikos*), on the one hand, the firm or enterprise, on the other,” championed by the neoliberal Gary Becker, postmodern because they combine distinct systems as if they are one (269-270). Jameson’s book is published in 1991, though some of the material was published in the mid-1980s, during the Reagan administration and the initial rise of neoliberalism. In this way, Jameson is dealing with the beginnings of neoliberalism, but he refers to late capitalism, which includes an emphasis on multinational and transnational corporations, as opposed to monopolies in a single country, and a desire for a global capitalist system (xviii–xix). Neoliberalism shares this emphasis on globalization and the desire to spread and create new markets across the world. His resistance to the intrusion of the market resonates with this project’s emphasis on how neoliberalism invades childhood. See pages 12-21.

pastiche and nostalgia are inadequate for fully understanding the intertextual nature of postmodern texts. He writes, "The intertextual understood as a form of borrowing from what already exists is always also (at least potentially) a making new from combinations of what is old. In this way, popular culture is, and has always been, about more than a pastiche or a nostalgic recycling of what has been before" (209). Pastiche alone cannot account for the ways in the postmodern recycles old forms or ideas into new ones.

Another aspect of postmodernism is its ahistorical nature. Linda Hutcheon notes "One of the few common denominators among the detractors of postmodernism is the surprising, but general, agreement that the postmodern is ahistorical" (*The Poetics of Postmodernism* 87), but complicates this further. She argues that "postmodernism is a contradictory phenomenon, one that uses and abuses, installs and then subverts, the very concepts it challenges" (*The Poetics of Postmodernism* 3). It considers history and fiction as "human constructs," which provides "the grounds for its rethinking and reworking of the forms and contents of the past" (*The Poetics of Postmodernism* 5). She names texts that engage in this tendency "historiographic metafiction." Unlike Jameson, Hutcheon does see parody in postmodernism;²² parody uses irony to distance itself from the past, even as it wistfully "call[s] to continuity beneath the fragmented echoing," thus distancing itself to the past even as it reaffirms its "connection to the past" (*The Poetics of Postmodernism* 11; 125). Thus, "Historiographic metafiction always asserts that its world is both resolutely fictive and yet undeniably historical" (*The Poetics of Postmodernism* 142).

As Hutcheon notes, others also discuss the relationship between postmodernism and history. Christopher Butler writes, "History was just another narrative, whose paradigm

²² This may be an issue of usage. Jameson sees pastiche as parody without satire (17), but Hutcheon seems to consider them synonyms, or at least flattens their differences. She writes, "Parody – often called ironic quotation, *pastiche*, appropriation, or intertextuality – is usually considered central to postmodernism" (*The Politics of Postmodernism* 93) [italics added].

structures were no better than fictional, and was a slave to its own (often unconsciously used) unrealized myths, metaphors, and stereotypes ... even its causal explanations could be shown to derive from, and hence to repeat, well-known fictional plots" (32). This doesn't mean that "anything goes," but that we should be more cognizant of "the theoretical assumptions which support the narratives produced by all historians" (35). This coincides with the rationale for historiographic metafiction: it can rework and rethink the past because it recognizes the narratives of the past are constructed by people. This emphasis on the past as construct makes it less likely to see history as linear progress. According to Simon Malpas, "... postmodern fiction frequently treats history ironically as a site of fragmentation rather than a progressive structure" (101).

Elephantmen incorporates its grotesque hybrids within a postmodern environment of history, pastiche and commodification. It draws on fragments of specific atrocities even as it dissolves boundaries between atrocities. Nikken, speaking to a United Nations court, says, "So much **blood** has been split... So many **people** have died. So many **atrocities** have been committed. So many **monsters** have walked the earth. But you are looking for just **one**" (Starkings, Moritat, Churchill, Medellin, Steen, et al.). Whether Nikken's accusation that he is a scapegoat is accurate or not, it metatextually speaks to the series' practices. The series gives us one atrocity, the treatment of the hybrids, to stand in for all atrocities. The hybrids draw upon the history of the slave trade and the mistreatment of Africans and African Americans; the U.N. trial of the hybrids creator, which is juxtaposed against images of mass graves, draws upon the holocaust and its aftermath. The mixing of historical narratives doesn't end there. The hybrids are not just freed slaves, but immigrants, as the comic uses images meant to recall Ellis Island and other iconic images of immigrant workers. The U.N. soldiers who free the hybrids are

sometimes cast as their enslavers. They load the hybrids into trains while carrying guns, and they put the hybrids in chains to bring them to the United States in ships. The comics often begin with quotes on a variety of topics from real people, like George W. Bush, Carl Jung or Ayn Rand, but they also include quotes from fictional people, like Dr. Nikken. This pastiche of atrocity, of victimizers and saviors, and of real and fictional people are elements of how the narrative consciously recalls a variety of events and perspectives, without fully affirming a historical narrative.

The dissolution of boundaries is prominent in its blurring of historical atrocities, but it also takes place on the formal level of the art and materiality of the comics. Richard Starkings is interested in bringing a “sense of fun” to *Elephantmen* (Starkings, “Interview: Richard Starkings”). In a more recent interview, he reiterates: “... we wanted to have FUN ... I love having a book where I can channel all my love for comics – Sword and Sorcery! Science Fiction! Horror! I love it all. That’s what the book is really about” (Starkings, “Strange Times, Stranger Heroes in Elephantmen”). This sense of fun is present in the constant homage to pulp influences. Starking’s describes *Elephantmen* as pulp science fiction in the vein of precursors like the “60s Marvel comics and 70s issues of *2000 AD*” (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland Afterword). Pulp science fiction is, to Starkings, “Action and adventure with a SF [science fiction] twist” (Starkings, “Interview: Richard Starkings”). The term is even used in the comics’ marketing. For example, it can sometimes be found on the covers of the individual comics as paratextual information. The pulp influences of the comic can be found in the pastiche of imagery and styles within the comic books.

The comics often explicitly reference genre fiction and sometimes the overall aesthetic style of the art changes drastically. One issue of the comics has a title page that embodies the

emphasis on detective fiction (Figure 2.16).²³ Ebony Hide looks like a gumshoe, with his trench coat and flashlight. The comic's title, "*The **Elephant** in the **Room***," is a joke that references both the hybrid skeleton on display, Ebony Hide himself, and the mystery the detective is investigating. Another comic depicts a femme fatale, who ends up going upstairs into a detective's office (Figure 2.17). In addition to drawing on tropes and images from the pulp detective genre, *Elephantmen* also reference specific texts, like *Blade Runner* (Figure 2.18). "Glade Runner" is a clear take on the sci-fi detective film, except it replaces clones as the beings that challenges ontological divides with hybrids. "Glade Runner" is a comic within a comic. Some characters in *Elephantmen* read the "Glade Runner" or other comics. Another comic-within-a-comic, "The Victory of Sammy Thrace" from the series *Hip Flask*, is an homage to Will Eisner's famous detective comic *The Spirit* (Figure 2.19). Part of Eisner's fame is due to his innovative and meticulous title pages, which incorporated the name of the series into the architecture of the page in stunning ways. *Elephantmen* mimics this by spelling "Hip" with the laundry hanging on the clothes line and "Flask" painted perpendicular on the building. Contributors names are integrated into the cityscape, with "Busiek Arms" and "Immonen Barber Shop." The "Created by Richard Starkings" signature mirrors the appearance of Eisner's credits in *The Spirit*, down to the circles atop the letters "I." While homage to detective fiction is common in the series, it isn't the only type of homage. "The Slaughter House Five" is a direct reference to Kurt Vonnegut's *Slaughterhouse-Five*, only the carnage in Starkings' take references crocodile hybrids, notorious for their ferocity, rather than the Dresden bombing (Figure 2.20). Ebony Hide is often cast as Conan the Barbarian during his drug-induced dreams and hallucinations, an homage to Robert E. Howard's pulp sword and sorcery creation and the focus

²³ Hip Flask and Ebony Hide work as detectives after the war.

of the 1970s Marvel comics by Roy Thomas (Figure 2.21). "The Tower of the Elephant," which is the title of an homage to *Conan*, is also the title of one of Howard's short stories, which Thomas adapted. While the point of the pastiche is homage, Starkings wants to have fun. This desire surfaces in the loving homage to his influences, but this homage does not help readers reimagine or reinterpret the stylistic forerunners.

The list of these examples isn't meant to account for the complexity of each individual image, or the sheer volume of all the references. Rather, it illustrates the propensity of the comic to directly reference its influences. The multitude of references also coincides with a variety of aesthetic styles used in the comics. While it isn't surprising that a comics series that has employed a number of artists has differences in styles, the aesthetic differences are often drastic;²⁴ and while sometimes the changes in style coincide with diegetic reasons (to depict a dream or comic or story within the overarching narrative), oftentimes the changing aesthetics do not coincide with a temporal or spatial shift in the diegetic world. The comics' art often has realist elements, although bodies and guns are usually exaggerated. It alternates between dark, noir settings and vivid, energetic scenes. It's usually full of kinetic energy and movement, but not always. In some instances, the art is lush, full of delicate and precise watercolors (Figure 2.22). Some stories are done in bright pastels (Figure 2.23). One story depicts three disembodied heads

²⁴ It's often the case that aesthetic differences between artists are drastic. Jack Kirby's kinetic and rambunctious fight scenes are often easily recognizable, as our J.H. Williams III's gorgeous palettes, which often break or redeploy generic conventions regarding panels and movement. But individual series often do not look drastically different. Many Marvel and DC superhero series, for example, don't have an aesthetic that varies greatly from one title to the other, at least to the lay-reader, much less within an individual series. This is often the case even when a series' creative team changes. One famous anecdote notes that DC had Jack Kirby's drawings of Superman redone because they didn't look enough like the house style at the time (Cronin). Of course, there are times when a publisher or creators significantly change the aesthetic of a series, like with David Aja's art on his recent, critically-acclaimed run on *Hawkeye* with Matt Fraction. Yet these aesthetic differences rely on their "newness" to generate interest in the series, therefore they are predicated in part on the idea that the comics often look the same to set themselves off from other titles. *Sweet Tooth* does occasionally shift aesthetics, usually, though not always, this is during the few occasions there is an artist other than Lemire. However, *Sweet Tooth*'s aesthetic shifts function differently, as they often reflect different states, like dreams or memories of childhood.

that are realistically drawn which surround miniature, cartoonish depictions of some of the comics main characters, all against a psychedelic backdrop of mushrooms and an explosive burst (Figure 2.24). *Elephantmen* more freely blends aesthetics than most other comics. This artistic promiscuity is in line with its pastiche, in that it constantly draws attention to itself (through its references/through its art) and its constructed nature.

The comics also commodify the characters in various ways, which contributes to the series' postmodernism sensibility. After the Elephantmen come to the United States, and despite the fear and derision some people feel towards them, Ebony Hide capitalizes on the fascination the public has with them by commodifying their likeness. They are featured in comics within the comic, turned into toys (Figure 2.25) and placed on clothing (Figure 2.26) and television (Figure 2.27). The awe and fear the hybrids generate as grotesque beings gives them cultural appeal. The toys, specifically, seem to have a further purpose than simply commodification, as they make imposing creatures diminutive and cute. Ngai argues that "cute" is a prominent aesthetic category which emerged over the course of the twentieth century. In terms of *Elephantmen*, what seems most important about Ngai's argument is that "cuteness solicits a regard of the commodity as an anthropomorphic being less powerful than the aesthetic subject appealing specifically to us for protection and care" (60). In terms of the hybrids, their imposing bodies are turned into huggable objects in need of protection. Just as the hybrids are former slaves and current immigrants reliant on the largesse of the United Nations and the United States to chart a new future for themselves, the Elephantmen toys recast the intimidating beings as objects in need of support and protection from the general public, or at least the toy owner. This reverses the actual power differential between hybrid and human by repositioning the hybrid as the powerless one. This power differential is key to "cute," as "the subject's affective response to an imbalance of

power between herself and the object” is what determines whether something is cute or not (54). The appeal of the cute commodity, which implores its subjects to buy and care for it also inspires feelings of sadism in the consumer (Ngai 64–65). The rough treatment toys may receive can theoretically be a way for consumers to vent their fears over the Elementmen; but ultimately, the toys, by appealing to sentimentality through their cuteness, metaphorically resituates the hybrids, turning them into creatures to be protected rather than feared. The emphasis on the commodification of the hybrids coincides with the history of the main character. Before *Elephantmen* was a comics series, Hip Flask was initially part of a poster advertisement created by Ian Churchill that Starkings and Churchill published in 1998 to advertise their comics fonts company (Starkings, “Pertinent Points Pertaining to Pilots, Pieces and Pulchritude”).

The actual bodies of the hybrids, in addition to their plush and commodified likenesses, contribute to the postmodern tone of the narrative. The hybrids bodies challenge human/animal binaries and ontological determinism. This often occurs in the intersections between postmodernism and science. Simon Malpas notes, “The cultural productions that engage with the developments and challenges of science and technology frequently present pictures of a future in which human subjectivity and identity have become profoundly problematic” (75). Iain Hamilton Grant situates “the hybrid” as one of the dominant figures of “postmodern science” (105). Ursula K. Heise notes that the line between animal and human (and human and machine) is becoming unstable and that “the fact that technoscientific advances are beginning to make such border crossings more than mere hypotheses, combined with a willingness, at least in some quarters, to put in question conventional definitions of humanness, do mark a point of departure from the modernist conviction that human beings stand apart, and should remain apart, from other forms of existence” (144). The relationship between these three points is that postmodernism in science

often involves questions regarding what it means to be human, and these questions are often evoked through hybrid figures, like in *Elephantmen*.

Elephantmen is a site where the grotesque and the postmodern meet. The grotesque bodies of the hybrids, which both embody their dehumanization (part animal/part human) and provide the rationalization for it (they are created and trained throughout childhood to be corporate commodities), are postmodern because they challenge ontological classifications of the human, a point of intersection between the grotesque and the nonhuman, while the comic itself glorifies in a postmodern world that blends the future with the past, engages in pastiche of styles and homages, and incorporates an emphasis on commodification throughout the comic, while simultaneously highlighting the ongoing struggle to overcome dehumanization.

Figures



Figure 2.1 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)



Figure 2.2 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)



Figure 2.3 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)



Figure 2.4 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)

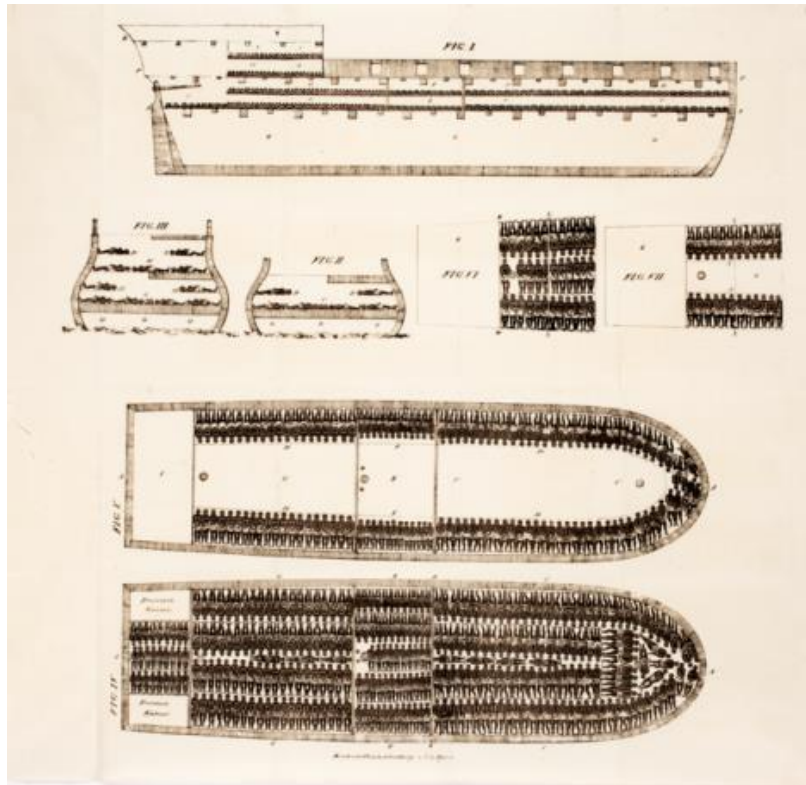


Figure 2.5 (“Slave Ship”)

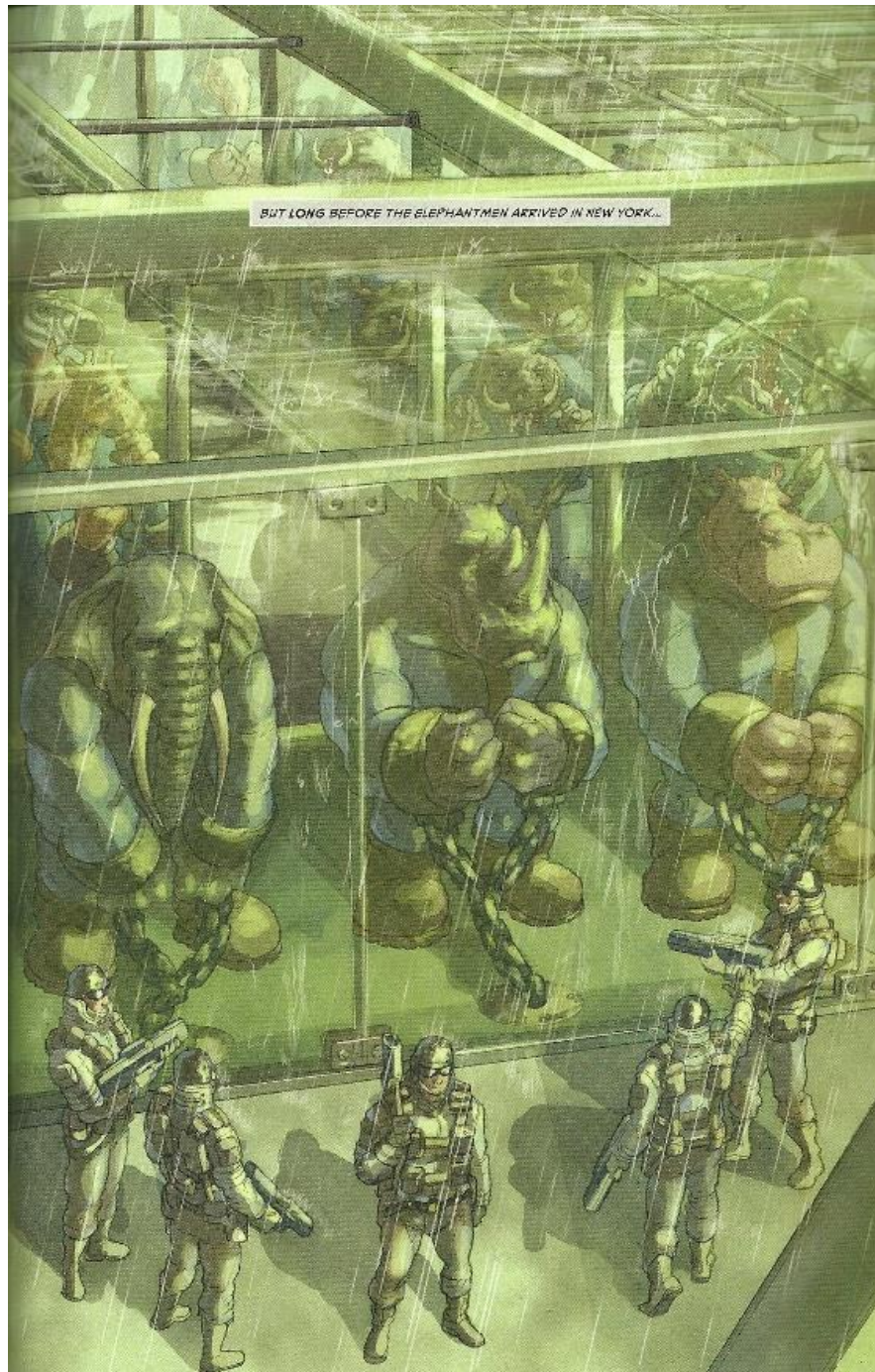


Figure 2.6 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)

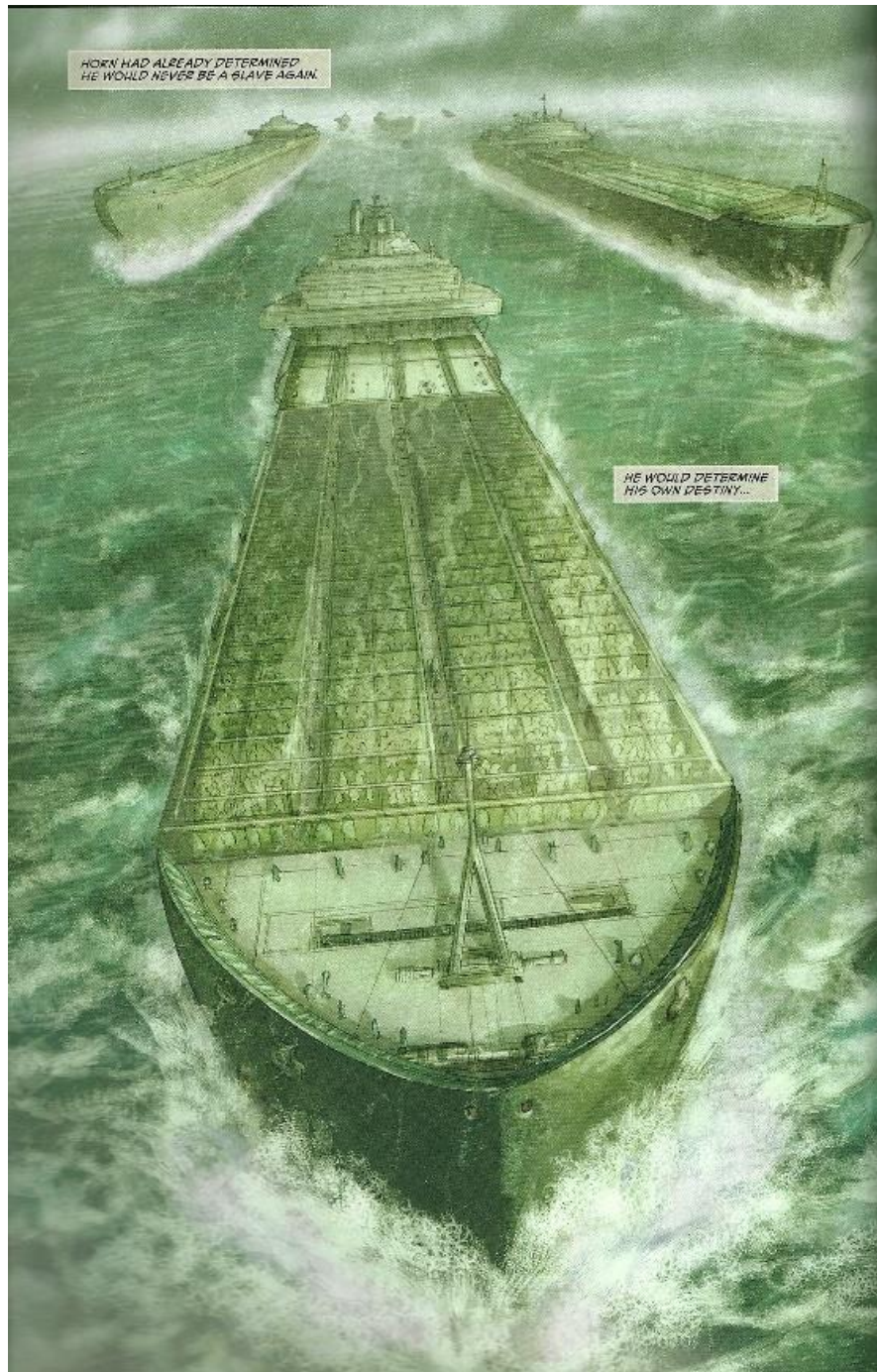


Figure 2.7 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.8 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)



Figure 2.9 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)

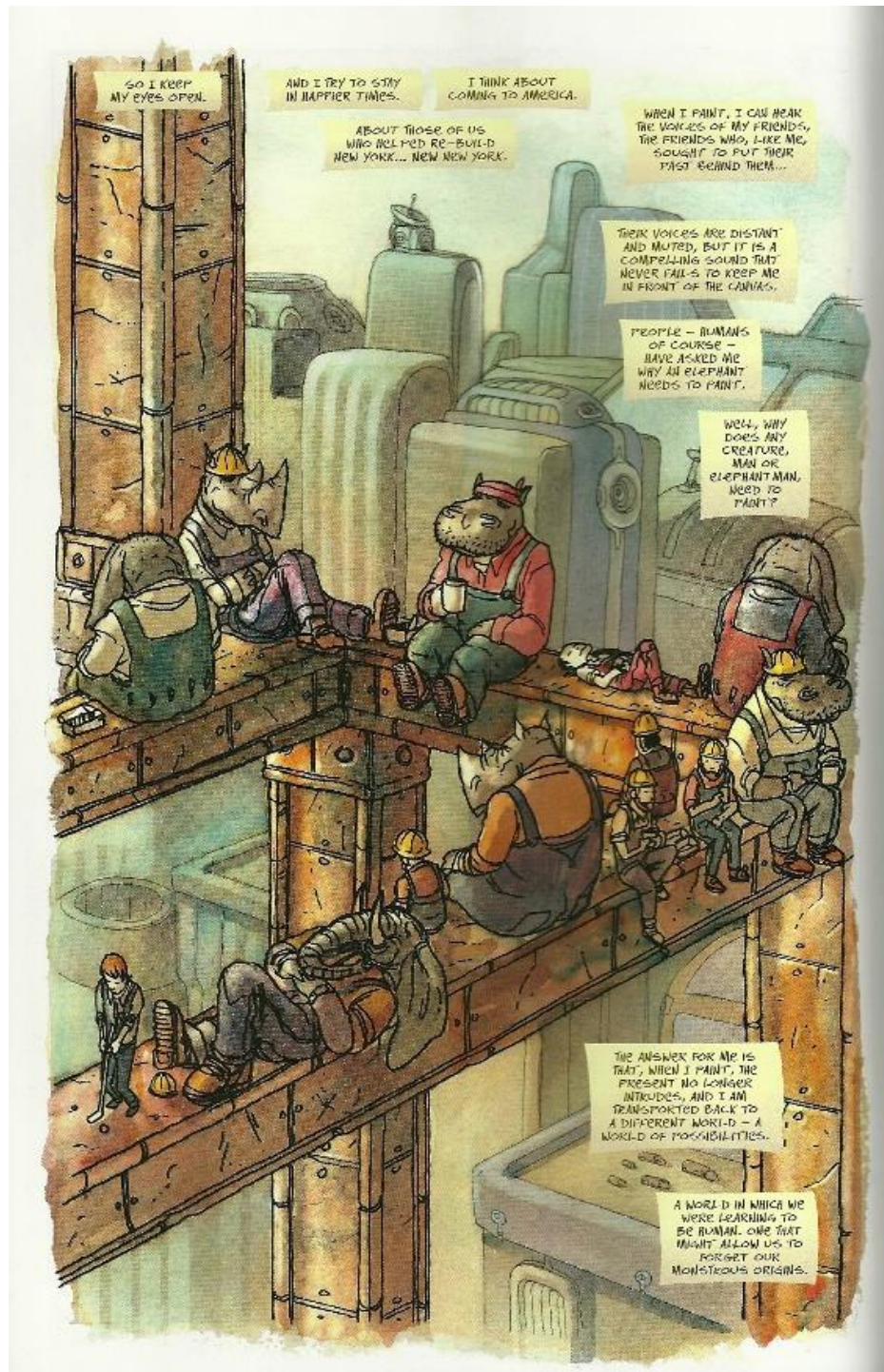


Figure 2.10 (Starkings, Medellin, and Bautista)



Figure 2.11 (Schweikert, Kane, and Starkings)



Figure 2.12 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.13 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.14 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)

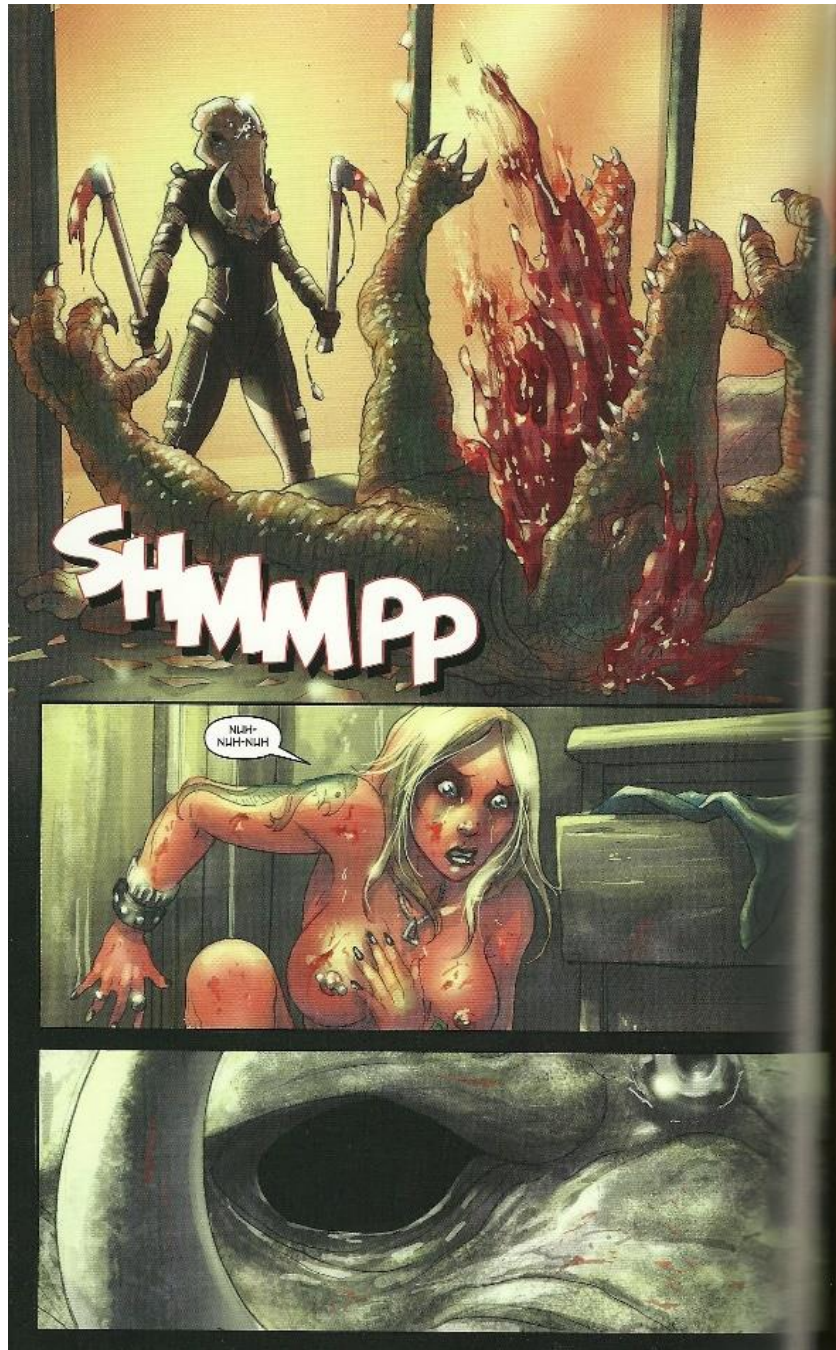


Figure 2.15 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.16 (Starkings, Moritat, Ladrönn, Roshell, Cook, and Churchland)



Figure 2.17 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.18 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchill, Medellin, Steen, et al.)



Figure 2.19 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchill, Medellin, Steen, et al.)



Figure 2.20 (Starkings, Medellin, Churchland, Moritat, Churchland, et al.)

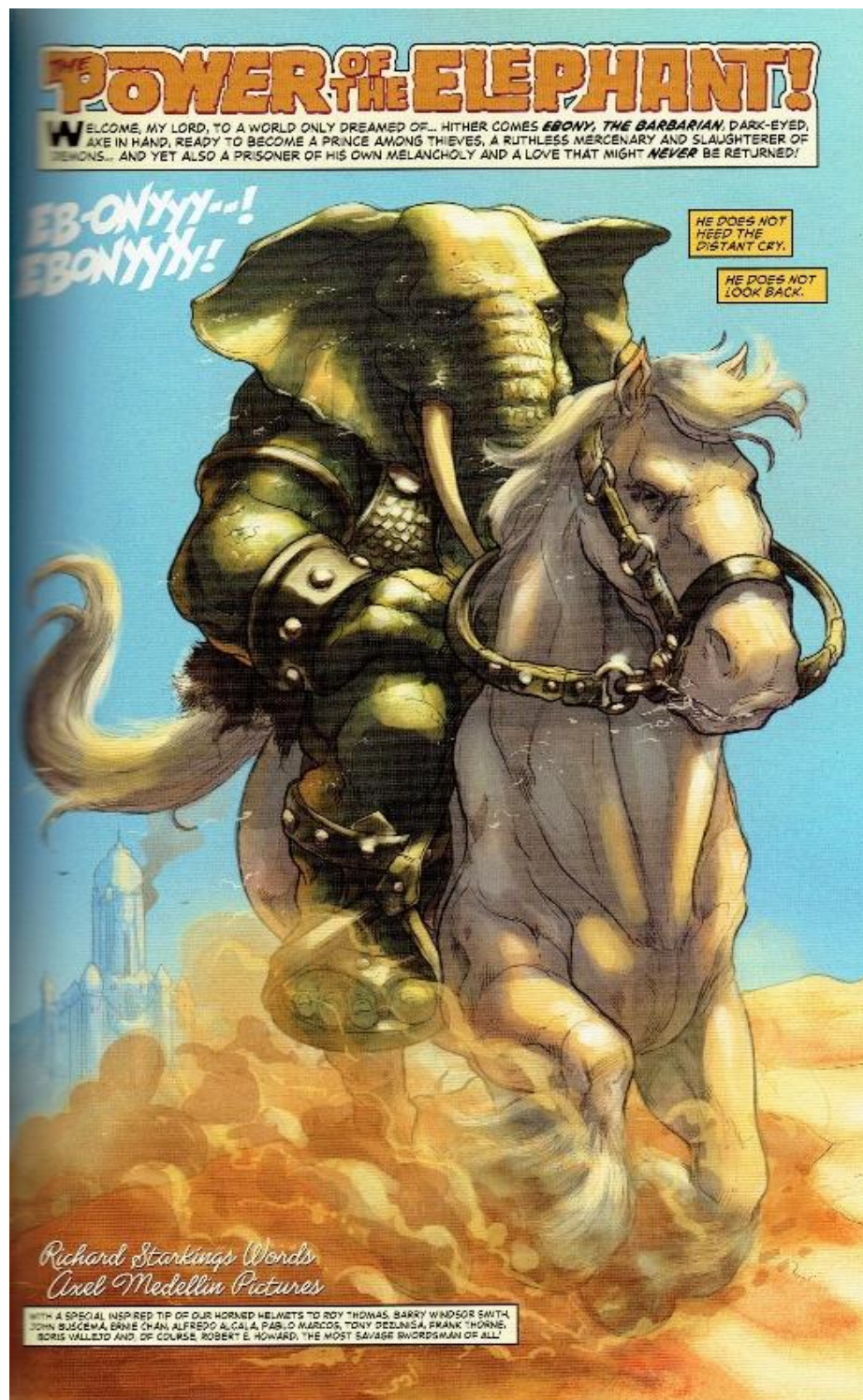


Figure 2.21 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.22 (Starkings, Aldridge, Hine, Medellin, Parker, et al.)



Figure 2.23 (Starkings, Medellin, Kane, Roshell, and Cook)

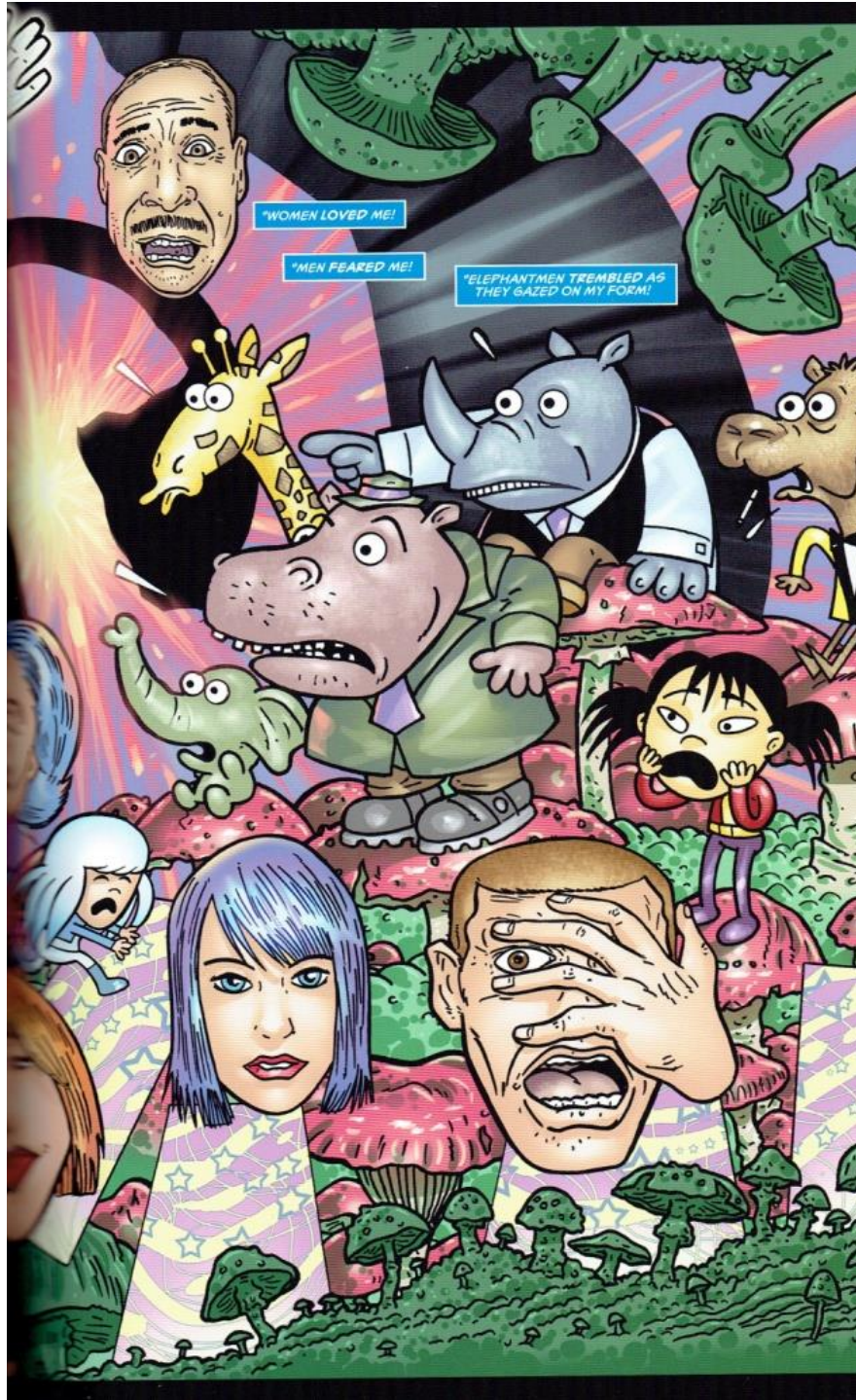


Figure 2.24 (Starkings, Aldridge, Hine, Medellin, Parker, et al.)

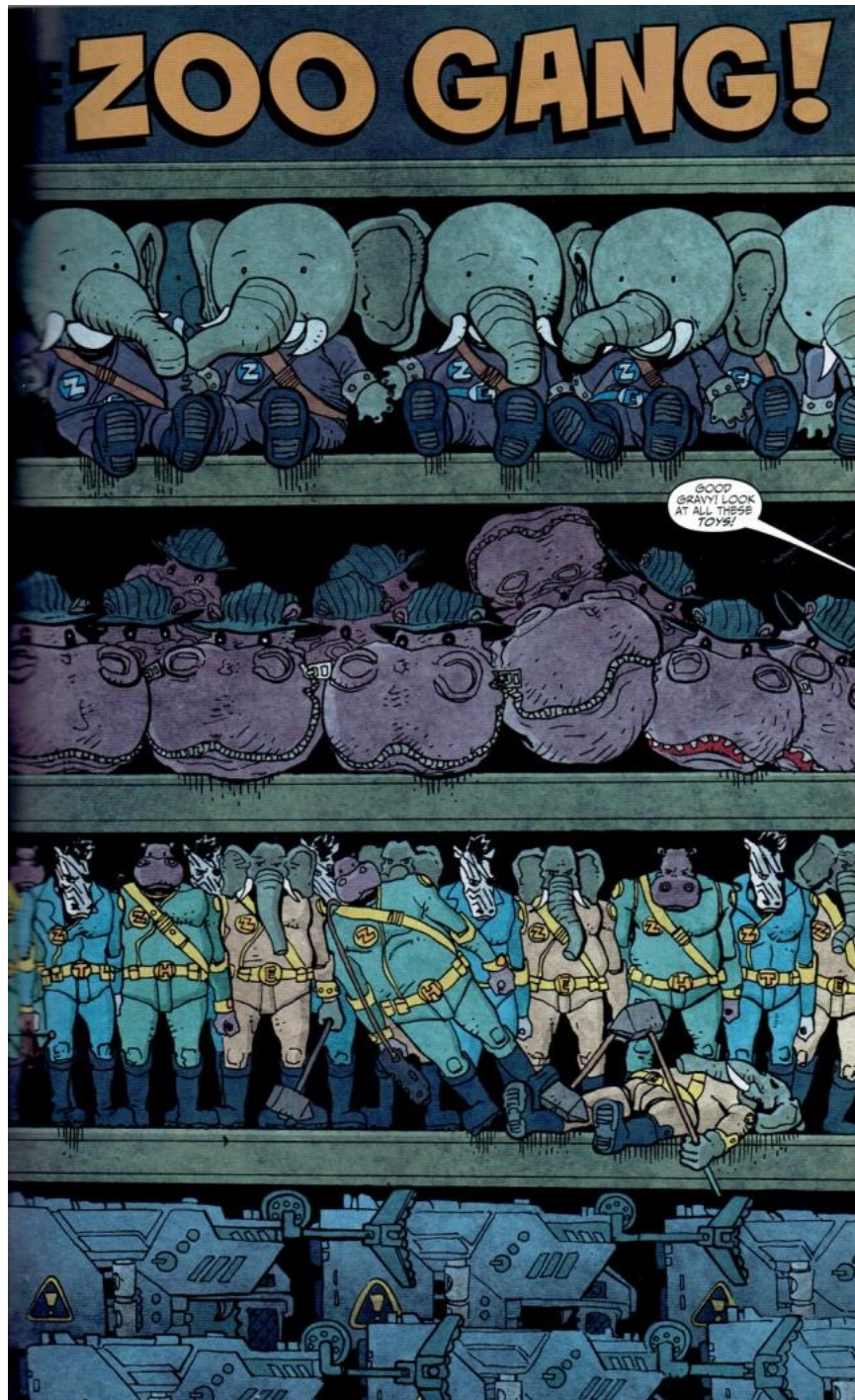


Figure 2.25 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.26 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)



Figure 2.27 (Starkings, Moritat, Churchland, Roshell, and Cook)

Introduction

Geek Love, a novel by Katherine Dunn published in 1989, depicts the Binewski family and their traveling carnival. The Binewski family consists of Aloysius (or Al), his wife Lillian (or Lil), and their children: Arturo, Electra, Iphigenia, Olympia, and Fortunato (or Arty, Elly, Iphy, Oly and Chick). The story is told from Oly’s perspective as a record of the family history for her daughter, Miranda. The Binewski’s history involves the display of grotesque children in the carnival. Arty is born with flippers, Elly and Iphy are Siamese twins conjoined at the torso, Oly is a hunchback, albino dwarf, and Chick is telekinetic and empathic. He can move things with his mind, even at the molecular level, and he experiences the feelings of others. The inclusion of children in a traveling carnival is in line with real world freak shows and carnivals because they showcased people, often children, for profit (Bogdan 8–9; 112–113). Freak shows, whether in dime museums or traveling circuses, have a long history in the United States and were especially popular between 1840-1940 (Bogdan 2).¹ However, the primary difference between these earlier displays of children for profit and the display of children for profit in *Geek Love* is that the Binewski parents engineer their children from conception to be carnival attractions, which informs from birth how the children understand themselves.

The Binewski children are grotesque because of their parents. Al suggests that Lil take drugs and other harmful compounds during ovulation and pregnancy. They desire unique children who can be displayed at their carnival, thus reversing its declining fortunes. As the children grow up, they base their self-worth on their ability to draw spectators and make money for the family. This leads to tension between Arty and the twins, the carnival’s two biggest

¹ Going back even further, “the bodies of children [were] stunted and twisted in late Renaissance Europe so that they could be used as props by beggars or peddled to exhibitors” (Fiedler 251).

attractions. Arty eventually takes control of the carnival after he learns he has a gift for persuasion that enables him to draw bigger crowds than his unique body would by itself. He ultimately creates a cult based on the gradual dismemberment of limbs: a process he abets by recruiting Dr. Phyllis, a woman willing to engage in Arty's unethical work, and by using Chick's ability to numb the pain of others. Cult members give up their life savings to join and follow the carnival around, until their limbs are all amputated and they are sent to live in homes funded by the money they donated to join the cult. Arty's rise to power coincides with his parents' mental decline. It also involves the domination of the twins. He finds out they have been prostituting themselves and is so jealous and upset that he cannot control access to their bodies that he eventually gives them to his right-hand man, the Bag Man, and has Elly, who hates Arty, lobotomized. Chick is able to use his powers to revive Elly. Upon her revival, Elly kills the child she had with Iphy and the Bag Man. The twins then kill each other.² Chick, devastated by the pain he feels over the family's suffering and disgusted by the behavior of Arty, uses his power to blow up the carnival. Only Oly and Lil survive the inferno.

Before the carnival is destroyed, Oly convinces Chick to transport some of Arty's sperm into her body so that she might have his child, and she gives birth to Miranda. Oly uses some of the carnival's money to place Miranda in an orphanage. After the carnival is destroyed, Oly shadows Miranda; she looks over Miranda without revealing herself as her mother. She also takes care of Lil, whose memory and sight are gone. Miranda, who has a tail, eventually meets a rich woman named Miss Lick, who offers to pay for an operation to remove it. Oly, upset over the possibility her daughter might cut off what makes her special, befriends and ultimately kills Miss Lick. Oly also dies in the process.

² Sadly, the potential for a model of odd sisterhood that Siamese twins provide for Mary Russo fails in this case (12).

The novel, through the Binewski children, employs grotesque metaphors for the commodification of children, while simultaneously providing the rationale for such commodification. The children's bodies are valuable because they are human but still radically different. Furthermore, because the children's bodies are grotesque, they seem to belong in the carnival. While Oly eventually works in the outside world, the children's bodies are the reason and justification for their exploitation. This dynamic causes the children to define themselves by the same systems which exploit them. The terminology which dominates the novel is one of "freaks" versus "norms."³ This paper situates the discourse of "freaks" within the realm of the grotesque and argues that the Binewski children's grotesque bodies are aesthetic embodiments of some of the effects of neoliberal capitalism. This aesthetic disguises itself as one of individuality, but ultimately narrows all possibilities for individual expression. The novel shows how adult desires dominate the lived experiences of children.

Freaks and the Grotesque

Scholars consider the physically abnormal as part of the grotesque (Slay Jr. 100), but they usually take this connection as a given based solely on the bodily differences of freaks.⁴ However, the connection between freaks and the grotesque works because physically abnormal bodies function similarly to grotesque forms. In Leslie Fiedler's 1978 book, *Freaks*, he examines strange and extraordinary bodies, like those of dwarves or Siamese twins, while also discussing their treatment historically, including their relation to the carnival. While he is writing about "freaks," his discussion resonates with the grotesque, even though he doesn't specifically engage

³ For the sake of consistency with the novel, I use the "freak" and "norm" terminology throughout this chapter. In Dunn's work, freaks are unique individuals born with (usually) physical features that are so unique that they are easily distinguishable from norms, or people without such features. To the Binewskis, being a freak is far preferable to being a norm and is a source of pride.

⁴ Mary Russo differentiates the freak from the grotesque by associating the freak with spectacle (78–79).

with the grotesque. Fiedler spends much of his introduction discussing why the term “freak” is the most appropriate for his project. He writes, “Euphemisms lack the resonance necessary to represent the sense of quasi-religious awe which we experience first and most strongly as children: face to face with fellow humans more marginal than the poorest sharecroppers or black convicts on a Mississippi chain gain” (17). This justification is notable because it positions freaks beneath exploited groups like poor sharecroppers, who had to give some of the fruits of their labor to landowners, and prisoners forced to work for the state. This comparison foreshadows the ways in which freaks may be exploited. The other notable aspect about Fiedler’s quote is the emphasis on the affective response the freak engenders: the “quasi-religious awe.” The emotional experience which Fiedler associates with the freak is central to its being. When discussing the film *Mutations*, Fiedler argues it fails because of the unconvincing special effects, which “move the audience to snicker in embarrassment and condescension instead of crying out in terror” before noting that many normals (his term of choice for those not considered freaks) actually laugh at freaks, “making ... jokes at their expense” (19). This quote reveals two appropriate reactions freaks: terror and laughter.⁵ This laughter, to Fiedler, is a coping mechanism: “ambiguous and defensive” (20). Fiedler later affirms the terror inspired by the freak but combines it with a different reaction: sympathy. He explains, “The true Freak ... stirs both supernatural terror and natural sympathy, since, unlike the fabulous monsters, he is one of us, the human child of human parents, however altered by forces we do not quite understand into something mythic and mysterious” (24). This tension between a “human child of human parents” and something “mythic and mysterious” is part of what makes the freak grotesque. He or she is biologically human, but aesthetically situated between the human and nonhuman. After

⁵ See page 23 for more on the grotesque’s ability to inspire multiple reactions.

establishing the freak's capacity to inspire multiple emotional reactions, Fiedler asserts its capacity for upending ontological classifications. "The true Freak," he writes, "challenges the conventional boundaries between male and female, sexed and sexless, animal and human, large and small, self and other, and consequently between reality and illusion, experience and fantasy, fact and myth" before qualifying that "no actual Freak threatens all of these limits at once" (24).

The ability to generate seemingly contradictory emotional reactions, along with the ability to challenge boundaries, places Fiedler's definition of the freak alongside definitions of the grotesque. Justin Edwards and Rune Graulund note the "tension between the ludicrous and the fearful, the absurd and the terrifying" (4). Shun-Liang Chao argues that the grotesque is most often associated with "horror and terror" because grotesque bodies are "(biologically) impure," which causes people to fear things like pain and sickness. At the same time, as a transgressive form, the grotesque "can also yield pleasure in novelty, the comic, absurdity, and the like." One experience may dominate or different experiences may be felt simultaneously, depending on the form (10).

The connection between Fiedler's freaks and the grotesque does not end with definitional similarities and the freak's ability to generate ambivalent emotional reactions. Fiedler uses the term "grotesque" multiple times. He refers to the "total monster" (24), The Monster of Ravenna, as a "grotesque fantasy" (26). This creature has female and male genitalia, a horn, an eye at its knee, wings instead of arms, and a scaly bottom half that ends in a giant chicken leg. It's both absurd and terrifying as it blends traits from multiple species and male and female sexual organs. Fiedler's use of the word "grotesque" as an adjective to describe the Monster of Ravenna is an accurate one, even as it comes in a section which discusses, in part, the appropriateness of terminology like "monster" or "freak" without considering "grotesque" as a potentially

appropriate term. Regarding hermaphrodites, those bodies which challenge female/male divisions, Fiedler observes, “[they] seem to both sexes the most grotesque of all side show Freaks” (32–33). Hermaphrodites are given an entire chapter in *Freaks* and are defined as such. Yet here the grotesque becomes an attribute of the freak. For Fiedler, the grotesque works in degrees. Not all freaks are equally grotesque; but they are grotesque. Hermaphrodites are the most grotesque because they upend one of the entrenched distinctions of humanity: the division between male and female. While Fiedler initially associates the grotesque with freaks, he subsequently uses the words synonymously. He describes, “Giants, Pinheads, Midgets, and other grotesques” when discussing the household of W. C. Fields (61). Fiedler’s grotesques all involve physical deformity. Of course, not everyone equates physical deformities with freak-ness or the grotesque. But even though the grotesque can be subjective, Arthur Clayborough notes that we regard physical deformities, or nonhuman creatures that suggest deformities, as “more deeply or abidingly grotesque than others” (109).

Fiedler’s description of freaks connects to the grotesque. Of course, Mikhail Bakhtin discusses both the carnival and the grotesque in his influential *Rabelais and His World*, though he doesn’t emphasize carnival freaks. Bakhtin situates the carnival in relation to folk humor. His focus on laughter and the upending of traditional hierarchical boundaries within the carnival fits with the ability of the grotesque to inspire laughter and challenge classifications (5–6; 10), but his emphasis on bodies is different than Fiedler’s. For Bakhtin, everyone has the potential for exhibiting the grotesque because the grotesque involves excess. The transgression of bodily boundaries is as much a part of the grotesque as the transgression of social and political ones. Fluids, excrement, and fat can all be grotesque. This conception can be deeply positive because the ability to overflow boundaries is associated with renewal (18–19). Fiedler is not specifically

concerned with the idea of excess in relation to freaks, but he does see a sort of universality in feelings of freakishness. Not everyone has the capacity to be truly grotesque, but anyone can feel as if they are a freak. This is demonstrated in Fiedler's discussion of children and adolescents.

Fiedler notes that childhood is the time when one is most uncertain "about the limits of our bodies and our egos," as well as the boundaries between dreams and reality (27). Children may feel they are themselves freaks without having seen one: "compared to an adult, he [the child] is himself a Midget, while compared to a baby or his last year's self, he is a Giant" (28). Fiedler writes, "Born unhousebroken and half wild, dabbling in their own feces and popping into their mouths whatever unlikely objects they can grab, they remain for a long time unsure—as the Alice books everywhere imply and Book IV of *Gulliver* explicitly states—whether they are beasts or men: little animals more like their pets than their parents" (28). Children seem freakish because they aren't fully domesticated. In addition to scale, children may feel freakish because they seem to cross lines between animal and human, civilization and barbarism. The articulation of children as "half-wild" aligns with Puritan and Victorian conceptions of the child as one in need of restraint.⁶ Fiedler's discussion of the animality of children is one based on an adult perspective. Structural divisions, even ones that may be understandable and helpful in organizing the world and establishing an identity, are learned. It's highly unlikely that children are "unsure ... whether they are beasts or men" if for no other reason than biological classifications are not yet fully ingrained in them. Fiedler's assertion that infants and babies are unsure of their ontological status reveals more about adults than it reveals about children.⁷ If anything, parents or adult onlookers may ponder the behavior of a child and whimsically wonder into what realm,

⁶ For more on Puritan conceptions of childhood, see pages 5-11.

⁷ For more on adult imperatives in constructing childhood, see pages 3-5.

animal or human, he or she belongs; thus revealing a small tear in the seam that humans construct between themselves and (other) animals.

Fiedler's observations regarding feelings of freakishness are more convincingly applicable to adolescents. His most persuasive account of youths as freaks is when they leave childhood behind and enter puberty, when individuals must manage their sexual impulses in relation to societal expectations (30). The entry into adolescence often involves accompanying issues of self-perception. Adolescents may feel "monstrously deficient or excessive, too tall, too short, too fat, too thin" (32). His stance that adolescence is a time of freakishness is especially convincing because so many people remember feelings of inadequacy or strangeness from adolescence. Nonetheless, children and adolescents are not actual freaks.

Fiedler's identification of youths' feelings of freakishness is important because it helps him establish one of the cultural functions of the freak show: "A Victorian institution ... intended to be finally therapeutic, cathartic, no matter what initial terror and insecurity it evokes. 'We are the Freaks,' the human oddities are supposed to reassure us ... 'Not you, Not *you!*'" (31). Fiedler again focuses on multiple reactions to the grotesque. Initial feelings of terror or insecurity may give way to feelings of superiority as the freaks, in this context, remind the viewer of the social order in which the viewer is considered normal in comparison to the freak. Arthur Asa Berger, discussing *Dick Tracy* and its grotesque villains, writes "The grotesques facilitate a kind of 'guilt-free aggression' for readers. They are so repulsive and so easily identifiable that we can release our own hostile antipathies against them" (127). Berger's point is that *Dick Tracy* lacks moral complexity and the villains are drawn as grotesques so that there is no question they are villains and readers can root against them without complication; yet, Berger's understanding of the grotesque resonates with Fiedler's discussion of the carnival freak.

Both involve the displacement of one's own feelings onto something else, though Fiedler notes these feelings come from one's own insecurities.⁸

Fiedler's emphasis on the reassuring aspect of the freak leads to a paradoxical situation in which one of the freak's defining characteristics – the ability to collapse boundaries – is at odds with another characteristic of the freak: the ability to alleviate feelings of freakishness in the viewer by creating a boundary. This is because alleviating feelings of freakishness is predicated on the idea that “they” are freaks and “we” are not. Therefore, a boundary is created between, to borrow *Geek Love*'s terminology, freaks and norms. This boundary is reestablished after Fiedler initially collapses the boundary between freaks and humans by noting how children and adolescents may appear as, or feel themselves to be, freaks. This distinction between freak and norm appears to deny the possibility of fully identifying with the freak because freaks are generally defined by their grotesque physical form.⁹

Not only are the freaks in *Geek Love* grotesque, but they are also predominantly female, and the grotesque is often associated with females. The word “grotesque” is etymologically connected to “grotto.” This connection relates to the excavation of Nero's Golden Palace around 1480, which was where the “fanciful ornamental paintings on the walls and ceilings of the underground chambers” that came to be called grotesque were found (Chao 1). The association of the grotesque with the cavern or underground, both metaphorically and literally, links to the female. Mary Russo writes,

⁸ Though Berger goes on to say that he believes the grotesque is more complicated than simple catharsis from rooting against bad guys.

⁹ The association of Fiedler's freaks with the grotesque works due to their ability to disturb classifications and inspire certain emotional responses. Freaks are sometimes used for didactic purposes within the Southern grotesque. For example, “By exaggerating the spiritual deficiency in man, by making him a freak, [Flannery O'Connor] can emphasize his need for morality, and in her own words, for 'grace.' ... Her characters are saved from eternal grotesquerie, then, by the possibility of grace, which could encourage a movement toward spirituality” (Barnes 133–134). But the characters in *Geek Love* represent societal distortions, not moral deficiency (though some are clearly morally deficient).

The word itself ... evokes the cave—the grotto-esque. Low, hidden, earthy, dark material, immanent, visceral. As a bodily metaphor, the grotesque cave tends to look like (and in the most gross metaphorical sense be identified with) the cavernous anatomical female body. These associations of the female with the earthly, material, and the archaic grotesque have suggested a positive and powerful figuration of culture and womanhood to many male and female writers and artists. (1)

Other scholars note the association of the grotesque with the cave or grotto, though they aren't always as positive as Russo. Francis Connelly writes, "The grotto is associated with fertility and the womb, as well as with death and the grave. It is earthy and material, a cave, an open mouth that invites our descent into other worlds. It is the space where the monsters and marvels of our imagination are conceived" (1). The grotto or cavern is the womb of the grotesque, where its forms are conceived. It's appropriate that the grotto of the grotesque is ambivalent and evokes both life and death, as the grotesque is the embodiment of cultural tensions.¹⁰ Ewa Kuryluk argues that the cave can both protect and imprison and therefore "[b]ecause of the association with the womb and the cave, all closed spaces tend to be perceived as female and are associated with both protection and threat" (20). Kuryluk's formation of the dual nature of the cave (and the female grotesque more broadly) makes it potentially threatening. Margaret Miles further emphasizes the threatening nature of the female grotesque. While discussing Bakhtin, she notes, "The association of the female body with materiality, sex, and reproduction in the female body makes it an essential – not an accidental – aspect of the grotesque" (90). This is why "[f]emale sexual organs, sexual activity, and behavior are a central object of grotesque figuration" (92–93).

¹⁰ As we saw with *Elephantmen*, Connelly also acknowledges that the grotesque is often used to give voice to the outsider and engage "issues of gender and race" (23). See page 81.

Because the female body is essential to the grotesque and the grotesque subverts normative ideals, the female grotesque threatens patriarchal society; and while men may also be grotesque, that doesn't make the grotesque gender-neutral. Instead it gives men female attributes: "as grotesque, male bodies take on precisely the characteristics regularly attributed to female bodies; they lose form and integrity, become penetrable, suffer the addition of alien body parts, and become alternately huge and tiny" (91). While the female grotesque may be subversive, in the patriarchal imagination it is dangerous. Patriarchal societies mitigate against the subversive of the social order by managing women, including their representations (111–112). Miles explains, "In the patriarchal societies of the Christian West, 'woman' was mysterious and ultimately grotesque because women did not represent themselves; lacking conditions for self-representation – collective voice and access to the public sphere – women were represented by men's anxieties, fears, and fantasies" (112). Miles' association of patriarchal concerns over the female body and of disorder with the feminine grotesque make the grotesque fearsome. Women, unable to manage their own representation, become pigeon-holed by men's representations. Miles asserts, "an element of grotesque is present in every women" (85). Mark Dorrian affirms the connection between the female grotesque within the classical imagination. He writes, "The monstrous is born of the unruly, unmastered feminine ... The monstrous child was seen as the result of the displacement of the father's image by the conjurings of the female mind during conception or pregnancy. The monster thus signified illegitimate female desires, an illegitimacy expressed in the replacement of the father's image" (312).

The female grotesque, and especially Miles' argument, resonates throughout *Geek Love*, but the female grotesque doesn't have to be completely negative, especially for those who glorify in disorder and subversion. For example, Julie Docet uses the female grotesque in her comics to

critique male dominance over female bodies. Frederik Byrn Køhlert writes, “A playful assault on all that is high, abstract, and hegemonic, her stories appropriate and redeploy stereotypes as grotesque images that unsettle authority and undermine the common order” (37). Russo argues that the grotesque offers alternatives and can be a type of resistance to dominant ideals and expectations. These possibilities extend to feminism itself, which often doesn’t account for a variety of different forms and bodies. It is no surprise that Russo, who sees the cave as a positive, earthy and feminine symbol, finds the potential for emancipation within the grotesque. Russo’s association of the grotesque with the feminine coincides with Miles’. Russo notes that “the grotesque—as superficial and to the margins—is suggestive of a certain construction of the feminine” (5). Once again, male grotesques “are produced through an association with the feminine as the body marked by difference” (13). But unlike Miles, Russo focuses on risk and how various spectacles, such as aerial displays or Siamese twins, create the space to resist “oppressive bodily containment” and can ultimately provide a “model of feminist practice” (26).

Approaches like Miles’ and Russo’s indicate that although the grotesque can be understood as distinctly female, it also isn’t easily classifiable as positive or negative. Rather, it depends on a constellation of factors, including who is utilizing it and how.

The Commodification of the Grotesque Child

Geek Love is prescient in its exemplification of the dangers of neoliberal capitalism, as it foresaw some of the ways in which children internalize neoliberal logic. Its publication follows the Reagan presidency,¹¹ which David Harvey notes is instrumental in the rise of neoliberalism (24–26). Anna Mae Duane writes, “The shocking premise in *Geek Love* that parents would create children as explicit commodities starkly dramatizes what, for many theorists, is nothing less than

¹¹ Two pieces of the novel were published earlier, in 1983 and 1988, during the Reagan administration.

the dominant economic model of the late twentieth century. In an era of affective labor, economic production and human reproduction are inextricable” (111). Engineering the children as commodities is evocative of the tension between the economic and the social under neoliberalism.¹² The tension between the social and economic resonates with discussions of the grotesque children.¹³ The Binewskis define the family by market logic and then situate their children in a world where their lives and work are inseparable. While it’s true the Binewski children grow up in an earlier time, the novel illustrates the contradictions taking place at the time it was published. The novel makes the Binewskis prescient forerunners who anticipate the effects of neoliberalism during an earlier period. Miranda’s self-commodification of her tail exemplifies this, as she represents the subsequent generation.¹⁴ The carnival becomes unnecessary for displaying abnormal bodies when society encourages everyone to be unique individuals who themselves “as private owners of their own ‘human capital’” (Shaviro 8). Miranda is able to find a market for her abnormality outside of the carnival. The redefinition of human beings as owners of their own capital plays out physically upon the body, as the children’s existence is predicated on their commodity status. The children don’t just market their skills, they literally market themselves; not as workers but as beings.

This begins when Al inherits the struggling carnival. To counteract the carnival’s decline, Al and Lil Binewski create their own attractions to replace aging and lost ones. Al draws upon traditional American values for perverse means: “Al was a standard-issue Yankee, set on self-determination and independence, but in that crisis his core of genius revealed itself. He

¹² For more on these tensions, see pages 12-21.

¹³ See pages 26-28.

¹⁴ Although Miranda, who grows up without the domineering influence of Al or Arty, has more power to make her own decisions, her sex-work (she’s a stripper, as well as a medical illustrator) would not have been possible under the patriarchal gaze of her relatives, as the punishment of Elly and Iphy for their prostitution makes clear. Not to conflate stripping and prostitution, but Arty wouldn’t countenance either because he wants to control the type of access people have to his sisters.

decided to breed his own freak show” (7)¹⁵. The word “breed” is evocative of the tension inherent in the Binewski children: they are commodities as well as individuals. People sometimes talk about good or bad breeding in relation to people; but, in this instance, the language of breeding is more evocative of both eugenics and breeding animals for profit. The children are ideal carnival workers because their labor is free, and they have no real desire to leave. If they left they would abandon their family as well as enter into a world outside of the carnival, where their value as freaks would be upended and they wouldn’t fit in. The carnival functions like Kuryluk’s cave, as shelter and a prison. In the carnival, the Binewski children’s bodies are assets and people come to lavish attention on them. However, outside the carnival the children lack the protective environment of acceptance the carnival provides. This is evidenced when the family takes a trip to a grocery store and a norm tries to kill the children by shooting them.

Al comes up with the scheme to breed freak children, and his wife, Lil, proves a willing partner. During her ovulation and pregnancies, Al does her with “illicit and prescription drugs, insecticides, and eventually radioisotopes” (7). Although Lil eventually goes blind and loses her memory, she is lucky enough not to suffer severe health issues early on. The Binewski parents never concern themselves with the potential consequences for Lil’s health or the effect that the desired deformities will have on their children. Victoria Warren argues that the text interrogates American individualism through its use of the tall tale and through its comic qualities, which are both part of a tradition of American folk humor (326). Warren argues that the novel challenges cultural norms by giving subjectivity to the freaks, rather than the norms (329). Part of Dunn’s

¹⁵ Al’s Polish or Eastern European last name suggests he came from a family of immigrants, though it’s never commented upon. Lil’s maiden name is Hinchcliff, and she leaves behind her aristocratic Boston family to run away with Al.

critique of American culture, for Warren, involves Al's creation of his children. Warren observes the exploitive nature of this process with her contention that "Al's product is deformed children" (324) and that his creation and accumulation of these products "underscores the degradation and callousness potentially inherent in individualistic American capitalism" (331). The lack of concern over health risks, as well as the tension in seeing the Binewski children as both subject and object, exhibit and child, resonates with Warren's assertion of degradation and callousness. Al is ready to abandon one of his newborn children, Chick, because Chick doesn't appear to be a freak. Al tells Lil, "Give it to me" (69), so that he may dispose of him. By calling Chick "it," Al dehumanizes Chick and denies him Al's affection as a parent. It's only at the last minute that the family finds out Chick is telekinetic and decides to keep him. Al associates the family's health with the carnival's health, thus associating the social with the economic.¹⁶ As a result, Al considers the lives of his children in relation to their value to the carnival. Rachel Adams argues that the novel uses "tales and tails ... to invest our bodies with the weight of history and memory," which is "paradigmatic of how Americans attempt to manage the problem of bodily difference that has persistently troubled the nation's social and legal structure" (288; 278). She moreover notes, "The Binewskis are excellent interpreters of the capitalist system that constructs the body as a commodity" because they "recogniz[e] the significant relationship between the body and the ability to generate income" (280–281). This mentality begins with Al; and although this mentality demonstrates Al's economic intuitiveness, it also resonates with the callousness Warren identifies because Al sees his children as commodities and thus potentially disposable. Al's children all internalize this logic, except for Chick. Al has a difficult time capitalizing on Chick's powers. Plots that require Chick to rob carnival-goers using his telekinesis and help Al

¹⁶ Not that these categories are ever completely separate. Rather by letting economic considerations become the primary lens through which he views his family, Al upends any semblance of balance.

cheat casinos are not very successful.¹⁷ Chick hates hurting people and always seeks the approval of his family. This is intensified by Chick's ability to feel the emotions and pain of others, and it causes Arty to take advantage of him. Arty convinces Chick to use his powers to alleviate the pain of Arty's followers during surgery so they can survive their amputations. But the brutality Arty exposes Chick and the family to causes Chick to blow up the carnival: Chick can no longer take the pain and suffering. Anna Mae Duane argues that "the Binewkis reflect ... how extensively the logic of the marketplace permeates the allegedly sacred realm of home and family" (107). Chick especially represents the tension between the merger of the market and the family, and he undermines the notion that the child can be sheltered from such a merger. Duane writes,

Dunn keeps our eye on the shiny, attractive object—Chick, the innocent and beautiful child—to reveal that the vision of American life he represents is a particularly pernicious illusion. As a lovely nineteenth-century cherub stranded in a cutthroat twentieth-century domicile, Chick evokes a past fetishized throughout the 1980s by Christian conservatives—a world in which the child occupies the pinnacle of the private and functions as the affective center of a home ruled solely by love, walled off from the harsh bargains demanded by the outside world. (104)

But Chick, Duane teaches us, undermines this construction.¹⁸ He appears to resist the economic logic that informs his siblings and spends his time helping others rather than making money. He is "loving, innocent, and seemingly incapable of malice" (108). But this is an illusion, as he represents "a new domestic space reflecting an affective economy that undoes the division

¹⁷ Arty sabotages the casino scheme because he doesn't want Chick to become too valuable to Al.

¹⁸ For more on childhood innocence, see pages 1-12. For other examples of how these texts demonstrate childhood innocence is a construction easily undermined, see pages 44-52 and 95-96.

between home and work, and between love and money. In the process, the novel chronicles the destruction of the individual subject created by the supposed tension between the home and the market” (106).¹⁹ Within this domestic space, “the desire to imagine children existing in a state of fetishized innocence, and thereby separate from a primary source of American value—the ability to produce capital—masks the emotional labor that children are expected to do” (110). Chick’s emotional labor facilitates the ability of his more overtly capitalistic family members to achieve their desires, and it places Chick at the mercenary whims of his father and brother. While Duane notes that the entrance of the child’s affective labor “into the marketplace might alter the existing models of value” (118), Chick’s destruction of himself and the carnival suggests that “the affective labor of childhood can be as coercive and as destructive as paid labor” (119).²⁰ Chick demonstrates the illusory nature of the innocent child by revealing how the innocent child cannot be separated from the way in which market logic invades the family. Chick provides an effective vehicle for critique because of the powerful rhetoric power of the innocent child. While affective labor is generally associated with females, the early twentieth century’s removal of children from economic considerations placed them firmly in the domestic sphere with mothers.²¹

Duane’s argument that Chick undermines the construction of the innocent child at a time when market forces permeate the family, and how he illustrates the destructive capacity of affective labor, convincingly illustrates one of the problems of the current economic model, where the work of caring for others is feminized and devalued, supposedly done for its own sake,

¹⁹ For more on the merger of social and economic realms, see pages 12-21.

²⁰ In the next chapter on *Never Let Me Go*, this affective labor is done by clones, most visibly the female protagonist. In the concluding chapter, on *The Flame Alphabet*, this affective labor is shifted to the parents.

²¹ Although we are witnessing changes to the domestic space, particularly in that single-parent incomes are often no longer enough to support most households.

under-paid and emotionally-exhausting. Duane needs not spend much time on the other children of the novel to construct her argument, yet the other children dominate the novel.

Arty is the oldest living Binewski child²² and the most invested in his body's economic worth, which is predicated on his seal-like appearance. Dunn calls Arty "Aqua Boy" and describes his appearance:

His hands and feet were in the form of flippers that sprouted directly from his torso without intervening arms or legs. He was taught to swim in infancy and was displayed nude in a big clear-sided tank like an aquarium. His favorite trick at the ages of three and four was to put his face close to the glass, bulging his eyes out at the audiences, opening and closing his mouth like a river bass and then to turn his back and paddle off, revealing the turd trailing from his muscular little buttocks.

(7–8)

Arty does not need to be in water to survive, so his learning to swim in infancy is based exclusively on the way Al decides to market him, which is to highlight his already seal-like nature, as evidenced by his "flippers."²³ The words "display" and "trick" reinforce the nature of Arty's status as an object created for the carnival. Arty buys into the role for which his father grooms him. Although he retains identifiably human features, Arty's value to the carnival is based on how nonhuman he appears. Arty looks like the cross between a seal and a human. But Arty is biologically human. He has human parents. His deformities are the result of the toxins he was exposed to in-utero, but these deformities don't erase his humanity. Arty's heredity isn't

²² Al and Lil have six dead children. Four were still-born or died during childbirth. Two died early in childhood. Arty killed one because his parents wanted to make them a dual act, but Arty wanted to have his own show. The parents display the bodies of their dead children in jars of formaldehyde in a tent of oddities which costs one dollar to enter.

²³ While Arty is compared to a river bass and not a seal, fish have fins not flippers.

grotesque, but his physical form is: a form that is marketable because it violates basic aesthetic categories between human and animal. A human in an aquarium isn't valuable. A seal in an aquarium isn't very valuable (and a river bass not at all). The aqua-boy is valuable because he exists in a state that appears in-between animal and human.

Michel Eyquem de Montaigne, writing about monstrous children, of which he uses conjoined twins and a person without obviously male or female genitals as examples, concludes,

What we call monsters are not so to God, who sees in the immensity of his work the infinity of forms that he has comprised in it; and it is for us to believe that this figure that astonishes us is related and linked to some figure of the same kind unknown to man. From his infinite wisdom there proceeds nothing but that is good and ordinary and regular; but we do not see its arrangement and relationships ... We call contrary to nature what happens contrary to custom; nothing is anything but according to nature, whatever it may be. Let this universal and natural reason drive out of us the error and astonishment that novelty brings us. (539)

Montaigne's assertion that even drastic differences are a part of nature seems at odds with Arty's status as grotesque because grotesque creatures seem to defy nature, but, for Montaigne, this defiance is an illusion. We cannot completely comprehend nature because we cannot completely comprehend God or its plan. In this light, the bodies of grotesque humans can't defy nature, only our limited understanding of it. This also means that Arty and other grotesque people and characters should be considered human even if they do not look fully human. The grotesque resides in the astonishment to which Montaigne refers, which is inspired by a sense of difference despite similarity. Montaigne is right that "we call contrary to nature what happens contrary to

custom” and, in this respect, his thoughts align with scholars of the grotesque who recognize the grotesque’s social dimensions. For such scholars, however, there is no universal plan to which nature adheres but which humans cannot recognize or comprehend. Rather the grotesque reveals the artificiality of totalizing classifications, of a sane and safe world, of order. This can be fearsome and is part of the reason the grotesque can be terrifying; but it can also be exciting and is part of the grotesque’s appeal, which helps explain the popularity of Arty and his siblings.

One might expect Arty and his siblings to harbor resentment towards the parents for making them into carnival attractions, but they do not. Oly notes, “Papa would tell us about the hard times and explain that Arty had brought success to the show, and that Elly and Iphy had helped the business and, because he was a kind man, that even Oly had ‘done her part.’ There was always work but it was good” (47). Al’s insistence that the children are integral parts of the family business causes the children to define themselves in those terms. Because the children are told their value is predicated on how money they can bring in, this becomes how they determine their self-worth. For example, Oly says that Arty “didn’t mind me much because money was the gauge of his envy and I didn’t make any” (74). The desire for money is not unique to Arty or any of the Binewskis, but for the Binewskis it is central to their being. This centrality is even registered affectively, as when Oly “quivers” after being told she isn’t as economically valuable as her siblings (75).

Arty is so caught up in his status as the top earner that he gets upset if the twins sell more tickets than him, and he kills one of his other siblings when it becomes apparent she will be at least as important a commodity within the carnival. Arty eventually founds a sham cult where aspirants are required to pay a “dowry” to join, which amounts to giving all their wealth to Arty. The aspirants then follow the carnival and gradually have their limbs amputated. The cultists

withdraw from society and follow Arty to try and attain some sort of transcendence within their new forms. Colin Hutchinson notes that “the tendency towards withdrawal from, rather than participation within, the social, political and cultural mainstream has become an important topic within contemporary American fiction” (35). Hutchinson argues that contemporary novelists “have begun to reassess communitarian themes and secessionist strategies in terms of what possibilities these might offer to a dissenting liberal left” (36). Dissent based in part on “the iniquities of capitalism” (37). But “bad” communities sometimes subsume individual freedom “to a body or institution that represent ... a set of untrammelled psychotic desires” (43). This is why the tension between individual freedom and the good of a collective should balance and that the search for such a balance should be “contingent, self-questioning and incessant” (50). This search for balance is not present in *Geek Love*, however. Arturan cult members put themselves entirely at the megalomaniacal leader’s whims. Hutchinson critiques Arty and his cult by noting, “Arty replicates the evolution of American society by exploiting the rhetoric of freedom and individual happiness in order to create essentialized beings who, being reduced to the status of objects, are defined by their use-value: a process that is represented by invasive surgery” (46). This is true, but it is worth emphasizing Arty’s own status as an object initially defined by his value as a commodity. The Arturan cult members’ amputations bring them closer to their leader’s image, but it is also a reproduction of an object. The perverse irony here is that the reproductions have no value because they aren’t unique enough: only the original has any value, and if the reproductions were more like Arty, he wouldn’t create them, as doing so would devalue himself.²⁴ Arty exemplifies some of the issues inherent in the commodification of

²⁴ In terms of the cult members, Donna Hayles argues that the gradual amputation of their limbs allows them to opt out of a world that fetishizes bodies and where people fear not looking “normal.” This is also a rejection of consumerism (416).

children. His extreme jealousy and willingness to engage in violence against others and take advantage of the emotionally unstable represents the abhorrent side of economic systems, even as the pride Arty and his siblings feel over their bodies can be empowering.

Oly takes pride in her body but feels like a let-down compared to her siblings. Her self-worth is based on how little relative value her unique body holds. She notes, “My father spared no expense in [the] experiments. My mother had been liberally dosed with cocaine, amphetamines, and arsenic during her ovulation and throughout her pregnancy with me. It was a disappointment when I emerged with such commonplace deformities” (8). Oly’s remarks that her albinism is “the regular pin-eyed variety” and her hump “is not remarkable in size or shape” (8). Albinism and humpbacks may be uncommon, but they aren’t so rare that customers would pay to see them. Although the realization of her dwarfism is a nice surprise and “increased [her] value” (8) in her parents’ eyes, it does not make her unique enough to headline her own attraction. Oly’s appearance is not strange enough to generate the types of profit that Arty or the twins generate. She is a composite freak, with a myriad of unusual, but not exceedingly rare, attributes, whereas her siblings’ attributes are much rarer and are therefore more commodifiable. Yet Oly is also grotesque. Fiedler calls dwarves “grotesque,” as opposed to midgets, which are “perfectly proportioned and beautiful” (43). Dwarves especially challenge how one conceives of age, as “the achondroplastic Dwarf ... appears to have been born old” (45).

Michael Hardin believes that *Geek Love* “presents a world where the freakish is defined as normal, where the mutated body is desired and empowered” (338). This empowerment may exist for some, but it also takes place in a world of exploitation. Most of the Binewski children die in this world; more are stillborn or die in infancy than reach adolescence, and every one of Oly’s surviving siblings dies immediately before, or because of, Chick’s destruction of the

carnival. Oly lives, but she never radically alters her worldview. The children's bodies are "desired and empowered" to various degrees. But they are accepted and valued as such within their specific familial and carnival contexts. Even Oly, the least grotesque, understands her unique identity. When a journalist following the carnival asks if she ever wished to be "normal," Oly responds, "That's ridiculous! Each of us is unique. We are masterpieces. Why would I want to change into assembly-line items" (282). Oly's language positions the children as things, with the use of the term "masterpieces" as opposed to the more common "assembly-line items," while comparing birth to a process of manufacturing objects, where norms are easily reproducible while freaks are not. Ironically, the difference that makes the children "masterpieces" is similar to popular parenting rhetoric: rhetoric that valorizes each child as special. This rhetoric also coincides with neoliberalism's emphasis on entrepreneurship and individuality, as opposed to post-war parents' desire for "their children to be normal and average," to "be like the others rather than conspicuous" (Mintz 281).

Oly's ugliness stands in stark contrast to the Siamese twins' beauty. Oly describes Elly and Iphy as "always beautiful, slim, and huge-eyed" (8). Siamese twins are grotesque because they "challenge our individuality, along with the distinction between self and other upon which that individuality depends" (Fiedler 203). Arty fears the twins because of their popularity, which enables them to generate income. Oly notes, "The norm crowds loved them. In towns we passed through regularly pairs of young girls would come to the show dressed in a single long skirt in imitation of the twins" (51). What Elly and Iphy's act reveals is the way in which their view of themselves shifts over time, but is always restrained by their understanding of themselves as spectacle. Once Elly and Iphy get older, they attempt to take control of their own destiny by marketing themselves outside of the normal carnival acts. They become prostitutes: "'You know

what the norms really want to ask?’ said Elly? ‘What they want to know, all of them, but never do unless they’re drunk or simple, is How do we fuck? That and who, or maybe what. Most of the guys wonder what it would be like to fuck us. So, I figure, why not capitalize on that curiosity?’” (207). Elly understands that the twin’s appeal is in the tension between their difference and similarity to norms. Historically, this has often been the case when marketing Siamese twins. Robert Bogdan writes, “Many [freaks] were presented as ‘human wonders,’ but they did not sing opera or claim heroic feats; rather, they merely performed pedestrian tasks which the marks assumed were too difficult for them given their physical disabilities. They brandished such mundane achievements as finding a spouse and giving birth” (200), and he notes that “Part of the fascination of joined twins was the puzzle of how they performed such normal activities as walking and sitting” (201). The Binewski twins are virtuoso piano players, but they also rely on the interest in the day-to-day workings of the differently-abled that the carnival has historically capitalized on. Some spectators are interested in how extraordinary bodies engage in the mundane, or knowable, world; others want to experience it. Fiedler notes, “All Freaks are perceived to one degree or another as erotic, indeed, abnormality arouses in some ‘normal’ beholders a temptation to go beyond looking to *knowing* in the full carnal sense the ultimate other” (137). Elizabeth Grosz argues that the ability of the freak to inspire multiple reactions, like horror and fascination, involves their sexuality: “People think to themselves: ‘How do they do *it*?’ ... The perverse pleasure of voyeurism and identification is counterbalanced by horror at the blurring of identities (sexual, corporeal, personal) that witness our chaotic and insecure identities. Freaks traverse the very boundaries that secure the ‘normal’ subject in its given identity and sexuality” (64).²⁵ The twins capitalize on such sexual curiosity. Elly and Iphy’s self-

²⁵ These descriptions of the sexual curiosity that freaks may inspire alludes to the sexual objectification of abnormal bodies, which, like economic objectification, denies someone their own subjectivity.

commodification is, in a sense, subversive. It undermines the family dynamic of the profits going to the carnival, which is led first by Al and then by Arty. It also gives the twins a sense of ownership over their own bodies: their father trains them as piano players, but they decide to engage in prostitution. This subversion, however, operates within the status quo. The twins imagine themselves as different commodities because of how ingrained this self-understanding is, although they are also taking some ownership over their own lives and bodies. For the twins, this has disastrous consequences, but it also hints at the possibilities for individual expression and the subversive nature of the grotesque. Al and Arty want Elly and Iphy to use their bodies one way, but the twins reject this and temporarily make their own decisions. While the patriarchal dominance wins out over the twins, their niece, Miranda, has better luck.

Miranda has a tail that she is able to hide by curling it up and wearing skirts. Miranda works at a strip club that fetishizes difference: one stripper has pubic hair to her knees, for example, and another is a pre-operative transsexual woman. Miranda's routine emphasizes her tail. As her dance reaches its pinnacle, the reader is led to believe she is going to take off her underwear and reveal her bare buttocks. Instead, the dance's conclusion involves the revelation, both for the strip club patrons and the reader, of her tail:

She was down to her G-string with the fluffy lace plume on her rump, she had her thumbs hooked in it, looking over her shoulder at the crowd, she was waving her ass in a slow semaphore of invitation ... she pulled the plume down, unsnapped the G-string and whipped it off with a flourish, waving her ass still, her head tipped up and an unmistakable giggle bubbling out of her as she revealed the thin, curling tail that jutted out from the end of her spine and bounced just above her round buttocks. (17)

The striptease culminates in the reveal of her abnormality and highlights Miranda's continuation of the Binewski tradition of profiting from their abnormalities and the twins' appeal to sexual curiosity of their grotesque bodies. Miranda doesn't need to work as a stripper because her living expenses and tuition are paid for by a mysterious benefactor (Oly). Miranda does it because she enjoys it. It's ironic that the first Binewski woman completely free from her family's patriarchal control still commodifies herself for men. Perhaps the difference is that she isn't doing it for the men but in front of them. She accepts her body and becomes more comfortable with it. She makes her own decision, free from economic constraints, even as she hones her artistic skills so she can illustrate medical texts.

Much of the frame narrative involves Oly trying to protect Miranda from a benefactor, Miss Lick, who pays women to remove that which may be used to objectify them. Miss Lick believes, "If all these pretty women could shed the traits that made men want them (their prettiness) then they would no longer depend on their own exploitability but would use their talents and intelligence to become powerful" (162).²⁶ While Miss Lick's desire to reduce the sexual exploitation of females seems laudable, the extremes to which Miss Lick resorts makes the alternatives she offers at least as horrific as the experiments of the Binewski parents. For example, Miss Lick gives an attractive woman a double mastectomy, has her vagina sewn shut and her clitoris removed, and wishes she could also seal her anus (338). Miss Lick's offer to Miranda involves the amputation of Miranda's tail, which is far less severe. Nonetheless, Miss Lick's alternative is really about Miss Lick furthering her own desires (just as Al and Lil did) – to see women deprive themselves of the physicality which some men find appealing so that they can achieve their full potential – and appears similarly heinous. Miss Lick, though female, can be

²⁶ It's ironic that Miss Lick herself inherited her wealth.

understood as a patriarchal force. Her description takes pains to deny her any sort of traditional femininity: “Six foot two and 240 pounds in a grey business suit. Her high heels are each big enough to bury an Egyptian in. She trots alone across the parking lot, hunched under an umbrella” (36). While people come in all shapes and sizes, Miss Lick is associated with a traditionally masculine appearance. She is large, and the femininity her heels connote is undermined by the exaggerated description of the size of her feet. Her movement (trots) and demeanor (hunches) are realistic but removed from the traditional realm of the feminine. She is big and brusque with a “big solid belly” (152). Of course, Miss Lick’s features may contribute to her desire to see women valued for their self-worth and talents rather than their physicality. But in light of the patriarchal dominance of Arty and Al, Miss Lick also functions as a character who uses her position to try and get women to conform to her own desires. Miss Lick’s wealth also connects her to industrial capitalism. She inherits a company from her father, who “fired all the strikers in Portland and hired fresh help unpolluted by notions of collective bargaining,” that includes fifty-one plants that make portable dinners (149). The dinners are made with “old but reliable machinery that poops out” the contents (155). The grossness of such a description resonates with Oly’s rejection of norm bodies as uniform assembly items and the uniformity of the Arturan cult members. Miss Lick’s use of her wealth to remove anything that might make a woman sexually attractive, whether an abnormality or not, misses the point of the changing economic landscape that Dunn predicts, which is that these women might “empower” themselves by capitalizing on what makes them appealing. Individualism triumphs over uniformity. Metaphorically, it’s not surprising that Miss Lick is killed.

Conclusion

Marjorie Worthington positions *Geek Love*'s narrative (and Al's narrative of creating the children within *Geek Love*) as one that inscribes Al as the "author of [his] technological creations" (109). This serves to reinscribe hierarchical boundaries between "parent and child, male and female, even author and character" (111). Narratives involving technological authorship, she argues, proliferate because they "reinforce existing lines of patriarchal and authorial power" (111). This leads to a Binewski family tradition that is "highly capitalist and patriarchal" (119). Worthington ends her article by observing that technology, like Al's experiments, amplifies the tension between these supposed binaries. She concludes, "The resulting forms of agency that these techno-textual creations acquire take on an ambiguous meaning, as they serve simultaneously as resistance to and reification of the power forces that engender them" (130). This ambiguity is inherent in moments, like with Elly and Iphy, when characters assume control over their bodies only to sell them in new ways. Worthington's emphasis on the technology that creates the children opens up space for consideration of other concerns over eugenics. Worthington correctly observes, "It is the application of science to practical purpose—that turns the children into capital" (113). This is representative of a shift in attitudes towards the usage of eugenics. During the late nineteenth century, eugenics was thought of as a way to "improve the human race" by "attain[ing] human perfection" and "combat[ing] social problems such as poverty and crime" (Burke and Castaneda 6). The racist and elitist undercurrents of this approach were laid bare in a variety of abhorrent ways, like the horrific culmination of the Nazi belief in racial superiority, as well as the heinous idea that the poor shouldn't reproduce. In retrospect, the nineteenth century eugenics ideas, like that of Montaigne, mistook cultural and social issues for issues of nature. Even now, however, there are similar issues playing out on the individual level. There is a concern that "consumers with the resources

and access to health services can seek out perfection through biological manipulation” (Burke and Castaneda 7). Contemporary concerns over eugenics are less worrisome, perhaps, to the public at large because they reposition societal debates over eugenics and personhood onto a smaller scale; they become issues of individual choice rather than public or social policy.²⁷ Furthermore, by situating these concerns within the marketplace, the social dimension of eugenics gives way to an economic one. This mirrors the Binewski children’s reality. Al even comes up with his idea for commodifying children after seeing experimental roses with designed coloration. The rose garden gives Al an epiphany: “The roses started him thinking, how the oddity of them was beautiful and how the oddity was contrived to give them value ... He realized that children could be designed” (10–11). Al’s encounter with aesthetic beauty causes him to reimagine the social in economic terms; the rose garden becomes the impetus for creating children that are commodities. Of course, Al turns the eugenicists’ concern over the individual search for perfection (whether for one’s self or their children) on its head. He manipulates biology so he can accumulate resources, and his ideal children are the nightmares of other parents, not exemplars of physical perfection. *Geek Love*’s interest in eugenics in an age of commodification emphasizes the ugly aspect of eugenics’ history, while simultaneously imagining it in relation to contemporary neoliberal practices, which reposition social concerns, like family and childhood, as economic ones. What Worthington does not account for is that it is the application of science that turns the children into spectacles to be commodified, but the internalization of their commodity status, as passed down by their parents, reinforces this construction and allows it to continue. Nancy Bombaci argues that freaks were used in modernist American literature to undermine dominant discourses. She writes, “While oppressive dominant

²⁷ Consumer choice is often identified as individual choice, even as consumerism is capable of circumscribing choice or presenting the illusion of choice when there may not be much choice at all.

narratives celebrating normality and progress have inevitably constructed oddity as marginal and undesirable, freakishness has emerged, nonetheless, as a competing (albeit marginalized) discourse of power” (4). The emphasis on the freak’s subversive element is present in the scholarship on *Geek Love*, like in Katherine Weese’s point that Miranda undermines patriarchal hierarchies (361). However subversive the Binewski bodies may be though, they are conservative in their internalization of the dominant ideology. Even Miranda, raised outside of the carnival with no knowledge of her parentage, ends up commodifying her abnormality, even as she has the potential for a more positive future away from the carnival’s exploitation. Weese contends that Miranda is fundamentally different from the earlier Binewski generation because she doesn’t “use her deformity to earn a living” because her expenses are covered from a trust established by Oly (357). Miranda is an exotic dancer by choice, not necessity. The fact that she chooses to commodify herself when she doesn’t need the money, however, speaks to the pervasiveness of bodily commodification in the novel, even outside the carnival. This is not to say Miranda isn’t making her own decisions in a way that her family members initially couldn’t or that she should or shouldn’t dance, but the use of her abnormality—her dance culminates in the reveal of her tail—isn’t radically different from other forms of commodification. She is able to make her decision without the patriarchal influences of Al or Arty, which is significant and prompts Weese’s contention that “Dunn’s real interest lies less in physical difference than in gender—in possibilities for female grotesques who must find modes of self-expression outside the literal carnival setting, a space where they are oppressed by the carnival’s entirely conventional patriarchal practices” (349). This patriarchal dominance within the carnival is part of the reason that the Binewski children’s bodies aren’t quite as subversive as they appear; the children’s embrace of their bodies is an embrace of Al’s ideology. Weese’s emphasis on

Miranda's potential coincides with Rachel Adams' argument that Oly, by leaving Miranda her family history, provides Miranda with an option unavailable to the previous Binewski generation:

to keep her tail but to understand it as the product of a family history rather than simply as a fetishized object of male desire. This choice is paradigmatic of the novels' insistence on the historical nature of embodied identity. Knowing your own history becomes a means of negotiating between institutions that attempt to impose an official version of identity and those that seek to erase the past altogether. (280)

Those who would see Miranda solely for her tail and its sexual or commodifiable potentials, like the Binewski men, represent those who would impose their own version of identity onto Miranda. Miss Lick, with her desire to get rid of Miranda's tail so that men cannot fetishize it, thus cutting Miranda off from her family heritage, represents those who would erase the past. For Adams then, Miranda is less subversive, but still represents an option unavailable within the carnival. Miranda's multivalent possibilities are possible because her tail impacts who she is but does not completely define her.

The complexity of Miranda's feelings about her bodies exemplifies the shifting use of the grotesque within literature. David Mitchell writes, "The literary grotesque—those physical and cognitive anomalies, malformations and deformities placed in the service of symbolic social and artistic meanings—is a fantasy that invokes physical aberrancy as a visible symptom of social disorganization and collapse" (348). Although modernist grotesques represent social dimensions, "traditional interpretations of the grotesque in literature end up reinscribing biology, rather than social institutions, as the causal agent of physical aberrancy" (348). In modernist literature, then,

even as the grotesque is a metaphor for social collapse, its cause is the biological rather than the social. Postmodernist authors, however, interrogate the grotesque's use, rather than rely on previous uses that reinscribe biological rationale; and Dunn's novel is "a caricature of artistic desire to yoke physical aberrancy to metaphors of denigration and perversity" (348). Mitchell's is ultimately incorporating postmodern subjectivity into the field of disability studies (349), by arguing that *Geek Love* mediates on the relationship between the constructed nature of freaks and "the conflicted meanings of physical difference in the public and private realms" (357; 360). *Geek Love*'s aberrant bodies symbolize a social institution, neoliberalism, through physical form. The Binewski children's bodies do not symbolize neoliberalism itself, rather they symbolize the distortions created by the merger between the economic and the social. In this way, Dunn's work grapples with contemporary issues of culture and identity.

Geek Love shows the possibility and danger regarding how children internalize their own commodity status. It shows moments of true economic or emotional self-worth; but it also creates situations where the characters are unable to see beyond their status as objects. This ultimately reifies their assigned identities because they have no understanding of how they might define themselves outside of the system into which they were born. Like most economic models, neoliberal capitalism forces children into the market system. But some scholars, like Henry Giroux, understand neoliberal capitalism as especially dangerous because of how little it allows for social welfare. For children under neoliberal capitalism, this means that "youth are denied the ability to define themselves" and "when adult society talks about children, they are usually described as commodities or as threats to society" (14). *Geek Love* argues that children, immersed in an economic system, define themselves by it. Defining people as commodities leads them to think of themselves as commodities. This creates a self-sustaining system wherein the

environment shapes children's conceptions before they are consciously aware that there are other alternatives. Of course this makes sense, because for many neoliberals, as Thatcher put it, "There is no alternative" (Blyth 98). At the same time, however, the novel does posit an alternative. It coopts patriarchal and economic dominance by redeploying it in service to the individual (female). This can lead to tragedy, but it can also allow individuals to assert some of their own agency within the system that exploits them.

Introduction

Kazuo Ishiguro's 2005 novel, *Never Let Me Go*, takes place in Britain in the "late 1990s" (NP). The novel is about clones¹ raised from childhood to become organ donors for humans. The tension between the clones' status as humans deserving of dignity and agency and their intended purpose as organ stock takes the form of the grotesque. According to Philip Thomson, the grotesque is "*the unresolved clash of incompatibles in work and response*. It is significant that this clash is paralleled by the ambivalent nature of the abnormal as present in the grotesque: we might consider a secondary definition of the grotesque to be '*the ambivalently abnormal*'" (27). Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund argue, "Thomson's words in this passage – unresolved, incompatible, ambivalent, clash – speak to the ambiguities, juxtapositions and uncertainties surrounding the term [grotesque]" (3). Edwards and Graulund, like other scholars of the grotesque, believe that the incongruity and uncertainty of the grotesque leads to productive insight into who and what we are "through the indeterminate space of conflicting possibilities, images and figures" (3). *Never Let Me Go* subtly utilizes the grotesque in its exploration of personhood. The clones are grotesque; but because the grotesque is often concerned with the corporeal (Edwards and Graulund 1–2), the clones, who look exactly like humans, are not immediately identifiable as grotesque. Their grotesque nature, however, is present in their ontological uncertainty: they exist between human and non/human, person and object.

Paul Sheehan argues that posthuman bodies are generally tied to technological frameworks but finds that myth, not science, provides the conceptual basis for posthuman theorizing. As a result, he finds "analogous to the techno-body is the monstrous or grotesque

¹ I use the terms "clones" in keeping with the language of the novel. However, another way to think about the clone/human dichotomy is "clone human" and "non-clone human."

body” (245). He argues that “the clone has come to represent the most clear-cut posthuman body of all – where the ‘post’ is decisively severed from the ‘human’” (253). He writes, “clones are defined by what they lack ... individual identity. Both ‘mind’ and ‘identity’ are, of course, proxies for the soul” (253). Whether clones have souls is a question the novel poses, and, as a result, the association between individual identity and the soul factor into discussions of the clones. However, it is another point Sheehan makes regarding clones that is central to discussions of the grotesque. He asserts, “[Clones] show sameness to be a form of monstrous otherness; not a monstrosity of appearance, however, but of ontology” (253). Clones have monstrous, or grotesque, bodies not because of their differences, but their similarities. Their bodies unsettle ontological classifications of the human. Humans reject clones as distinctly human simply by naming them clones, thus foregrounding their difference in origin. At the same time, the tenuous nature of this difference is evident because humans are unable to recognize clones outside of the confines of where clones are kept separate. Sheehan’s associations of clones with ontological uncertainty and techo-bodies with the monstrous and grotesque positions the clones as grotesque bodies paradoxically predicated on sameness rather than difference.

Never Let Me Go is written from the viewpoint of Kathy H., who recalls growing up with her friends, Ruth and Tommy. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy are raised at an English boarding school named Hailsham before moving into transitional housing known as cottages, where they live together without adult supervision. After leaving the cottages, they become carers and donors. The reader gradually learns that Kathy and her friends are all clones and are raised and trained to donate their organs. Before donating themselves, however, clones serve as caretakers for other clones donating organs. As children, the characters have a general sense of their role in society

but do not seem to fully grasp the ramifications; and, the mistreatment of the clones is not immediately obvious to the reader, as their horrific fate is couched in euphemistic terms.

The titles “carer” and “donor” are initially confusing. The novel gives few clues as to what these positions entail. It begins, “My name is Kathy H. I’m thirty-one years old, and I’ve been a carer now for over eleven years ... My donors have always tended to do much better than I expected. Their recovery times have been impressive, and hardly any of them have been classified as ‘agitated,’ even before fourth donation” (3). Because the novel begins *in media res*, and the reader is not yet familiar with the terms Kathy uses, the ramifications of Kathy’s introduction is unclear. The reality under which the clones live is slowly revealed so that by the time the whole picture and process is visible, the clones are already firmly established in these roles. Furthermore, euphemisms make the roles seem positive. Carers sound like social workers. Kathy’s work sounds positive; she helps speed recovery times and calm donors. At this point, carer seems a noble profession, and perhaps it is; but because the narrator assumes knowledge on the part of the reader, Kathy does not explicate the fact that by excelling at her work, she allows donors to move more quickly through their donation process and increases the likelihood they will live through multiple donations so that more of their organs may be harvested before the donations kill them. In addition, the reader initially fails to understand that donors are not given a choice. The clones’ creation predetermines their donations. They serve no other purpose. Mark Currie argues that the euphemisms create a space between the closed world of Hailsham and the “brutal domain of inequality and social injustice” and that within this space, the novel deals with “remembered forgetting and recollected anticipation” (103). For this chapter, this gap is imperative to consider, as the clones reside in one world, but are shaped for another. In addition,

it also mirrors the grotesque status of the clones, as they reside within the space between two different worlds: human and non/human.

Carers may help prepare donors for death, but they also genuinely care for their donors. They help donors meet death with a semblance of dignity and provide them with a witness to the end of their life. Jill Casid argues that novels like *Never Let Me Go* give us a space to entertain tough but necessarily possibilities relating to death and care (132). For her, the novel combines issues of human and non/human with the commodification of bodies and additional questions relating to power, reproduction and economies. She argues that “love makes a difference” even though the carers can’t save the donors (129). Her argument emphasizes the precarity of the world, or the lack of social support for systems of care in a time of great economic inequality (122). For Casid, a “good” death can still exist in such a world. This is the power of her argument. Although an individual may be diminished in a world that fails to allow them adequate economic opportunity or support, he or she can still assert dignity.

In addition to the immaterial value of the carer’s work, caring causes two additional effects. On the one hand, it prepares carers to die. Care-giving is a brutal and difficult labor that emotionally drains the carer. Kathy notes, “Carers aren’t machines. You try and do your best for every donor, but in the end, it wears you down. You don’t have unlimited patience and energy” (4).² In fact, after working as carers, many clones request to become donors. On the other hand, making clones take care of donors helps to shelter the outside world from the clones. While the doctors and nurses must be humans, having other clones assist donors helps minimize the contact between clones and humans. Of course, clones might also provide better care because they can relate with the donors, but this does not negate the structural benefits of having clones care for

² The difficult emotional labor that the clones engage in as carers and donors, which frees humans to do other things, is reminiscent of Chick’s emotional labor on behalf of the Binewski family. See pages 152-153.

clones. Although serving as carers prepares clones for their eventual organ harvesting, this preparation begins when they are children. It is at Hailsham that Kathy and her peers internalize the logic of their own objectification. This internalization helps facilitate the transformation of the clones into commodities, which is why Hailsham is also where the grotesque nature of the clones first surfaces.

Hailsham

Hailsham is the boarding school where the children grow up, and it is the source of their earliest memories. It is much like any other school: brimming with laughter and pain. It is also where the clone children begin internalizing their “class,” which later attaches them to their “professional life” as carers and donors (Fluet 268). Thus, Hailsham features prominently in the students “becoming” (Villiers and Slabbert 90). The emphasis on becoming helps explain the processes by which the clones are trained, and it mirrors the emphasis of developmental psychology on children as future adults (Wall 25–29). The emphasis on childhood as becoming presages the clones’ exploitation as adults. Karen Sánchez-Eppler writes, “Children are often presented as not yet fully human, so that the figure of the child demarcates the boundaries of personhood, a limiting case for agency, voice, or enfranchisement” (xxiv).³ Because the clone children have limited agency and personhood, their disenfranchisement is more easily enacted. The power to shape the clone children’s future is aided by their limited personhood in the present, both as children and clones. They are “commodit[ies] and [are] special only in terms of utility” (Bone 4).⁴

Hailsham is the locus of the clones’ childhood. Kathy, Ruth, and Tommy all recall their time there positively, despite its role in shaping their bleak futures. Jane Elliot writes, “Although

³ For more on the developmental discourse of childhood, see pages 10-11 and 85-86

⁴ For more on children as commodities, see pages 12-21.

the boarding school has made the clones into docile bodies in just the fashion that one would expect from such a disciplinary institution, Kathy in particular experiences the school as a site of intense nostalgia, as a cozy and protected heaven to which she constantly returns to in her mind” (94). This is because, despite the disciplinary role of Hailsham in preparing Kathy for her future, Kathy recalls her past as relatively carefree. The fact that Kathy constantly remembers Hailsham positively is a testament to how effective Hailsham is as a disciplinary institution in its ability to mold her for exploitation without creating animosity. However, Kathy’s fondness for Hailsham is also due to her lived experience. The reality of Hailsham as an institution is that it prepares clones to become organ donors. The reality of Kathy’s time at Hailsham is that she made friends and interacted with caring guardians. This is not the case for all clones. Many grow up in places that are not as permissive as Hailsham, but these clones and their abuse is kept out of sight, with only the occasional oblique reference.

The narrator’s first description of Hailsham involves Kathy, Ruth and their friends watch some boys pick soccer teams, and it foregrounds the novel’s interest in the grotesque. As a great soccer player, Tommy expects to be picked early, if not first, but no one picks him. Kathy narrates, “‘Look at him,’ someone behind me said. ‘He’s completely convinced he’s going to be first pick. Just look at him!’ There *was* something comical about Tommy at that moment, something that made you think, well, yes, if he’s going to be that daft, he deserves what’s coming” (8–9). As other players are picked, Laura, Ruth’s friend, pantomimes Tommy’s facial expressions, and, outside “Tommy is left standing alone, and the boys all began sniggering” (9). Sniggering turns to laughter and the boys run off, leaving Tommy alone. This leads Tommy to explode: “He began to scream and shout, a nonsensical jumble of swear words and insults” (9). This soon escalates into the novel’s first grotesque image: “[Tommy] was just raving, flinging

his limbs about, at the sky, at the wind, at the nearest fence post. Laura said he was maybe ‘rehearsing his Shakespeare.’ Someone else pointed out how each time he screamed something he’d raise one foot off the ground, pointing it outwards, ‘like a dog doing a pee’” (10). This scene is grotesque because students take pleasure in the pain and humiliation of Tommy; secure in the knowledge that they are in no danger of similar abuse. Kathy’s use of the word “comical” and Ruth’s pantomime adds a comic element to the scenario, as cruel as it may be. For Tommy, the horror of this situation reveals itself as he realizes that not only will he not be picked first, but he won’t be picked at all. For the others, Tommy’s gradual realization serves to build up to the culmination of the joke: the explosive outburst. Tommy’s inability to articulate his pain and frustration, as evidenced by the “nonsensical jumble”, leads him to indiscriminately lash out at everything: “sky ... wind ... fence post” (10). Laura turns this into a joke by comparing this inarticulate expression of rage to Shakespeare.⁵ This comparison yokes together high culture and low culture, the greatest playwright of Western history and a bullied teen screaming in a field, whose gestures are compared to a urinating dog. The joining of high and low culture in a scene of this nature conjures images of the Bakhtinian carnivalesque. But whereas Bakhtin’s conception of the carnivalesque is subversive in that it suspends hierarchy and emphasizes equality (10), here the low is kept low through mockery. This moment reinforces hierarchical social status instead of undermining it. The laughter at the expense of Tommy is “a gesture of expulsion that establishes [their] distance from the absurdity” (Carroll 308).

Tommy’s constant rage is brought on by his abuse, but it also reflects his ability to intuit his own fate. As adults, Kathy tells Tommy, “I was thinking maybe the reason you used to get

⁵ The association between Tommy’s impotent rage and Shakespeare is an apt comparison. It resonates with Macbeth’s line, “And then is heard no more: it is a tale / Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury, / Signifying nothing” (*Macbeth* 5.5, 26-28).

like that was because at some level you always *knew*.” Tommy initially disagrees, but then considers it: “... that’s a funny idea. Maybe I did know, somewhere deep down. Something the rest of you didn’t” (275). Tommy’s rage is a very human reaction, and it contributes to the sense that the clones are almost completely indistinguishable from humans.⁶ His rage is also a reaction on two different levels. On one level, Tommy rages against the abuse he suffers at the hands of his peers. On another level, he somehow unconsciously comprehends what life has in store for him and impotently rages against the unfairness of his situation. Shameem Black notes that “the question of what it means to be human pervades” the novel and that the “clones struggle to comprehend the significance of their own circumscribed personhood” (785). Tommy’s rage is part of his struggle to understand his role in the world; it’s a reaction against the unfairness of circumstance. Whether it’s the isolation of his peers or the isolation of the clones from the rest of society, Tommy is equally frustrated. Both demean and dehumanize Tommy.

One of the ways that Hailsham prepares the clones for their lives of giving is by taking their art. “If you wanted to praise someone’s work,” Kathy says, “ you’d say: ‘That’s good enough for the Gallery’” (31–32). Though the clones don’t know this at the time, their art is used in the outside world to try and encourage people to recognize the souls of the clones. This appeal is empowered by the idea of childhood itself. The appeal to recognize the souls of the children is buttressed by the notion that children are innocents in need of protection from exploitation.⁷ The appeal fails, perhaps, because the protection one owes to the idealized child or children requires a recognition of one’s own responsibility to such a child; but most adults apparently do not see a

⁶ Other than the clones’ creation, which the novel keeps vague, the only major difference between clones and humans is that clones cannot reproduce. However, this is something that humans also often deal with, and it may be by design to prevent the clones from having alternatives for their emotional labor and to shelter humans from having to deal with the children of clones, who would further complicate the clones’ exploitation. The novel isn’t clear on this.

⁷ For more in childhood innocence, see pages 1-12.

responsibility to the clones. The ability to take the clones' work, without recompense, also foreshadows their positions as forced organ donors, where they are expected to give of themselves until it kills them. Shameem Black argues that the novel critiques humanist art because this art prevents the students from seeing themselves as inhuman by obfuscating their mechanical origins and preparing them for exploitation (790). As an alternative, Black argues, the novels ennoble the "inhuman," an "aesthetics of replication" which "reinvents empathy for the posthumanist age" (786). Black's argument is tantalizing in its exaltation of a new aesthetics, but it lacks an appreciation of the moments the clones are at their most sympathetic. These are the moments when they demonstrate their humanity through stereotypically human actions: when they rage, when they cry, when they give up. While Black acknowledges this dynamic (792), he instead champions a reading that asks us to extend our sympathies beyond the human (803). The practicality of getting humans to see the inhuman in themselves seems less feasible than getting people to see humanity in others.⁸ While the authority figures in the novel admittedly fail in their attempt to demonstrate that the clones have souls, it still seems a more realistic means of getting the clones into humanity's embrace than the alternative. It is easier to accept others' inhumanity than to accept our own. It's the sentimental appeal to the fundamentally human nature of the clones, despite their inhumanity, that calls for recognition. The ability of the novel to elicit recognition of the clones' humanity and condemnation regarding the way in which they are treated places the text within a tradition of eighteenth and nineteenth century sentimental and abolitionist literature (Shaddox 448; 450).

⁸ There is a tendency in posthumanist scholarship to exalt the posthuman, even more than in scholarship on the grotesque. I think that the reality of posthuman bodies will be quite challenging, however, as they become more common. They may become the object of fear, derision and even jealousy, and one of the ways to combat this might be to emphasize their connections to the human.

The work produced for the gallery, and the way in which it systematically trains the children to selflessly give is reinforced by two other aspects of Hailsham: Exchanges and Sales. The Exchanges occur four times a year. Students produce different forms of art for the Exchanges: “paintings, drawings, pottery,” etc. (16). Students are given “Exchange Tokens” for what they enter into the Exchanges, which they then use to purchase art from other students. Guardians give tokens based on how many they feel a particular item is worth. Participation in the Exchanges is used as a way to solidify communal bonds amongst the students, as the Exchanges, along with the Sales, are the “only means ... of building up a collection of personal possessions” (16). Much of the popularity of students also depends upon their ability to create (16). Tommy’s initial abuse is, in part, because of his inability to create, which Ruth articulates when she scoffs, “...He didn’t have a thing for Spring Exchange. And has he got anything for next month? I bet he hasn’t” (15–16). The reliance of the students on each other for much of their sentimental objects has a “subtle effect” on the students because, as Kathy puts it, “being dependent on each other to produce the stuff that might become your private treasures—that’s bound to do things to your relationships” (16). Kathy is correct, but her sense that it does “something” is vague. A more specific description is that it teaches the students to value each other based on what they can produce. The entire structure of Hailsham is designed to place students together, even as it separates them as much as possible from humans. Students spend all of their time together. They eat, play, and learn together. They sleep together in dorm rooms. And the Exchanges make them rely on each other for almost all of the objects to which they may become attached, as well. This constant reification of the bonds of the students sets the stage for their future, as they gradually move out of Hailsham and begin becoming carers and donors. When the students move beyond Hailsham’s walls and segue into their new roles, they are

supposed to keep themselves separate from humans and care for each other. It may be that the lack of desire to escape their fate, and their willingness to take care of each other, is predicated on how tightly woven the tapestry of their lives is.

Of course, the clones' best art is taken by Marie-Claude for the Gallery. This creates tension as the clones grow up. Kathy remembers, "By the time we were ten, this whole notion that it was a great honour to have something taken by Madame collided with a feeling that we were losing our most marketable stuff" (39). For all the institutional training the Exchanges and tokens provide for the clones, they also give them an awareness of exchange value. Some students take this up with Miss Emily, who subsequently gives students tokens for their art, but not as much as it might be because of the honour associated with the Gallery (39–40). Despite Miss Emily's compromise, the reimbursement for art is not a sacrifice on the part of the guardians. It still involves the students giving up what they are taught to cherish for tokens that hold no value outside of the Hailsham. Thus, the clones are trained to give of themselves without any real sort of compensation, and their training as future-donors is still intact. The various ways in which artwork is circulated, according to Black, mirrors "the circulation of vital body parts" and "repress[es] the student's possible resistance" by cultivating a reliance on community for a sense of self, by tying their value to their ability to produce art, and by making the clones feel as if "they actually partake in a real exchange" as opposed to being part of "an economy of ... extraction" (795). The Gallery and Exchange systems are thus troubling in that they prepare the clones for lives of exploitation, while masking their intended goals. These systems are a metaphor for the inequality of "national and global economies systems" where "First World economies desire labor without the inconvenient presence of human laborers" (Black 796). Black's concern over the circulation of goods at Hailsham show up in one other event: Sales.

At Sales, students use tokens to purchase personal possessions from the outside world. Once a month, a white van arrives with items from the outside. Kathy remembers, “It’s where we got our clothes, our toys, the special things that hadn’t been made by another student” (41). These vans are always greeted with excitement, and yet the Sales seem to generate disappointment:

There’d be nothing remotely special and we’d spend our tokens just renewing stuff that was wearing out or broken with more of the same. But the point was, I suppose, we’d all of us in the past found something at a Sale, something that had become special; a jacket, a watch, a pair of craft scissors never used but kept proudly next to a bed. We’d all found something like that at one time, and so however much we tried to pretend otherwise, we couldn’t ever shake off the old feelings of hope and excitement. (41)

The amount of tokens the students accumulate is barely enough to cover the replacement of items. Perhaps this is part of a larger effort to keep the clones used to living their lives with little in the way of commodities, but it also demonstrates the precarity in which so many struggle just to maintain. The clones value the Sales’ items even though the items are mundane: clothing or unused items one can find in most households. The possibility that they find something of value fills them with hope and excitement. This seems in line with contemporary consumerism in that the excitement produced by the possibility of a purchase often leads to a letdown after the purchase, a process which may then repeat itself. One also gets the sense that the items at the Sales are the cast-offs of humans (Black 796). They arrive in cardboard boxes and seem random, as the students never know what will be there. If this is the case, the students are exchanging

their tokens, worthless to the outside world (though, admittedly, not to them), for the items which humans don't want.

The clones get so worked up at the prospect of finding something they can treasure at the Sales that things get violent. Whereas the Exchanges have a "hushed atmosphere," the Sales are "crowded and noisy"; a place where "pushing and shouting was all part of the fun ... Except ... every now and then, things would get out of hand, with students grabbing and tugging, sometimes fighting" (42). The atmosphere is reminiscent of a shopping mall or store during Black Friday, as reports often indicate violence among customers (Piccoli). The fighting at a Sale leads to an admonishment by Miss Emily: "we were all very special, being Hailsham students, and so it was all the more disappointing when we behaved badly" (43). The students at Hailsham are, we learn, treated better than many other clones; although, it is unclear exactly how less fortunate clones are treated. But in relation to the wider world, a world of both clones and humans, describing the clones as special is complex. They are, of course, special in that their creation is so distinct from humans. Yet the clones' special aspect is the reason they are commodities. In this sense, "special" becomes another euphemism, like "carer" or "giver," and helps to ennoble their future roles. The euphemistic use of special to describe the clones comes up in other places too. Miss Lucy is asked about whether she has smoked. She says yes, "but what you must understand is that for you, all of you, it's much, much worse to smoke than it ever was for me ... You've been told about it. You're students. You're ... *special*. So keeping yourselves well, keeping yourselves very healthy inside, that's much more important for each of you than it is for me" (68–69). The clones are not special because they are children, of course, but because of the unspoken reality of their origins. Children are often called special in Western societies. We exalt them, and they are special, each being unique in their own way; and yet they

are not special, each being reminiscent of others. The clones are not special because they are unique; they are special because they are commodities.

It is an encounter with Marie-Claude when Kathy is a child which most directly exposes Kathy to how special she truly is and situates the clones themselves in the realm of the grotesque, as opposed to their earlier encounter with Tommy where only he is the grotesque object of derision. The clones intuit that Marie-Claude fears them. To test this hypothesis, Ruth, Kathy, and others contrive to quickly and suddenly come upon Marie-Claude and then walk closely past her. Kathy recalls Marie-Claude's reaction: "I can still see it now, the shudder she seemed to be suppressing, the real dread that one of us would accidentally brush against her. And though we just kept on walking, we all felt it. It was like we'd walked from the sun right into the chilly shade" (35). The horror which Marie-Claude feels towards the clones is palpable, expressing itself both in her bodily reaction and the clones' ability to feel Marie-Claude's dread. This is confusing for them. They have no idea what the Gallery is truly for, and no idea why an adult would fear them, as their origin and future are minimized at Hailsham. Marie-Claude's fear gets even stranger, "Madame *was* afraid of us. But she was afraid of us in the same way someone might be afraid of spiders. We hadn't been ready for that. It had never occurred to us to wonder how *we* would feel, being seen like that, being the spiders" (35). Spiders are often associated with the grotesque due to their ability to unsettle people (Kayser 182; McElroy 8–9), and the connection of the clones to arachnids forces the children to consider their own dehumanization. Their grotesque ontology is innately terrifying for Marie-Claude. Not because she thinks them inherently dangerous, but because she knows they are inherently different even though the clones' difference in origin leaves no distinguishable trace, or, more precisely, *because* the clones' biological differences leave no distinguishable trace.

This seems contrary to the grotesque, which often registers itself on the body. Noël Carroll notes, “[T]he grotesque subverts our categorical expectations concerning the natural and ontological order” (297). This, in turn, has the potential “to elicit certain affective states, such as horror, comic amusement, and awe” (298). Furthermore, for Carroll, the grotesque is embodied. He writes, “[S]omething is grotesque only if it is an image, whether verbal or visual, of an *animate* being that violates our standing biological or ontological concepts and expectations” [emphasis added] (297–298). While the clones are animate beings, their images are of “normal” humans. It’s not their image that violates our “concepts and expectations,” but knowledge of their origins. In this way, the clones may be considered more metaphorically than literally grotesque. Carroll does recognize the potential for the metaphorical grotesque, he’s just more interested in creating a taxonomy for the literal grotesque (297). What is paradoxical about the clones’ bodies, however, is that they are grotesque precisely because they don’t appear any different from non-clone humans. If the cloned humans had some sort of striking differences between their bodies and non-cloned humans’ bodies, they might still be grotesque. But Marie-Claude is terrified precisely because of the normalcy of their bodies; she is terrified because they look like her but upset her notions what’s natural pertaining to the “biological [and] ontological” categories of the human.

Kathy connects her experience with Marie-Claude to that of the readers’:

I’m sure somewhere in your childhood, you too had an experience like ours that day; similar if not in the actual details, then inside, in the feelings. Because it doesn’t really matter how well your guardians try to prepare you ... So you’re waiting, even if you don’t quite know it, waiting for the moment when you realise that you really are different to them; that there are people out there, like Madame,

who don't hate you or wish you any harm, but how nevertheless shudder at the very thought of you—of how you were brought into the world and why—and who dread the idea of your hand brushing against theirs ... It's like walking past a mirror ... and suddenly it shows you something else, something troubling and strange. (36).

Kathy's identification of a shared clone experience with her reader invites the reader to join her world. It compels the reader to identify with the experience of the exploited other, even if Kathy has yet to be exploited at this point. Asking a reader to relate to the protagonist from a position of otherness is a powerfully seductive call, even if the reader is an imagined one. This moment emphasizes a unity based on the shared feelings of strangeness, on the ability to relate to feeling inferior or dejected. It's important that Kathy calls the reader to recognize the shared feelings rather than specific experiences. This gets to the empathetic power of liberal humanism. The clones are people too. Not solely because of their capacity to reason, though they certainly have it. But also because of their capacity to experience and share emotions, like love, loss, or alienation. The shared identification of the emotional aspect of Kathy's experience is even more powerful in that it comes from a position of weakness. It's one thing to call upon others to relate to one another when coming from a position of health and happiness. It's another to ask people to consider their personal moments of wretchedness and relate to each other based on shared pain and feelings of inadequacy. In this respect, it emphasizes humanity by acknowledging how anyone can be dehumanized, either by ones' self or others. John Marks observes that clones are considered "less than human" in the popular imagination despite their human appearance and that clones are often positioned as others (331; 333). Kathy's appeal, however, situates the otherness of the clone as a shared experience and central to that of others.

Marie-Claude's fear of the clones is further complicated during another encounter with Kathy. Kathy becomes obsessed with a song on a Judy Bridgewater cassette tape she gets at a sale. The song is the titular "Never Let Me Go":

What was so special about this song? Well, the thing was, I didn't used to listen properly to the words; I just waited for that bit that went: "Baby, baby, never let me go . . ." And what I'd imagined was a woman who'd been told she couldn't have babies, who'd really, really wanted them all her life. Then there's a sort of miracle and she has a baby, and she holds this baby very close to her and walks around singing: "Baby, never let me go . . ." partly because she's so happy, but also because she's so afraid something will happen, that the baby will get ill or be taken away from her. Even at the time, I realised this couldn't be right, that this interpretation didn't fit with the rest of the lyrics. But that wasn't an issue with me. The song was about what I said, and I used to listen to it again and again, on my own, whenever I got the chance. (70)

Kathy's interpretation, though inaccurate, is prescient. The clones, like the character in Kathy's imagination, cannot have children; but it's the identification of a moment of unanticipated happiness and connection combined with the foreboding that something bad will happen which foreshadows her adult relationship with Tommy and his eventual death. It also sets the stage for an encounter with Marie-Claude that resonates through the years.

Kathy is dancing alone in a room, with a pillow pressed against her chest as if she were cradling a child, and listening to "Never Let Me Go." Kathy describes what happens when Marie-Claude comes upon her: "She was out in the corridor, standing very still, her head angled to one side to give her a view of what I was doing inside. And the odd thing was she was crying.

It might even have been one of her sobs that had come through the song to jerk me out of my dream” (71). This event leads to confusion on the part of Kathy, who is unsure about how to react, because “ [Madame] was just standing out there, sobbing and sobbing, staring at me through the doorway with that same look in her eyes she always had when she looked at us, like she was seeing something that gave her the creeps. Except this time there was something else, something extra in that look I couldn’t fathom” (72). Marie-Claude crying over the image of Kathy cradling the child, as they are separated by a doorway, is a moment of connection where artificial boundaries between clones and humans are erased, just as the door fails to separate the two characters. This moment of connection, however, is confusing because of Marie-Claude’s earlier reaction towards the clones. This moment connects to the grotesque, as Marie-Claude’s eyes register multiple emotions on seemingly contradictory registers.⁹ Kathy inspires aversion, but also something extra. This something extra is capable of driving a grown woman who fears clones to tears when confronted with one of the clones during an intimate moment. Tommy guesses that Marie-Claude was crying because she knew clones can’t have babies, but pushes his hypothesis further: “‘Maybe Madame can read minds. She’s strange, Maybe she can see right inside you. It wouldn’t surprise me.’ This gave us both a little chill, and though we giggled, we didn’t say any more about it” (73). As Kathy and Thomas experience a touch of both terror and humor, this moment inverts the perception of who is grotesque. For Marie-Claude, the clones are. For the clones, it’s Marie-Claude and her seemingly preternatural ability to know the mind of Kathy during a moment of vulnerability. This inversion reveals the subjective nature of the grotesque, which is often concerned with audience reactions (Chao 169; Edwards and Graulund 78; Korsmeyer 3). There are plenty of scholars who emphasize one aspect of the grotesque over

⁹ For more on the emotional aspect of the grotesque, see pages 23, 53-54, and 140-141.

another: horror over humor, and vice versa. Baudelaire, for example, deemphasizes the horror, while Kayser highlights it. Here the grotesque is about perception.¹⁰ To Marie-Claude, the clones are grotesque because they defy the defining experience of humanity, birth (ironically enough, an experience no one remembers); yet they seem in almost every other way to be human. For Kathy and Thomas, Marie-Claude is human, but the uncanny ability to read people's minds that they bestow upon Marie-Claude makes her different. Of course, Marie-Claude cannot read minds, but this moment highlights the subjective nature of the grotesque and how boundaries almost always end up being porous. The line between humans and clones might seem reasonable, but it only remains stable if the clones never exhibit humanity, which they clearly do. Of course, Kathy and Thomas do not know Marie-Claude's mind, but Marie-Claude, during a later confrontation when the clones have grown, tells them what she was thinking at the time: "I saw a new world coming rapidly. More scientific, efficient, yes. More cures for the old sicknesses. Very good. But a harsh, cruel world. And I saw a little girl, her eyes tightly closed, holding to her breast the old kind world, one that she knew in her heart could not remain, and she was holding it and pleading, never to let her go" (272). The reality which causes Marie-Claude to cry is not their inability to reproduce. It's sadness over what she sees as an increasingly cruel world, a world where scientific advances for some lead to cruelty towards others. Of course, the pain of the phrase "never let me go" in the song is partly due to the fact that the metaphorical child is not holding Kathy, but the opposite. Kathy is holding the child, giving it comfort, while pleading for comfort in return. The phrase helps us consider how one might both accept and even "beseech [our] own confinement" (Currie 91), such as the clones do. The old world the pillow/child represents has already let Kathy go, if it ever comforted her to begin with. Marie-Claude's reading has Kathy

¹⁰ See page 102 for another example of this.

clinging to a world that was always indifferent to her, if it ever acknowledged her at all. The new world may not care much about Kathy and the clones, but it refuses to let them go, as it harnesses them for its own use. The cruelty of this world which Marie-Claude identifies is important when considering the exploitation of the clones. They are created as objects, and so in a sense their objectification is inverted. They are objects that become human, rather than humans who are objectified.¹¹ And yet, they are objects meant to replicate humans, and quickly reveal themselves to be fundamentally the same. Processes of objectification still apply. Once the clones' humanity rears its head it cannot be lain to rest. Mark Currie's references the grotesque, as he considers *Never Let Me Go* in relation to Kafka. *Never Let Me Go* is Kafkaesque in part because of "the more general predicament of Kafka's narratives in which characters accept the unacceptable, treat the grotesque as if it were normal, or confer a kind of homeliness on the most offensive of social justices" (Currie 93). In this way, the system which objectifies the clones is grotesque, in addition to the way in which the clones are described in grotesque terms.

Miss Lucy articulates the cruelty of the system when she chastises some students for talking about having jobs when they grow up. "None of you will go to America," Miss Lucy says, "none of you will be film stars. And none of you will be working in supermarkets as I heard some of you planning the other day" (81). The fact that a generally unattainable profession, film star, is juxtaposed with a supermarket worker reveals even the most low-skilled jobs to be unattainable for the clones; it denies the clones a place of their choosing in society, regardless of their aspirations. Lucy continues, "Your lives are set out for you. You'll become adults, then before you're old, before you're even middle-aged, you'll start to donate your vital

¹¹ While the children in *Geek Love* and *Elephantmen* are also created to be objects, I'm referring specifically here to the fact that the clones are not birthed. They are grown in tubes. In this way, they initially exist closer to objects that are created rather than people who are born.

organs. That's what each of you was created to do ... You were brought into this world for a purpose, and your futures ... have been decided" (81). What can the clones reasonably do in this situation? Their lives are outside the bounds of law. Not because the clones are lawless or unbound by law; but because they are placed outside of the protection of the law and become objects rather than subjects, akin to nonhuman animals (Villiers and Slabbert 91; Wolfe 10). The ability to treat others as animals is highlighted by another event. The children are in Miss Lucy's class learning about WWII and prison camps. Kathy recalls, "One of the boys asked if the fences around the camps had been electrified, and then someone else had said how strange it must have been, living in a place like that, where you could commit suicide any time you liked just by touching a fence" (78). The children have a strange reaction to this consideration: they laugh and Laura "got up on her seat and did a hysterical impersonation of someone reaching out and getting electrocuted" (78). The children's reaction is, once again, grotesque, as they laugh and mime when discussing the holocaust. "Hysterical" carries additional weight as it describes the humor the students see in the situation, but also serves as a potentially appropriate description of those who might hear about a family member or friend who chose to electrocute themselves. Their reaction is also sad because it reveals an utter lack of self-awareness of their own situation. They are the oppressed minority; prisoners of Hailsham. Kept separate for future use; valued for their body, not their identity. Miss Lucy reifies the metaphor of Hailsham as prison when she says, "It's just as well the fences at Hailsham aren't electrified. You get terrible accidents sometimes" (78).

The clones' status as grotesque objects, both in their own eyes and as objects for others, is further elucidated when Tommy cuts his elbow. Another student tells Tommy that moving his elbow too quickly can cause his arm to "unzip like a bag opening up" and that this has happened

to another student who “[woke] up to find his whole upper arm and hand skeletally exposed, the skin flopping about next to him” (85–86). Tommy eventually discovers the joke, but the notion of “unzipping” stays with the clones. Kathy remembers, “[it] bec[a]me a running joke among us about the donations. The idea was that when the time came, you’d be able just to unzip a bit of yourself, a kidney or something would slide out, and you’d hand it over” (87–88). This bit of gallows humor in the face of abjection provides another example of their humanity. This scene is also the most direct connection the clones make between themselves and objects, even though it is done as a joke. The joke itself is ludicrous, one cannot unzip oneself and take organs out. It elides the organ transplant process by taking the corporeal effect of scalpels on bodies and making it comically simple. But from the perspective of most humans in the novel, clones are body bags, who carry the organs humans need but are otherwise faceless and unknowable.

Hailsham is both a shelter and a prison to the clones. It shelters them from detailed knowledge of their commodity status, so they have a time of relative innocence, and it mostly keeps them away from humans who might discriminate against them. Many clones in places other than Hailsham are treated horribly. But Hailsham also imprisons the clones. The clones aren’t allowed to leave, and they are kept away from humans, so they can be exploited out of site and mind. Everything the clones learn at Hailsham also trains them to be commodities. The dual nature of the Hailsham as shelter and prison connects to Ewa Kuryluk’s association of the cave with both protection and threat (20).¹² This positions the clones as female grotesques, despite the fact that there are both male and female clones. We have seen, however, that male grotesques traditionally take on female characteristics (Miles 91; Russo 13). In this case, the clones, male and female, become carers, which involves the (traditionally female) emotional labor of helping

¹² See pages 145–148 for a longer discussion of the female grotesque.

other clones prepare for and recover from organ donations. The novel doesn't talk of compensation for this labor, and, if there is any, it can't be much. In this way, the emotional labor remains undervalued. Those clones, like Tommy, who don't care for the work, quickly become donors and are placed in communities of donors before they give (organs) until it kills them. Furthermore, the clones' infertility more visibly upends traditional female gender roles. It seems more grotesque to create female clones incapable of having children, at least based on constructions of gender and the ongoing, though problematic, association of females with domestic spaces.¹³

Cottages

After Hailsham, the clones spend a transitional period akin to college at places known as cottages. The cottages are isolated locales consisting of a handful of buildings where the clones go after graduating from Hailsham. At the cottages, the clones mix with some older peers, as well as peers who grew up outside of Hailsham. Their only contact with the wider world is a man who occasionally brings them supplies. The clones ostensibly have a larger academic project to work on, Kathy's is Victorian novels, but it doesn't matter whether they actually complete it or not. The project simply gives them a focus as they transition into a new place and towards their intended futures. The cottages are essentially a place for the clones to live until they get bored and decide to become carers. A kinder interpretation of the cottages would be that they gives the clones a few years of unsupervised freedom to enjoy themselves before they live their lives confronted by the mortality of themselves and others. The exact intention of the cottages isn't immediately clear, though they end up serving both functions.

¹³ This may also fit within the subversive aspect of the grotesque if one is interested in understanding how the clones might push against dominant conceptions of the human and/or gender.

At the cottage, Kathy worries about her sexual appetite. She ends up having sex with other clones at various times, but they are not clones with whom she is interested in having a relationship. These encounters do “funny things to [Kathy’s] feelings” (128). Kathy asks Ruth, “Do you ever get so you just really have to do it? With anybody almost? ... There might be something not quite right with me, down there. Because sometimes I just really, really need to do it” (128). The irony of this moment is that her struggles with her body and sexuality convey Kathy’s humanity, but Kathy, unsure of how to process her feelings and urges, understands them as *wrong*, somehow. She thinks her urges grotesque. This moment aligns with Leslie Fiedler’s generalization that when adolescents enter puberty, “at a point in life when one feels himself primarily a sex machine,” that their bodies seem either “monstrously deficient or excessive” (32). While Fiedler is generalizing, this description coincides with Kathy’s feelings. She sees her appetite as monstrously excessive or unnatural, as evidenced by the fact she thinks something might be wrong with her. Kathy believes this may be a result of her possible, the woman she was cloned from. Kathy recalls, “The basic idea behind the possible theory was simple ... Since each of us was copied at some point from a normal person, there must be, for each of us, somewhere out there, a model getting on with his or her life” (139). However, the clones are uncertain as to what age their possibles should be. Humans could be cloned at any age. For some clones, the “models were an irrelevance, a technical necessity for bringing us into the world, nothing more than that ... At the same time, whenever we heard reports ... we couldn’t help getting curious” (140). The possibles are a mirage. Nowhere in the novel does a clone meet their possible. The one trip to get a better look at Ruth’s potential possible ends with the certainty the potential possible isn’t it. The clones believe that glimpsing a possible is like “glimps[ing] your future” (140). But this is incorrect. A possible may give the clones a sense of what they would look like

later in life, but it cannot give them a glimpse into a future because their future is pre-determined. A more accurate articulation of what the possible reveals is an *alternative* future, a might-have-been. It's emblematic of the world of the clones that their fantasy of viewing their future is also one that sees future as predetermined. If someone can view their future by seeing their possible, then that means their future would be dictated by the possible, the genetic make-up from which they come. It's a more individualized predetermined future than the organ donations, but it is still predetermined.

The clones' attitude towards the possibles connects with Kathy's feelings of being sexually grotesque because she believes that if her possible is a sexual person that this accounts for her sexual urges. Kathy scans pornographic magazines to determine if the women in them look like her. Kathy never finds a possible in the magazines, as it's an impossible search. But to some, pornography might be an appropriate place to look, considering the social stigmatization attached to it. Ruth, upon learning her office worker possible is not related, explodes, "We're modeled from *trash*. Junkies, prostitutes, winos, tramps. Convicts, maybe, just so long as they aren't psycho. That's what we come from. We all know it, so why don't we say it? ... If you want to look for possible, if you want to do it properly, then you look in the gutter. You look in rubbish bins. Look down the toilet, that's where you'll find where we all came from" (166).

There's logic to Ruth's diatribe. As a disposable body, Ruth sees herself as part of a heritage of "disposable" groups who are kept outside the bounds of "civil" society and often refused the type of social support they would benefit from, as Western societies like the United States often emphasize the punitive over the rehabilitative. This relates to a troublesome eugenics argument, the notion that selective reproductive can help prevent social ills, which was popular during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. Because it was believed that "human mental,

temperamental, and moral traits were determined by heredity,” there was broad appeal for the eugenicists’ arguments that “society ought to foster the breeding of those who possessed favorable traits (‘positive’ or ‘constructive’ eugenics) and discourage or prevent the breeding of those who did not (‘negative’ eugenics) seemed obviously to follow” (Paul 1).¹⁴ While some early eugenicists encouraged the state to support eugenics movements, “Almost no one today would profess such a belief. Indeed, the dominant view is now its opposite: that the nature of reproductive decisions should be no concern of the state” (Paul 71). *Never Let Me Go* isn’t about eugenics in the strictest sense, but it does carry elements of it. For example, the clones cannot reproduce, which is negative eugenics writ large: rather than discouraging the undesirable clones to reproduce, they take away the option. In this light, as well as the notion that the state has a vested interests in creating the clones, the novel moves away from the dominant view that reproductive decisions are best left to the individual and places this power back in the hands of the state. The clones are so undesirable as to be below the homeless or most convicts, who still retain control over their reproductive systems. While the nature of the relationship between eugenics and the clones is complicated by the ontological differences between clones and humans, “All eugenicists shared at least one conviction: that reproductive decisions should be guided by social concerns” (Paul 72). Despite the speculative world of the clones, it does mirror contemporary concerns over eugenics, as “some have argued that eugenics is being revived by our increased ability to choose the kind of children we want” (133). Medical geneticists argue that their work is different. They “tend to insist on a narrow definition of eugenics; for them, eugenics implies state interference with reproductive decisions. Such definitions sharply distinguish eugenics from medical genetics” (133). The geneticists’ disavowal of a relationship

¹⁴ Negative eugenics has at times been forced on poor and minority populations.

to eugenics may be reasonable, but the fact that the disavowal needs to be made makes it clear that eugenics are on at least some people's minds in relation to medical genetics. Whether Ruth believes, or is even aware, of the particularities of eugenics' history and practice, she is speaking from a position of powerlessness, and she thus situates herself within a community or heritage of the powerless in relation to eugenics.¹⁵ Ruth is a disposal commodity, whose organs are harvested until she expires. If she could have children, her children would be birthed by natural means, which would erode the only biological distinction between clones and humans. This would trouble the ability of the state to utilize clones as commodities and give the clones reasons for resistance. Ruth's acknowledgement that "psychos," whether mental or moral, would be unfit to be cloned coincides with negative eugenics interest in disallowing some people to reproduce.¹⁶ Leonard Cassuto notes that the grotesque can be used to depict the iniquities heaped upon the lower classes. He writes,

[Jack] London uses the grotesque to try to make a visceral impact on an order that links humanity to social station, and which keeps the lower orders from living like the human beings they are ... The grotesque in London's hands therefore becomes a hard-hitting social tool with which to attack the moneyed interests who are ruining the lives of the innocents. In effect, London is willing to sacrifice the humanity of some of these innocents, a loss taken in the interest of exposing the inequities of the system. ("Jack London's Class-Based Grotesque" 123–124)

¹⁵ See pages 164-165 for more on eugenics.

¹⁶ Furthermore, it's not clear who gets the clones' organs, but it's currently the case that rich or upper class citizens have unequal access to positive eugenics/geneticists.

In this context, Ruth and her peers, who associate their possibles with the lower classes and who are considered undesirable among humans are metaphorically sacrificed to highlight an environment wherein the lower classes are considered expendable.

Shadowy Objects

The clones are not actually sacrificed until they are adults. This may be partially because it would be more difficult for humans to countenance the use of child clones, and it may also be because the organs of children aren't yet fully grown. As adult clones, Kathy takes care of Ruth, who wants to set up Kathy and Tommy. Ruth believes she kept them apart when they were younger, so she tracks down Marie-Claude's address and gives it to Kathy. Her hope is that a rumor that Hailsham students in love can defer donations for a few years to be with each other is true. When Ruth dies, Kathy eventually becomes Tommy's carer and they develop a relationship. Kathy tells Tommy about Marie-Claude and they concoct a plan to get away from the hospital for the day to approach Marie-Claude. When they confront Marie-Claude, they also encounter their old headmistress, Miss Emily. Miss Emily reveals that she and Marie-Claude were part of a movement to treat clones more humanely. She argues that they protected the Hailsham clones from the "worst of those horrors" involving the deplorable conditions other clones are raised in. She states,

Most importantly, we demonstrated to the world that if students were reared in humane, cultivated environments, it was possible for them to grow to be as sensitive and intelligent as any ordinary human being. Before that, all clones—or *students*, as we preferred to call you—existed only to supply medical science. In the early days after the war, that's largely all you were to most people. Shadowy objects in test tubes. (261)

Despite the accomplishment of Hailsham and institutions like it, it ultimately fails to effect any large scale changes. In fact, by this time in the narrative, Hailsham and other more humanist schools have closed. The failure of Miss Emily's vision can be seen in Miss Emily's description of the clones "as sensitive and intelligent *as* any ordinary human being" [italics added]. She keeps the clones positioned as other, regardless of their similarity. This is especially problematic because it reveals a failure on the part of Miss Emily's humanist ideology, which seeks to establish the humanity of the clones without granting them status as humans. Miss Emily may prefer to call clones students in an attempt to emphasize the ability of the clones to thrive under a humanistic education emphasizing the arts, but Miss Emily's inability to see them as human reveals the crucial flaw in the plan. If the clones' most vocal supporters, that we know of, are unable to fundamentally imagine the clones as anything but, then they remain unable to convince the clones' greatest adversaries. Yet Miss Emily and her ilk do seem able to claim a tangible success. If all clones were thought of as "medical supplies," as "shadowy objects in test tubes," then the clones have been humanized despite their ongoing objectification. The clones' objectification is inverted from the other children discussed in this dissertation. In other chapters, humans are dehumanized, in whole or part. In *Never Let Me Go*, according to Miss Emily, objects are humanized. The commodity status isn't the result of the imposition of value onto humans, but instead remains with the clones as elements of humanity are gradually attributed to them. At the same time, however, the movement towards recognizing the humanity of the clones seems short-lived. Their social well-being is currently being sacrificed as the humanist schools close. This seems to indicate that clones are once-again being turned into "shadowy objects." The descriptor "shadowy" is especially appropriate in light of this chapter's contention that the clones are grotesque. The shadowy nature of the clones gets at the uncertainty regarding the

clones. A shadowy object in a test tube is difficult to make out. Its exact nature is uncertain. Shadows also instill fear, representing the unseen and unknown, and thus provide a metaphor for the fear that Marie-Claude and others feel in the presence of the clones. The shadow also connects to the world of Hailsham and of carers and donors. The clones exist in a second world, a shadow of the wider world. The clones' world is no less real than the humans' world, but they are kept separate. This allows the humans to willfully keep themselves in the dark regarding the clones, who are kept out of sight. The clones may no longer be "shadowy objects in test tubes," but they are still objectified and kept out of sight within specific, acceptable places. Miss Emily notes, "However uncomfortable people were about your existence," that their overriding concern was their own families (263). "So for a long time you were kept in the shadows," Miss Emily explains, "and people did their best not to think about you. And if they did, they tried to convince themselves you weren't really like us. That you were less than human, so it didn't matter" and that so long as students were forced to donate, "there would always be a barrier against seeing you as properly human" (263). The clones inspire discomfort because they remind humans of themselves. Humans have to convince themselves of the clones' difference because this allows humans the willful ignorance necessary to commodify clones and reap the benefit. Those crusading on behalf of the clones lose ground due to experiments that demonstrate children can be born with "enhanced characteristics." This scares people even more than the clones used for donation. Humans "recoiled" from that (263–264). This leads to the corporations and politicians supporting Hailsham to withdraw their support: "they didn't want to think about you students, or the conditions you were brought up in. In other words, my dears, they wanted you back in the shadows" (264–265). The tenuous nature of Hailsham and other institutions interested in the social good, whatever faults they may have, is emblematic of the precarious nature of social

institutions when moral imperatives, such as supporting society's most imperiled citizens, are at the fickle whims of corporate and government interests, especially neoliberal governments who gradually disinvest in social programs.

In spite of her support of the clones, Miss Emily, like Marie-Claude, fears them: "We're *all* afraid of you," Miss Emily says, "I myself had to fight back dread of you almost every day I was at Hailsham. There were times I'd look down at you from my study and I'd feel such revulsion ... But I was determined not to let such feelings stop me doing what was right" (269). The revulsion Miss Emily feels, like Marie-Claude, demonstrates the grotesque nature of the clones in the eyes of humans. The clones are positioned as inferior to human to justify the way in which the clones are used. At the same time, they clearly are human, or at least resemble humans so thoroughly that it makes humans uncomfortable with the clones. This is why they must be kept in the shadows, so that people can forget about the ways in which the clones challenge their definitions of humanity and the widespread exploitation of the clones. According to Leon Kass, we feel repugnance and revulsion towards cloning as "an emotional expression of deep wisdom" in that cloning is rife with potential for abuse and is inherently *wrong* (20).¹⁷ Miss Emily is able to work with the clones in spite of her feelings of revulsion because she focuses on their rights. Perhaps Miss Emily doesn't see clones as fully human, but the better life Miss Emily seeks to win for the clones wouldn't be a necessity if the clones didn't remind Miss Emily and her supports of humans. Black notes that the novel expresses "concerns about the state of England and ... transnational fears about rising inequality" (785). The clones represent a permanent underclass locked into roles as exploited caregivers, whose ability to make decisions is circumscribed by their environment (Elliot). Lisa Fluett observes that immaterial laborers, those

¹⁷ I agree with the former concern, that cloning may be abused, but not the latter one, that cloning is inherently wrong.

who work but do not produce tangible products, have “no future in Ishiguro’s novels” but that this “enables their more ethical approach to the demands of the present” (268). This also allows readers to consider our own immaterial labor in the present, without hope for a better future (285). In this sense, the inevitability of Kathy’s death, and the accompanying loss of her memories of Tommy and Ruth, speak to a harsh truth outside the novel: a world that accepts the commodification of individuals and their disposability is a cruel world indeed. What future do any of us have in such a time and place?

Unsettling Language: Grotesque Description in *The Flame Alphabet*

Introduction

Ben Marcus' 2012 novel *The Flame Alphabet* takes place in a world where language becomes toxic to adults. Poisonous language is first attributed solely to children but eventually encompasses all speech and written communication, no matter who produces it. The language plague's effects are monstrous: it breaks down a person's body, causing an "intolerable squeezing in the chest and the hips" (4), and an unyielding lethargy. Tongues harden, faces become "slightly smaller" (22). Bodies decompose into pillars of salt. The novel's main characters are Sam, his wife Claire, and their daughter Esther. The novel is divided into three parts, all of them from Sam's perspective. In the first part, Sam recounts the plague's onset and the disconnect between himself and his daughter. The second part explores Sam's time at a compound where adults experiment to come up with new ways of communicating and counteracting the devastating effects of the plague. These tests are conducted on children and other adults. The third part follows Sam, now outside of the compound, as he seeks to reunite with his family.

Critical reviews of the novel are mixed, but these mixed reviews all address, to a greater or lesser degree, Marcus' imaginative prose. *The New York Times* review calls Marcus' sentences "excessive" (Lennon); *NPR*'s review agrees, calling entire sections "superfluous" (Diamond). These negative comments come after disclaimers that stylistic prowess is generally one of Marcus' strengths. *The Guardian* review, on the other hand, praises the "cold beauty of [his] prose" (Lezard); and the review from the *Los Angeles Times* asserts "there are rich pleasures in Marcus's words" and that Marcus is "wildly inventive in his imagery" (Barton). The emphasis on Marcus' vivid prose is in line with his positioning as a writer. His work is

categorized as experimental and he authored a piece for *Harper's* where he seeks to carve out a place for experimental fiction amid the dominance of literary realism by emphasizing experimental fiction's capacity to challenge readers and stimulate critical thinking ("Why Experimental Fiction Threatens to Destroy Publishing, Jonathan Franzen, and Life as We Know It.").

Marcus' imagery often utilizes the aesthetics of the grotesque. In doing so, the novel's imagery breaks down traditional classifications between human and nonhuman, and it provides the diegetic space where abstract concepts like the grotesque are imprinted onto physical bodies, transforming them. These grotesque transformations most pointedly mark the plague victims; but they also metaphorically represent the willingness of people to behave in grotesque fashion.

The Grotesque

Shung-Liang Chao argues that metaphor is what makes "the grotesque, which is primarily visual or pictorial ... also verbal" (14). Chao's comparative study of Crashaw, Baudelaire, and Magritte situates the grotesque as "a corporeal, or flesh-made, metaphor which produces within itself (and within the reader/viewer's response) intellectual uncertainty, emotional disharmony, and hermeneutic indeterminacy" (14). Chao understands the grotesque "as a metaphor whose literalness tampers with its structural unity or totality" (14). Chao's emphasis on the grotesque as a metaphor is predicated on the bodily aspect of the grotesque. Ewa Kurlyuk situates visual metaphors in relation to the grotesque, which corresponds to her emphasis on art. She argues, "The creation of metaphors in language corresponds to the formation of images in the visual arts, and every artist who does not simply reproduce a visible reality but conveys a symbolic meaning plays with metaphors" (71). Geoffrey Galt Harpham connects myth and metaphor. He writes, "At the margin of figurative metaphor and literal myth

lies the grotesque, both and neither, a mingling and a unity” (53). Harpham sees boundary crossing as central to myth, such as when animals marry like humans. This provides the rationale for myth’s connection to the boundary crossing of the grotesque. Dieter Meindl also situate the grotesque in relation to metaphor. Drawing upon the work of Paul Riceour, Meindl writes, “The kinship between metaphor and the grotesque should be noted ... [Paul Riceour] emphasizes the factor of categorical transgression in metaphor, which results in a redescription and redistribution of reality. The grotesque conflates categories and is notable for the effect of defamiliarization and estrangement it produces in the reader” (81). Metaphor and the grotesques share the ability to conflate categories and estrange readers, and metaphors are ideally suited to the literary grotesque because they are predicated on the yoking together of disparate elements to provide fresh insight into things. The notion that the grotesque involves metaphors with physical structures that resist classification resonates deeply with how the abstract struggle between social and economic worth transforms bodies.¹ The emphasis on metaphor is especially appropriate in relation to the powerfully evocative imagery of *The Flame Alphabet*. While not all its stunning images are metaphors, the effects of language on the body and the unique and sometimes horrifying images often generate their power through comparison. The novel is about grotesque transformations, both physically and psychologically. These grotesque transformations are brought on, literally, through language, and the text uses unsettling description as a way to embody this strange but familiar world. While the grotesque metaphors are not always corporeal, the children, for example, are not physically grotesque even though they are compared to animals, the novel draws its power from evocative and grotesque imagery.

Esther as grotesque

¹ See pages 26-27 for more on how the grotesque embodies this tension.

The association of children with animals predates the onset of the language plague. Early in the book, Sam recounts a time when he was with his family at a picnic. At the picnic, “kids would devour their food” before they “formed a roving pack, moving like one of those clusters of birds that seem to share a single, frantic brain” (27). “A roving pack” connotes animals like dogs or wolves. The image of the bird cluster is another animal comparison, and it highlights groups that operate as a single unit (which hunting canines may also do): multiple individuals functioning as a single unit. There is, of course, a significant difference between kids moving “like” a cluster of birds and of being such a cluster, a difference of comparative degree. The simile lacks the direct yoking together of the metaphor. Here, “like” is comparative, but it also simultaneously asserts children’s autonomy. Children may be behaving as part of a cluster without individual autonomy, but their individuality is still her own; they are not animals, just like them. This becomes complicated, however, when the book later depicts children harming others. The references to pack and cluster mix animal metaphors regarding biological type, but they share an emphasis on nonhuman animals acting on instinct rather than emphasizing individuality. For this reason, Sam’s adolescent daughter, Esther, refuses to play with the other youths. She tells her parents, “I’m not an animal. I don’t follow people around simply because their asses smell good to me” (28). Esther’s rebuke encapsulates a disaffected teen’s angst. Her rebuke also rejects behavior that impinges on her distinct personhood. Esther does not want to be someone who follows the crowd; especially a crowd predicated on instinct. However, Esther begins to take on the pack mentality as the novel progresses.

As adults begin getting sick from language, Esther and the relationship she has with her parents transforms. Her parents start hiding from her, as if she’s a monster or animal predator. At one point, Sam and Claire sit on the bathroom floor for “what felt like hours” until Esther goes to

bed: “Only then was it safe to come out” (40). Esther’s transformation into a monster, as something her parents fear, is later connected to the animality that Esther initially rejects. As children and adolescents begin actively harming adults, they are increasingly described as animals. They form “feral pack[s]” that attack strangers by yelling and screaming at them, “And together, when they spoke in unison on their nighttime tours, their weapon was worse” (54). Later on, Sam and another man are caught outside when a group of children approach:

A din rose out of the north field beyond the school, and as the sound bloomed it grew piercing, wretchedly clear, borne so quickly on the wind, we shuddered when it hit. Voice-like, childlike, a cluster of speech blaring out of the field. The sound crushed out my air. Behind the noise ran a pack of kids, so shadowed and small at that distance, they looked like animals springing across the field. Coming right toward us. In front of them came a wall of speech so foul I felt myself burning. (74)

This troubling moment continues the metaphor of the children as nonhuman, as monstrous animals trampling adults underfoot. They are again a pack, who spring rather than walk. While they are still “like” animals, their “cluster of speech” is now also “childlike,” which metaphorically positions the children as neither animals nor children, but like animals and children; now they are truly something in-between. Markus P.J. Bohlmann and Sean Moreland discuss the term “childlike” in the introduction to their anthology on monstrous children in cinema. They argue the adjective is “imaginatively empowering,” as opposed to the adjective “childish,” which is an “infantilizing” description (14). Because of the preexisting connotations of the preceding terms, Bohlmann and Moreland thus propose “childness” as a way of apprehending the “elusive quiddity” of the child and the way it is perceived, while providing

distance from “the reality of *actual* children” (15–16). “Childness,” then, is about how society imagines children to be and what qualities it ascribes to them, without describing actual children. It is important to understand that children’s lived experiences are not the same as theoretical understandings. At the same time, theory does shape people’s perceptions of children, both in their day-to-day interactions and the way in which they discuss children, such as in political arenas. Separating the theoretical child from the actual child does provide clarity; at the same time, however, divorcing them too much may make it more difficult to understand how theory and practice intersect. Nonetheless, Bohlmann and Moreland’s proposal is compelling, even though I choose not to employ their term. Their distinction between “childish” and “childlike,” however, is worth further examination. “Childish” is an infantilizing pejorative because it embodies regression. Idealized attributes like innocence which are associated with childhood cannot be re-attained. Calling someone “childish” is in essence an assertion that a person has gained no knowledge or perspective despite their loss of innocence and exposure to the wider world: a poor trade. Calling someone “childlike” (as opposed to “like a child,” which is sometimes closer in meaning to “childish”) is a more neutral descriptor which depends upon what is “childlike” about him or her. Bohlmann and Moreland assertion that the term is imaginatively empowering focuses on the idealized child, but “childlike” depends on the quality for its positive or negative connotations. For example, saying someone has a childlike imagination is an association with a positive quality. This bestows on a person a desirable attribute that stays with him or her despite maturation and its corresponding knowledge and perspective. Saying someone has a childlike temper, is an association with a negative quality, which ideally should have been shed as one matures and learns how to better control themselves. Of course, when *The Flame Alphabet* tells us that the “cluster of speech” was “voice-like,

childlike,” it’s functioning differently from Bohlmann and Moreland’s description. It shows the ontological slippage between the animalistic children, who, at this moment, are closer to animals behaving as humans. The difference in Marcus’ usage of childlike compared to Bohlmann and Moreland’s isn’t a critique of Bohlmann and Moreland’s assessment; rather, the difference helps illustrate the conceptual baggage that Marcus is unpacking in such a brief comparison.

Describing animalistic children as “childlike” divorces children from their privileged status in the social imagination. Everything the children do could reasonably be described as “childlike” because children are doing it. At the same time, describing children as animals who sound childlike is a comparative move that both divorces children from, and points out, their ontological underpinnings. In doing so, the novel asserts the constructed and ambiguous nature of both language and childhood. Here children exist in between the world of animal and human, fully residing in neither.

This ambiguity resurfaces in subsequent descriptions of Esther. The reader learns that Esther is part of the child mob. One kid catches a man and attacks him with speech. The attack is described “as if a cattle prod shot electricity from [the boy’s] mouth” (75). But the attacking boy is actually Esther: “When the boy stood up we saw his face in the streetlight, so long and solemn and awful to behold. Except the kid wasn’t a boy. It was my Esther. Her hair was wild and she wore an outfit I didn’t recognize, some long coat that was too big on her” (75). Esther’s grotesque transformation into something not fully human becomes so complete that she is initially unrecognizable to her own father. Her wild hair and unfamiliar, ill-fitting coat speak to the transition of Esther from alienated daughter to feral other. Her transformation is imprinted upon her body and clothing, which can now be read as a metaphor for her ontological shift. Of course, the children are not literally transformed into part human/part animal. This ontological

blurring is created through the extended use of comparisons. It's also interesting the violence is gendered male, even though a female commits it.² This suggests a further blurring between notions of masculinity and femininity, even though the subversion of this binary division is not maintained throughout the novel.

The comparison of the children to animals is sustained throughout the novel. When Sam sees a video of children in a community without adults. He narrates,

One's first assumption of a child-run community, supervision-free, calls up wolflike youngsters crawling through dirty hallways, eating each other's torsos with lazy relish. But the evidence I reviewed presented a subdued crowd. The children, in the footage we had, their faces turned bland by the editor [so no one could see their lips move and thereby harm themselves], had set up a long table with plates. They raced across a room, bringing supplies to this table, then sat down to eat. But with their features smoothed over they seemed to be spooning food into the blurry holes of their necks. (181)

Sam's acknowledgement that one might assume unsupervised children would behave as animals coincides with the way in which he's thought of Esther and other children throughout the book. The fact that the children in the monitor are behaving "civilized," by sitting down to eat dinner together rather than cannibalizing each other, doesn't undo the earlier comparisons; rather it emphasizes the complex and contested nature of childhood. The comparison of children to animals is a way of understanding the sometimes disconcerting behavior of children and the fearsome changes upending the world. This is partly why the ontological blurring of the animal/human, and, later, human/object, resonate so strongly: they upend categories and

² Though the novel doesn't engage with the female grotesque specifically, this could be a moment where it coincides with such discussions. See pages 145-148 and 191-192.

hierarchies within a world that seems thoroughly upended or altered. The novel's diegetic space, one of collapsing order, both informs and is informed by its characters.

The animal comparisons eventually extend beyond children. Sam, for example, receives a package from an associate named Murphy which includes some materials from LeBov. LeBov is supposedly someone studying the language plague. Murphy is the man who Sam later goes to Forsythe to work on curing the plague with, where it's revealed that LeBov is a cover identity used by Murphy and his associates that they use to publish information regarding the plague under. The materials Sam receives, known as *The Proofs*, include drawings where "germs were people or beasts, and viruses looked like the world seen from miles away. Speech from the faces of children was rendered in ugly rushes of color, with each color coded to some kind of distress" (81). *The Proofs* association of the plague's germs with "people *or* beasts" [italics added] seems to differentiate distinctly between human and animal. In reality, it continues the association between these two diverse groups. "Or," in this case, conjoins the terms. It can be one or the other. The drawings of both human and beasts are adequate for depicting plague bearers; they are almost interchangeable in this context. But this isn't literally true. Beasts, lacking the capacity for language based communication, do not spread the plague. The "beasts" are metaphors for the people, and both terms are visual metaphors for germs. The use of "people" encompasses more age groups than children and extends the blame for the plague's progression to all humans. The novel later admits this more specifically, as it reveals, "The toxicity had spread beyond children" (116), but the *The Proofs* movement from depicting germs as "people or beasts" to showing the "ugly rushes of color" coming from children resituates the plague as primarily child-based. Nonetheless, this moment starts to expand the connection of the metaphor of the chaotic other to people aside from children, and foreshadows future events, such as when Sam and Claire's town

is evacuated. Claire flees the car she is in because she cannot leave Esther behind. But there are people with dogs sweeping the area to make sure no one stays behind. “From the woods trotted a pack of dogs,” the novel reads, “like old men in animal suits, barking with human voices. Behind them trudged a human chain of jumpsuited rescuers, arms linked so they’d miss no one” (142). The term “pack” is now directly associated with animals, as opposed to people behaving like animals, but now the animals are like humans. Dogs like old men pretending to be dogs. The comparison of dogs to men dressed as dogs is practically an ouroboros of a metaphor. It circles around on itself. The novel compares humans to animals, and then compares animals to humans behaving as animals. It’s also appropriate that the subsequent image is of a human chain, or humans behaving as an object.

Esther’s ontological shift from human child to feral other is initially predicated on comparisons of herself, and other children, to animals. But once this association is made, the novel mostly foregoes the animal comparisons in favor of a variety of other dehumanizing moments that position children as transformed and dangerous. For example, Sam notes, “Esther had changed. Her face was older, harder. Filthy from her outings, but spectacularly beautiful. Of course I must think this, I’m her father. Fathers do not easily succumb to assessments of ugliness where their children are concerned. Esther had never been a cute child, but she’d grown threateningly stunning in the last few months” (99). On its own, this doesn’t position Esther as grotesque; when combined with Esther being situated as monstrous other, it reaffirms such a reading because the recollection also resonates with the transformative aspects of adolescence. Esther is at that age where she’s leaving childhood behind. Diegetically, however, the fear is based on Esther’s chaotic behavior and dangerous impulses in relation to the language plague. Esther is filthy presumably because she has been attacking adults and roaming in packs, rather

than staying at home. She is now “threateningly stunning” which takes the motif of the awkward child growing into their bodies and, perhaps, worrying parents about potential romantic interest from their child’s peers, and uses the language as a direct referent to Esther’s capacity for damage. Esther’s speech is threatening and literally stuns adults into submission.

When the plague gets worse, Sam searches for Murphy, hoping for some answers. As he’s driving, his car is struck by something. He narrates, “A pack of children tore across a yard, fled from sight. I locked my doors” (117). He feels his car lifting, and revs the engines, but something blocks the car. Next, “One of them pressed his little face into the driver’s side window, so close. He smiled, his lips moving, as if he were singing. With his finger he tapped on the glass, made a twirling motion for me to roll down the window. His hands formed a posture of prayer under his chin and I believe he mimed the word *please*” (117). Sam lays on the gas and is able to drive over “whatever had been blocking [the car]” (117). In his rearview mirror he sees “them ... they formed a circle, went to their knees and that was all I saw” (117). Sam’s constant refusal to use the term child or children, or to confront the fact that what is stuck underneath his car is a child—not animal road-kill or an object—marks the full-scale conversion of children to things in his mind. The animal comparisons are minimal here, just one ambiguous use of “pack,” but the danger they pose is salient. This danger is predicated on the appeal to innocence from the child at the car window. His smile, pretend prayer, and miming of “please,” are all things a normal child might do to get their way; and they also manufacture an image of an innocent child that belies the danger he represents at this moment. The child is appealing to a different, less harmful, conception of childhood than the chaotic one to try and draw the adult out. In the novel’s terms, however, this goes against the child’s nature, animalistic and violent, and highlights an additional danger: the child can deceive others by drawing upon idealized

depictions of childhood.³ The child can draw upon what adults imagine children to be before revealing his or her true, dangerous selves.

The fears over the grotesque nature of Esther and the other children are historically aligned with the Puritan discourse on childhood, which asserts that children require shaping and regulation because their natural instincts are animalistic and chaotic.⁴ Other scholars affirm the Puritan connection between children and beasts. Daniel Cook, in his history of the American clothing industry and the dialectical relationship between clothing manufacturers and children, writes “Infants were seen as a danger to both the cosmic and social orders, their crawling placing them in postural proximity to members of the animal kingdom” (28). The idea that crawling children are bestial situates some of their natural impulses as animalistic, which is the same rhetoric which *The Flame Alphabet* draws on in its depiction of animalistic children. Furthermore, the Puritan legacy contains ambivalent “hope and fear” for the future that the Puritans saw embodied in children. Mintz observes,

Beginning in the 1660s and 1670s, Puritan presses and pulpits produced a stream of jeremiads lamenting the sins of the rising generation and the degeneration of the young from the religion and godliness of their forebears. Young people were made to carry an awesome psychological burden. Morality, religion, indeed the future, depended on them. In secularized form, it is this mixture of hope and fear about the rising generation that remains Puritanism’s most lasting legacy. (31)

The lament over the degeneration of children may be cliché to contemporary audiences, but the notion that children are emblematic of the future is as prominent as ever.⁵

³ See pages 1-12 for a discussion of childhood innocence.

⁴ See pages 5-12 for a discussion of chaotic children.

⁵ This is part of the reason why scholars, like Henry Giroux and Cindi Katz, who study childhood in relation to neoliberalism are so concerned by the lack of investment in children.

Whether religious or secular, attitudes toward children include the idea that they represent the future, good or bad, but these futures are always extrapolations of the present. Lamenting the degradation of a generation is to assign that generation responsibility for contemporary changes that may seem intimidating or fearsome to adults. In *The Flame Alphabet*, parents cannot control their children, and the result is catastrophic; children discipline adults, and they do so in seemingly capricious fashion. Parents seem to know little about contemporary childhood and adolescence, despite having experienced these stages in the past. Sam and Claire initially do their best to relate to Esther, but she will have none of it. The parents' emotional labor is lost in a void of rejection and thinly-veiled animosity. Yet they keep giving until their physical health no longer allows for it because Esther's language, and the language of all children, physically breaks them down.⁶ Adults then begin sacrificing children in the hope they can save themselves. This coincides with another shift, as the novel, although initially positing the children as dangerous, alters its trajectory and associates monstrous behavior with adults.

Grotesque adults

The grotesque, yet pitiful appearance of the adults is due to the breakdown of their bodies due to their exposure to the language of children. This gives the parents a monstrous appearance. For example, Claire, Sam's wife and Esther's mother, is described as having a "face ... the weight of clay" and when she smiles, Sam sees "... a shadow had spread under her gums, a darkness inside her mouth" (98; 99). She has "a dry body ... rank-smelling hair, [a] bruised neck" and wears a mouth guard "to keep her from gnashing into the exposed nerve pulp of her teeth" (132). The "darkness" residing in Claire's mouth, and her disgusting hair and exposed

⁶ Leslie Fiedler writes that we initially encounter "Freaks not as creatures from elsewhere but as monstrous children born into their own families" (229). Though the children *The Flame Alphabet* aren't coded as freaks (eventually everyone's language is toxic), the notion that parents initially encounter the monstrous other in "their own families" resonates.

“nerve pulp” positions her as monstrous, yes, but even more specifically as a zombie.⁷ The decomposing mouth, combined with the emphasis on the gnashing teeth and the inability to prevent them from doing harm is reminiscent of zombies. Indeed, Claire is literally the walking dead: her lethargy and decomposition cause her to move slowly and spend much of her time in bed, uncommunicative. She doesn’t live so much as exist in a state of perpetually worsening decay. Outside Forsythe, the place where experiments are taking place in the hopes of recovering some form of language and finding a cure for the plague, “hordes of people sought entrance ... A mob of bodies swelled before the gate as if suspended in emulsion” (168). This horde is evocative of zombie imagery in contemporary narratives. The bodies of the adults become horrifying, but the monstrosity of the adults is also emblematic of the way in which Marcus explores the slippage between language and meaning. For example, there are hints that the monstrous adults can be associated with vampires too. There is Claire’s bruised neck, which isn’t unique to vampires or their victims, but is more directly associated with them than zombies. An early description of the plague’s onset compares it to a bite: “At first we thought we were bitten. Something had landed on our backs and sucked on us. Now we would perish” (14). The vector for the disease and the subsequent lethargy Sam and Claire experience is tied up in the draining of their essence, which they think is caused by a bite. The vampirism metaphor resonates in other ways. The temporary reprieve developed at Forsythe involves draining the essence of children, which is similar to what the children do to the adults with their speech. When Sam first sees a demonstration of an adult person able to withstand the deleterious effects of speech, that adult is with a child, and there is “a bag of *fluid*” that “dangled from the little neck of the child,

⁷ Another way to understand the lack of teeth in the larger context of this project could be as a metaphor for the malnourishment associated with poverty, however, within the specific context of the novel, the parents appear upper-middle class.

puckering from his skin into the tube. From this it flowed directly into the man. Allowing him to speak, one presumed. *A fluid drawn directly from the child*” (*The Flame Alphabet* 192). The withdrawal of the children’s fluids for the sustenance of adults (from their neck, no less) is metaphorically vampiric. The adult is even dressed in a tuxedo, “*almost a gentlemen*” (191), which coincides with aristocratic depictions of vampires. The vampiric sacrifice of the children is an inversion from the first section of the book, where Esther, as a standoff-ish adolescent, metaphorically drains her parents’ vitality.

The simultaneous comparison to both zombies and vampires is the result of the intentional disconnect between language and meaning that Marcus employs to show the difficulties that arise when language lacks a clear referent and communication breaks down. The novel asserts the problematic relationship between language and indexicality. For Derrida and subsequent post-structuralist accounts of language, all communication involves some sort of spacing: the discrepancy between a sign and its referent (Bennett 75). Marcus plays within that space. Vampires and zombies are different creatures, but, in the context of the narrative, it doesn’t matter. Both are creatures that feed on others and so they provide enough of the right meaning that Marcus can slide between different signifiers. Animals and children are different, but they have some conceptual connections, so Marcus bridges that space. He still asserts the slippage between language and meaning. When Sam confronts LeBov (previously known as Murphey) about Lebov faking his own death, LeBov shrugs it off by saying, “Look, that’s nothing. That’s cosmetic. Not even cosmetic. I moved around some grains of sand. Or not even that. I can’t invent a small enough metaphor for what I’ve done. It’s that insignificant. It adds some maneuverability, that’s all. Some spaces open up” (127). LeBov’s description of his faked death speaks to post-structuralist accounts of language and the fallibility of communication.

LeBov's fake death being "the last story before the blackout" (127) speaks to the failure of the media as a form of communication. The inability to provide a metaphor small enough to describe an action is perhaps downplaying the incident; LeBov did, after all, fake his death. But it also involves his inability to find in language an adequate comparison for his behavior. He can't find a sign in a sea of signs. LeBov's description of his trick opening up space to maneuver also speaks to the book's play with language.

The space between language and meaning is also embodied in the religion Sam and Claire practice. They are what's known as "Forest Jews," who worship in small huts or holes which contain a transmission coming from underground from a Rabbi Burke. This secretive worship is meant, in part, to keep others from hearing the sermons. Sam narrates,

The true Jewish teaching is not for a wide consumption, is not for groups, is not to be polluted by even a single gesture of communication. Spreading messages dilutes them. Even *understanding* them is a compromise. The language kills itself, expires inside its host. Language acts as an acid over its message. If you no longer care about an idea or feeling, then put it into language. (44)

If communication pollutes the Jewish teachings, then it is because it cannot adequately embody or express the teachings; their dissemination "dilutes them." That language obstructs communication, is "an acid over its message," is contrary to what people value most about language, which is its ability to convey messages or help one express oneself. This creates a situation where communication does violence to the message; an idea mirrored in the destructive capacity of language within the novel. The space between language and meaning, it seems, can be one of exploration and experimentation, but it can also be dangerous because it's an area of distortion.

Although the Sam and Esther practice an invented branch of Judaism, it does draw upon the Jewish tradition, specifically in its invocation of the golem. The golem is a construct of mud and/or clay animated through language. A golem may have a word written on its head or a piece of paper with the name of God inserted in its mouth. Removing the word deactivates the golem. The golem may also serve as a protector. When Esther's mother, a practicing Jewish woman, is described as having a "face ... the weight of clay" it also evokes the Jewish golem (98). The Golem reference highlights the space between human and monster. Golems are anthropomorphized creatures. They appear in human shape but are not human, which has thematic similarities to the grotesque. This is why they look fearsome and is similar to the uncanny valley effect, where beings who appear too similar to humans are disturbing. The golem also raises the issue of individuality that Esther first brought up with her rejection of her peers. The golem serves others and lacks the capacity to shape their own destiny. In this way, it provides an inchoate metaphor for the relationship between parents and children. Golems, though they are intended to serve as protectors, are also capable of violence and destruction. Children are ostensibly guided by their parents, but in *The Flame Alphabet* Esther initially rules her parents. Yet as the novel progresses the parents reassert their dominance over their children. Adults transition from unappreciated protectors to the destroyers of children, a transformation depicted through Sam.

Marcus' text constantly explores the changing nature of people and how they shift categories. In addition to the monstrous metaphors used to describe the appearance of the adults, their monstrosity also surfaces in their behavior, as Sam shifts from victim to victimizer. In this way, the monstrous appearance of the adults becomes a grotesque metaphor with dual resonance: adults are both grotesque subjects and objects, capable of exerting agency in grotesque ways and

transforming into grotesque creatures via exposure to the plague. The plague doesn't just transform the bodies of adults, though it certainly does that. It also causes some to engage in horrific behavior.

The grotesque behavior of the adults begins small, before reaching its horrific crescendo. When the plague starts, Sam engages in what he calls "smallwork." He constantly measures and tests what he can, hoping to find ways to find out the causes and effects of the plague to contain its damages. His "smallwork" eventually encompasses his attempts at Forsythe to create a new language, as well as his extraction of children's essence. Initially, he runs tests on Claire, but Claire stops willingly participating. Sam observes, "Claire retired as my test subject. She stopped appearing in the kitchen for night treatments, declined the new smoke. When I served infused milk she fastened her mouth shut. If she accepted medicine from me she did so unwittingly, asleep, whimpering when the needle went in" (97). Claire sends a clear message that she no longer wishes to partake in his "smallwork," but Sam continues with some of the experiments anyway. Calling his concoctions "medicine" implies a palliative effect that belies the amateur and speculative nature of his "smallwork." Saying Claire unwittingly accepts the medicine is euphemistic, at best. Her earlier actions indicate she clearly rejects his tests, and she cannot accept something, even unwittingly, she is unconscious for. The "whimpering" registers her discomfort with what's happening, even in sleep. Sam's penetration of an unwilling Claire with a needle metaphorically registers as rape. He is denied consent but does what he wants, regardless.

Sam's transformation into a monster continues. As Sam and Claire become increasingly sick, Esther goes on a tirade, harming Claire and Sam with her foul language. Sam enters the room late, but imagines the tirade started with Esther "climbing up on her mother and assum[ing] a feral crouch, opening her throat for the pure injury to pour out" (132). This continues Esther's

depiction as a dangerous animal. In a moment of desperation, Sam jams a needle into his own ear. The needle was given to him by LeBov and is supposedly capable of providing temporary immunity from language, but it works for Sam in another way. It shocks Esther into silence: “Esther had stopped speaking by then ... My activities with the needle had rendered her mute. She stood watching me, a mostly convincing look of fear on her face. An effective display of crying, soft crying that she seemed to want to suppress, came next. She performed her grief for my benefit” (133). When the scene starts, Sam fears Esther and her ability to harm Claire and himself. This scene is evocative of a common parenting scenario, where an adolescent child lashes out at her parents. But Esther’s pernicious language entails physical consequences for her parents. But when Sam slams the needle into his own ear, power dynamics shift. “I would literally stab my own ears out,” his actions scream, “then be subjected to your tirade.” Sam shocks Esther into submission, causing her to become fearful and cry. Sam’s distrust of Esther’s actions show the void opening up between Sam and his daughter, as he believes her fear and grief a performance. Sam’s distrust may be warranted, but it’s also a sign of his own transformation. Esther becomes dangerous and animal-like, but controls herself after witnessing her father’s actions. Sam, however, becomes more callous and monstrous, at least in readings sympathetic to Esther. This becomes even clearer as the moment continues. Esther approaches Sam and signals to him that she’ll be quiet. She tries cleaning up some of the fluid from Sam’s ear. Sam rejects this help and drags Esther from the house. Marcus writes,

Esther stood outside our house with her head down, shoulders small. I rushed her again, moved my daughter yet farther into the yard, and she slumped over me, let herself be carried. At the sidewalk I dropped her and with my hands I made the most terrible gesture I could. It was the most fluent I’d ever been without speech.

Stay, stay there. Do not come in this house again. You are forbidden from here.

We do not know you. Esther looked up at me and nodded. With her little finger she crossed her heart. (133)

Esther is diminished: her “shoulders small,” she slumps and is carried. She lacks the will to resist but is unwilling or unable to move away unassisted. Sam is violent and aggressive. He drops her and makes “the most terrible gesture [he] could.” This gesture indicates a moment where nonverbal communication succeeds while language fails. What single gesture could be so terrible as to contain all the hurt that Sam communicates? Any actual description of the gesture would fail and render its power obsolete. A description may even lower the terrible power of the gesture to a joke, as a description may well fall so far short of communicating the precise language Sam believes it entails. Sam’s terrible gesture may not evoke quite the language Sam thinks. Esther could get the gist without grasping his full meaning. This creates a paradox where an allusion to a thing is more precise than a description of that thing. The reference is effective because it obscures its referent. The description remains vague because giving the gesture precise definition would neuter it. The moment has power because it appears to reference a specific gesture that doesn’t actually exist in any knowable way, even though it has concrete meaning for Sam. Esther’s understanding of the gesture, whether approximate or exact, leads her to a heartbreaking moment of acceptance. The subtle nod is understated. The crossing of her heart is a child-like promise—cross my heart and hope to die—which reinforces the nod. This is a gesture that can be understood without any explanation at all because of its Western context. Esther’s gestures communicate something like, “I understand, and I promise to honor your wishes.” A narrative description of Sam’s gesture would fail because the Western world has no gesture that can encapsulate such a specific and terrible meaning as he wishes to communicate. On the other

hand, Esther's gestures succeed without explanation of their content because of Western familiarity with such gestures. These gestures illustrate the difficulty in creating meaning disconnected from context, a problem Sam faces later in the novel. They also show a reversal between Sam and Esther. Now Sam is the metaphoric monster. One might reasonably argue that Sam is just doing what he must do survive—a common refrain used to whitewash violent, selfish, and totalitarian impulses in many post-apocalyptic narratives—but this argument does not account for Claire, who would rather not separate from Esther, even though Esther's presence is harmful. Whereas Sam will initially sacrifice his relationship with his daughter in his quest for survival, Claire would sacrifice herself and forego survival. This is demonstrated when the adults evacuate the town, and Claire jumps out the car because she'd prefer to stay near Esther.

Sam's shift from victim to victimizer coincides with the language plague becoming part of everyone's language, not just children's. Children are still immune, but adults also harm each other by communicating. Furthermore, some adults, in an attempt to combat the plague, establish a testing facility in an abandoned school. They try to understand what's causing the plague and how to counteract it. But these experiments are largely in vain because they are done in isolation and even reading written language damages people. There is, however, at least one success. A serum is developed that provides temporary immunity to speech; but it's developed from children. Fluids are siphoned from their bodies and distilled into powder. Children and less fortunate adults are forced into being test subjects for both potential cures and new languages. Many of the adults who become test subjects are tricked into coming to the compound because they are shown pictures of their missing children and it is implied that families will be reunited. Instead the adults are used as test subjects: "To be thorough," Sam recalls, "we tested on men

and women alike, young and old, sick and well. There was a healthy supply of subjects on hand. People lined up for this work. They volunteered, fought to be first, scratched at each other without mercy, as if they'd been profoundly misled about what waited for them at Forsythe. Which of course, well, they had" (171). Sam watches some of the "volunteers." He observes, "From my office the specimens were brought downstairs and readied for testing against people, people already shattered and near death, overexposed to the very thing I made more of every day" (169). Sam's description of the people as specimens is part of the process of objectification where people are dehumanized. At the same time, Sam isn't able to complete this objectification in his own mind, as he subsequently uses the word "people" twice. This sort of tension between thing and person is a constant tension in discussions of children and of test subjects. Children are referred to as "the ultimate asset" and Sam observes the people at Forsythe "struck gold in those kids," thus situating children as commodities and currency (180; 193).

When Sam first witnesses a demonstration of the child-serum that provides temporary immunity to language, it involves a demonstration with an adult and child test subject. As the adult first enters, it's clear he's one of those who have been overexposed: "Onto the stage came an old man, his head draped in testicle skin. When he rubbed it and blinked into the lights I saw it was merely his face, beset with a terrible, taffy-like drop. I did not want to reflect what sort of experiments, or what sort of life, had led to possessing a face like that" (190). The image of a man with testicle skin draped over his head is absurd, but it also highlights Sam willful ignorance regarding the test subjects. Sam refuses to see the man as someone transformed by the experiments he's subjected to. He refuses to contemplate what the man may have experienced, and then he hedges further by thinking it could be the life the man led instead of the experiments: a mental maneuver that decontextualizes the suffering the man must endure at Forsythe.

This self-justification and willful disconnect consistently manifests in the author's use of euphemisms and constant understatement. After the demonstration is finished, "The child had to be carried off, but first they threw a sheet over him" and Sam notes that in further demonstrations, "The child was never the same one, though sometimes the man was" (192). The unstated detail is that the children are killed in the process of creating the serum. In the final section, Sam abandons Forsythe and ostensibly reunites with Esther, though she looks different and they cannot effectively communicate with her, so it's unclear as to whether it's actually Esther or not. While outside of the compound, and before he finds who he thinks is Esther, Sam hunts children and experiments on them; his hope is to unlock the secrets of the immunity serum. He recounts stumbling onto the secret by accident, "One of my subjects, strapped to an old bottled respirator, so large it dwarfed his little face, began the rapid breathing one never likes to see in a small person. Too often it foreshadows the unproductive kind of stillness" (281). It's then that Sam notices some powder in the respirator, which Sam distills into the serum. Sam's use of the term "specimen" positions the child as an object, not an individual, and recalls Sam's time at Forsythe. It positions him as a scientist or expert, something he's been playing at the entire novel. The image of the large machine dwarfing the small child highlights the power differential between Sam and his experiment and the child. Then Sam uses a euphemism: "the unproductive kind of stillness."⁸ At worst, this refers to death; at best, a momentary lapse of consciousness. I find it more likely to be death, especially when taking into account the earlier children being shrouded and carted away, never to return to the demonstrations at Forsythe. Even so, while "unproductive stillness" allows for both possibilities, it clearly is a physical stillness that prevents Sam from finishing his work unhindered. "Unproductive," in this instance, also

⁸ Recall the use of euphemisms in *Never Let Me Go*, such as carer and doner, which mask the brutal realities of the world in which the clones live.

situates the child further in the realm of objectified commodity, like “specimen”: he, like the test subjects at Forsythe, has a very specific use value. His worth is predicated on what can be extracted from him. On what his body can provide in terms of knowledge or relief, which is entirely disconnected from who he is as a person. When Sam laments the fact that rapid breathing “too often” leads to “unproductive stillness,” it’s an understated lament for the inconvenient loss of a test subject. Even Sam’s terminology for what he’s doing is euphemistic. “Smallwork,” while initially an accurate portrayal of the scale of his amateur testing, eventually fails to encompass the harm it does to others. The serum made from children is called “Child’s Play,” thus associating something created through a harmful and laborious process with connotations of both ease (making it was child’s play) and harmless play (the play of a child).

A reasonable defense could be mustered for the experiments on behalf of the human race, but Sam, at this point, just wants to reunite and communicate with his family; and, even at Forsythe, test subjects are often tricked by showing parents pictures of their children and implying they could be reunited. Consent is also an issue. Adult cannot communicate what everything would entail to each other, and they cannot stand speech, nor even the acts of reading and writing language. Furthermore, the children Sam kidnaps to experiment on are currently immune to the plague. It’s what makes them valuable, but it also creates a situation where there’s no benefit for the children to go along with what’s happening, even if they had a choice. Sam isn’t going to cure the plague at their expense, nor does he try and convince them he will.

Sam’s grotesque dehumanization sometimes involves the aesthetic dehumanization of the children he objectifies. For example, having associated children with threatening animals for so long, it’s less of a jump for him to experiment upon them. Sam views the children he experiments on as commodities. After finding “the first child” upon leaving Forsythe, he starts

his “project with assets, with person-derived inhibitors” (277). In this example, the inhibitors, which temporarily suppress language’s toxicity, are the assets. But the children are also assets. The inhibitors are derived from them. In this way, not only are the children valued for their status as fungible commodities used to produce more valuable commodities, they are also seen as less valuable than their parts. Sam later says, “When I need some [language serum], I pull it out of little ones. I used it first at Forsythe. The crude kind, the roughly gained immunity, drawn on the priceless account of the child’s person” (278). The initial reference to “little ones” rather than children is an abstraction that is no less horrifying than simply saying “little children.” Sam’s behavior has become so abhorrent that euphemisms began losing their understated power, including the “roughly” in the subsequent sentence, which acknowledges some violence but not the full scope. Sam’s observation that the serum that provides him immunity is “drawn on the priceless account of the child’s person” is a direct subversion of the association of the emotionally priceless child, which in *Pricing the Priceless Child*, Viviana Zelizer argues is the result of a transition away from valuing children for their economic potential.⁹ This transition helps reify the figure of the innocent child, because it makes it easier for many people to shelter children from work and some of the realities of outside the home. A child may be “priceless” in the sense that they have unique and irreplaceable emotional value to their family and friends, but they have become literally “priceless” in Sam’s world because money is worthless, whereas the child’s body has immense value; and accounts, by their very nature, cannot be priceless because they have a finite amount to draw from, whether the account is credit or not. This mirrors the finite nature of the children, who seem to have a limited supply of whatever it takes to create the

⁹ See pages 14 and 49.

serum. In this way, the account isn't "of a child's person" but "*from* a child's body." As their essence is vampirically drained, their body weakens.

The grotesque dehumanization of people takes place in other ways, beyond the abstract animal/human and human/object comparisons. At Forsythe, the mechanical is sometimes combined with the human. Some subjects are entwined with nonhuman technology: "Antenna wires grew like creepers up their faces. Test subjects with cages for mouths, human antennas. From their faces came nothing but white noise" (248). Here the test subjects become scientific instruments, spewing white noise rather than speech; "human antennas" encapsulates the tension between human and object, as it describes a human object. When Sam experiments on the child from whom he first extracts Child's Play, he observes, "The child on the floor looked to be squirming in mechanical postures designed to trigger a reaction. I noted the repetition of his gyrations, the unimaginative way he thrashed" (281). "Mechanical postures," "designed to trigger a reaction," and "[unimaginative] gyrations" all position the child and his behavior as machinic rather than human. Within a different context, the "designed" and "gyrations" wouldn't necessarily evoke such a sense, but coming after "Mechanical postures," they do. Ironically, Sam seems to be the most machine-like at this moment, in the sense that he fails to experience emotion over the struggling human child. He carries a clinical detachment in his observation. This moment also reveals Sam's skepticism. He thinks the child is manufacturing his thrashing to elicit a desired response, rather than associating the thrashing with the effects of Sam's own malfeasance, even though Sam is the one whose behavior is suspect. Earlier, when Sam hit a child with a car but refused to roll down the window, thinking he'd be attacked, Sam's mistrust seemed understandable. Here, it's less so. In fact, Sam is constantly misreading his own actions. When children cry, he blames it on his "unfriendly appearance" or grants "Perhaps the children

felt I was displeased.” Sam believes he’s a “gentle [and benevolent] guardian” (280). Sam potentially misconstrues what might actually be fear over Sam and the extractions he performs, as opposed to his appearance or displeasure.

This is especially ironic because Sam himself was once placed in the position of dehumanized other by the Forsythe researchers. He is initially a subject. When he arrives at Forsythe, he’s violently brought in for examination and study, disrobed and prodded, language is tested on him (151–152). When Claire arrives later, she’s stripped and put through shows, which aren’t “strictly water, because what collected in the drain had a soapy, black foam in it” (218). The showers, combined with the inhuman testing on people and the Jewish elements of the novel, gives Forsythe an Auschwitz-like feel. Sam is hung in a room where “mesh baggies of hair hung from the ceiling, repelling flies. Possibly the hair attracted them instead” during the “year of the sewn-up mouth” (153). This marks Sam’s setting as grotesque. The strange containers of hair make no sense, whether they attract or repulse, but the uncertainty over their function gets at the ambiguity within the grotesque itself, which can both attract and repulse (Edwards and Graulund 78). The year of the sewn-up mouth provides a metaphor for the inability of the adult’s to communicate by depicting a form (mouth) disconnected from its function (speech). Sam resides in his cell until he notices an orange cable, similar to the cables that deliver the Jewish sermons in their places of worship, and places it into his mouth in the attempt to use his flesh as a conduit for the messages passing through the cable (152). It works. Sam spews a sermon from his mouth, transforming himself into a human conduit. This also wins him his freedom because LeBov, who monitors him, hadn’t yet heard the sermon Sam projects; so he promotes Sam from test subject to tester, in the hopes Sam has insights which LeBov does not. Sam’s grotesque body is always a sliding signifier, shifting between a physical

representation of his own objectification and the objectification he inflicts on others. That Sam can so easily become a tester is especially upsetting, especially considering the Forsythe/Auschwitz comparison, perhaps because it demonstrates the capacity in everyone for violence and grotesque behavior. Sam's transformations encapsulate the novel itself, where the grotesque shifts from child to adult, animal to technology, subject to object.

Conclusion

Adults become grotesque, both in their monstrous appearance and in the way the language of the novel positions them as both human and object. In this way, their broken bodies provide a metaphor for how, as Evan Calder Williams puts it, "real abstractions affect real bodies" (73). Williams is specifically talking about zombie narratives and how the body of the zombie metaphorically embodies the effects of capitalism, as the zombies represent capitalism's "unwanted poor ... more mouths to feed ... the sick repetition of want let loose on a global scale" (74). In *The Flame Alphabet*, the bodies of the adults provide a metaphor for the victimhood of the adults, as well as their monstrous actions. This is similar to how Leonard Cassuto sees both the objectifier and the objectified as grotesque (6), only the adults' appearance in *The Flame Alphabet* provides a visual metaphor. The grotesque runs throughout novel, but the decomposition of the adult bodies, when viewed in light of the adult test subjects, demonstrates how objectification breaks down a person. Recall that the bodies of the adults are monstrous; Claire, for example, has a "dry body" with "rank-smelling hair" and requires a mouth guard "to keep from gnashing into the exposed nerve pulp of her teeth" (132). The bodies of the objectified adults, which is what Claire becomes, provide a way of seeing a person run down by society. She loses the capacity to care for herself under the constant barrage of others; her child, yes, but also adults who put her to work for their own purposes. The bodies of adult victims eventually

become nothing but salt. Their nutrients are stripped from them, and when there is nothing left they become, as the Scorpions so eloquently put it, dust in the wind.

At the same time, however, the disturbing appearance of the adults also provides a grotesque metaphor for those who victimize both adults and children. Their monstrous behavior is written onto their features not only because they are metaphors for those broken down, but because some adults become inhuman monsters. The book ends with Sam abducting a young adult he thinks is Esther, who, having aged, is now susceptible to the poison of language. But it's highly likely it isn't Esther. Sam grants, "It was marginally possible I'd rescued, instead of Esther, a stranger with a different name" (257). Having captured Esther/not-Esther, Sam spends his time hunting for children so that he can extract their essence. He says, "What I was seeking is small and it has a face and it breathes so prettily, in little wet gusts of air. Often it comes alone willingly. It harbors a medicine inside its delicate chest" (255). The constant repetition of "it" adds to the horror because it demonstrates the child stalker's objectification of his victims. Here the child is almost completely objectified, and Sam is at his most monstrous. By making Sam's appearance match his grotesque behavior, the novel provides a visualization of what the adjective grotesque is often used for; to position heinous behavior as inhuman.

That the same grotesque bodies can provide two separate metaphors may still seem counter-intuitive. How can the grotesque bodies be a metaphor for both victims and their victimizers? Part of this is due to the nature of the novel. It opens itself to metaphoric examination on a variety of levels, but it constantly refuses tidy interpretations. One reviewer wrote "Marcus' imagination fills his plague with so many arresting yet confounding details that the reader is left to puzzle over their meaning" (Barton). Another laments, "whatever allegory or message is being intimated at in *The Flame Alphabet* never becomes clear" (Diamond). One

reviewer observes “‘The Flame Alphabet’ ... is laden with metaphor; everything might mean something, but nothing is certain”(Lennon). Another notes, the novel “both invites and strongly resists allegorical interpretation” (Lezard). The novel’s simultaneously invitation to interpret and its refusal to validate interpretation is its most confounding and rewarding attribute. It makes everything and everyone grotesque, and alters these relationships as the novel progresses. This makes the grotesque uniquely suited to this novel. Scholars often note the ambivalence which the grotesque inspires. Grotesque images often have the potential to inspire both attraction and repulsion, though the novel prefers repulsion, which the repulsive sex scenes illustrate. When Sam and Claire are reunited at Forsythe, for example, they are “determined to extract pleasure from each other” and their “pleasure centers” are “cold and shielded by brittle walls of hair” (236). A repulsive description. *The Flame Alphabet* takes the grotesque a step further, by locating ambivalence in the concept of the grotesque itself. Everyone is grotesque to varying degrees, and our sympathies shift as the novel progresses. In this light, we may be faced with a chilling reality: the grotesque, rather than being an intrusion into the natural order, may itself be the natural order. Not everything or everyone will always be grotesque, but the capacity is always there, beneath the surface, waiting.

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Curriculum Vitae

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EDUCATION

Ph.D. English, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, 2016

M.A. English, Saint Cloud State University, 2009

B.A. English, Saint Cloud State University, 2007

DISSERTATION

“Neoliberal Darlings: The Commodification of Grotesque Children in Contemporary Comics and Literature”

PUBLICATIONS

Edited Volumes

Heimermann, Mark and Brittany Tullis, eds. *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. Forthcoming.

Refereed Journal Articles

“Old Before Their Time: The Impossibility of Childhood Innocence in *The Walking Dead*.” *Journal of Graphic Novels and Comics* 5.3 (2014): 266-283.

Book Chapters

“The Grotesque Child: Animal/Human Hybridity in *Sweet Tooth*.” *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. Eds. Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. Forthcoming.

Heimermann, Mark and Brittany Tullis. “Bridging Comics Studies and Childhood Studies.” *Picturing Childhood: Youth in Transnational Comics*. Eds. Mark Heimermann and Brittany Tullis. Austin, TX: University of Texas Press. Forthcoming.

Grotesque Adolescence in Charles Burns’ *Black Hole*.” *Misfits: Children with a Twist*. Ed. Markus Bohlmann. New York: Lexington Books. Forthcoming.

“Perpetual Horizons: Reproductive Futurity in Post-Apocalyptic Films.” *The Child in Post-Apocalyptic Cinema*. Ed. Debbie Olson. New York: Lexington Books, 2015. 41-59.

CONFERENCE PRESENTATIONS

“An Abnormal World: Nathan Ballingrud’s Weird Southern Fiction.” International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Orlando, FL. March, 2016.

“Unsettling Language: Grotesque Description in *The Flame Alphabet*. International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Orlando, FL. March, 2016

“Beautiful Monsters: The Failure of Distraction in *Elephantmen*.” Popular Culture Association. Chicago, IL. April, 2014

“Innocence Under Siege: The Reconfiguration of Childhood in Jeff Lemire’s *Sweet Tooth*.” Midwest Modern Language Association. Milwaukee, WI. November, 2013.

“Old Before Their Time: Post-Apocalyptic Narratives and the Construction of Childhood.” Comics Studies Conference. Chicago, IL. April, 2012

“Narrative X-Factors: Shifting Forms of Feedback from Comics to their Adaptations.” Film and History Conference. Milwaukee, WI. November, 2010.

“(un)Life and (un)Death: Psychological Reactions to Trauma in *The Walking Dead*.” Midwest Modern Language Association. Chicago, IL. November, 2010

“Pacing and Pacemakers: Time as a Narrative Device in the Horror of Alan Moore.” International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts. Orlando, FL. March, 2009.

“Close Encounters of the Intertextual Kind: Infamy and Intertextuality in *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*.” Midwest Modern Language Association. Minneapolis, MN. November, 2008.

AWARDS AND FELLOWSHIPS

2015-2016	Advanced Opportunity Program Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2014-2015	Chancellor's Golda Meir Library Scholar Award finalist, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee
2013-14	Distinguished Graduate Student Fellowship, University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee