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Apocalypse . . . Eventually: Trans-Corporeality and Slow Horror in M. R. Carey's *The Girl with All the Gifts*

ABSTRACT

This article examines M. R. Carey's 2014 zombie apocalypse novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* through the ecofeminist concept of trans-corporeality as defined by Stacy Alaimo in *Bodily Natures*. Carey's heroine Melanie showcases how humans can re-conceptualize their relationship to a more-than-human, or natural, world that is both exterior to the self and always-already a part of the self through fungal agency. Indeed, the novel continuously engages in intimate human-environment interconnections that, in their horrific capacities, are meant to inspire readers to reflect upon their own enmeshment in a larger, material world. The novel's use of the real fungus *Ophiocordyceps* as the more-than-human agent that inspires the transformation of humans into zombies provides a vision for how humans can more ethically relate, in posthuman manners, to a more-than-human world. Finally, this article considers the novel as a depiction of slow horror, or a gradual descent into apocalypse.

Keywords: environment, horror, trans-corporeality, apocalypse, zombie, *The Girl with All the Gifts*.

MATTER OF TIME

M. R. Carey's zombie novel *The Girl with All the Gifts* hinges upon time: the longing for the time before the crisis; how much time it will take the characters to make it to safety; the diminishing time before the zombies—"hungries" infected with the fungus *Ophiocordyceps*—find and consume them; and the knowledge that, given time, all humans will be lost to *Ophiocordyceps*. Or, as Dr. Carolyn Caldwell notes of sporangia growing from a hungry-turned-mushroom-tree found in London:

Ophiocordyceps toppled our global civilisation in the space of three years . . . The only reason any pockets of uninfected humans were able to survive, was because the immature organism can only propagate—neotenuously—in biofluid . . . But the adult form . . . will take no prisoners. Each sporangium contains, at a rough estimate, from one to ten million spores. They will be airborne and light enough to travel tens or hundreds of miles from their place of origin . . . I estimate that what's left of Humanity 1.0 will close up shop within a month of one of these pods opening . . . It's only a matter of time. (Carey 288–89)

By the novel's close the "trigger event" occurs, initiated by the story's protagonist, Melanie, who is a child, hungry, and representative of Humans 2.0—a successful melding of human and fungus. Readers—Humans 1.0—are confronted with unease at the thought of our extinction while also relieved that children like Melanie will no longer be subject to capture, abuse, and murder by Caldwell, who is intent on finding a nonexistent cure. Ultimately, Humans 2.0 represent the possibility of a new future now that the more-than-human¹ world *must* be acknowledged as part of the self through intimate environment-human interactions.

Simultaneously, the novel underscores how human corporeality and selves are always-already composed of various agentic beings, such as parasites, bacteria, and viruses. These beings may lurk in our bodies unseen and unacknowledged, but they continuously exert their own agencies with and against our own. Carey's fungal plague *Ophiocordyceps* thus frighteningly, and accurately, reveals how human bodies are always-already caught up in networks of more-than-human relationships.² Or, as Stacy

¹ I refer to the nonhuman as the "more-than-human" for two reasons: 1) this term indicates environmental issues are *more* deserving of attention than humans typically think, and 2) this designation suggests nature both contains and exceeds the human—is "more than."

² This idea of networks points us both towards ecologies, or systems of interrelated parts, and to Jane Bennett's ideas of assemblages as discussed within her book *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Duke UP, 2010.

Alaimo argues in her book *Bodily Matters*, such meetings direct “attention to the materiality of the human and to the immediacy and potency of all that the ostensibly bounded, human subject would like to disavow . . . ‘the environment’ is not located somewhere out there, but is always the very substance of ourselves” (4). *Ophiocordyceps* reveals humans are never simply human, but are hybrid beings. There is no time before or after these interconnections; rather, they are ongoing. Children like Melanie, who are both human and fungus, suggest we understand ourselves as composite. The novel offers horror by forcing humans to consider their bodies as unbounded, and hope in the recognition that interconnection with a host of beings brings ecological insight. Arguably, to avoid the apocalyptic destruction of Humans 1.0 in the novel, where once the horror begins it is already too late, we must engage in such rethinking before time is up—both for ourselves and our planet.

I read *The Girl with All the Gifts* through an ecological lens focused on the melding of human and more-than-human. While the first meeting of fungus and humans is apocalyptic, Humans 2.0—the offspring of hungries, or Humans 1.0 infected by *Ophiocordyceps*—offer a vision of how humans can relate to the more-than-human world, one both exterior to the self and always-already a part of the self. In Melanie and children like her, *Ophiocordyceps* enters an advanced stage in which human and fungus live harmoniously and coextensively. Melanie is consequently a figure for Alaimo’s trans-corporeality as discussed in *Bodily Natures*, in which the movement of matter between exterior environment and the interiors of human bodies demonstrates “a recognition not just that everything is interconnected but that humans are the very stuff of the material, emergent world” (20). As an ecological form of humanity, Humans 2.0 allow readers to consider how “an unraveling of the human” (Alaimo 3) is an ethical, posthuman action. Finally, I consider how the novel engages in what I term “slow horror,” a gradual descent into humanity’s apocalyptic destruction—while simultaneously presenting a hopeful future.

TRANS-CORPOREAL FUNGAL AGENCY

The novel’s storyline follows a child named Melanie, who is heroine and zombie simultaneously. Twenty years before the novel’s present, the Breakdown occurred, in which the fungus *Ophiocordyceps* leapt the species barrier to infect humans. This disease, spread through blood or saliva, turns humans into flesh-eating entities known as “hungries.” In the present, the remaining human characters are concerned with how to avoid, stop, or reverse the hungry pathogen. This search is the reason that Melanie and her

classmates, all Humans 2.0, are locked in a military base, the purpose of which is focused around Caldwell, who studies the children's capacity to learn and then selects subjects for dissection to find a cure. The children are educated in an elementary school classroom, most notably by Miss Justineau, who Melanie loves and admires. Melanie, the most brilliant of the children, is eventually selected for dissection—but Caldwell is unable to carry out this task before Justineau intervenes and the base is overrun by hungries.

Once the base is destroyed, Melanie, Justineau, Caldwell, and two soldiers named Sergeant Parks and Private Gallagher make their way across a hostile landscape to Beacon, a haven in southern England. Upon entering London, Melanie discovers she is a second generation hungry, *Ophiocordyceps*' secrets are revealed, and Melanie decides humanity's fate by releasing a forest's worth of the fungus' spores from hungries-turned-fruited-trees. This release aligns Melanie with the mythical Pandora, the "girl with all the gifts" who, as Miss Justineau taught the class, "open[ed] up the box and [let] all the terrible things out" (11). Infection will gradually overtake the globe, eliminating Humans 1.0 and making room for Humans 2.0, entities both human and fungus, culture and nature, overtly more-than through their fungal lineage. Justineau is the only surviving human in this world, preserved by Melanie in the mobile research station Rosalind Franklin to educate Humans 2.0. This education will ensure Humans 2.0 are neither mindless like the hungries nor focused solely on the self, like Humans 1.0; instead, they will be mindful of their relationship with an exterior world.

Alaimo's concept of trans-corporeality focuses on such intimate human and more-than-human interconnections and their potentials by interrogating the false premise "that people are separate from nature, the environment, and other material substances and forces" (16). In the West, the human subject is traditionally viewed as distinct and unique, separated from nature by culture. Nature, meanwhile, is rendered null, a thing rather than a vibrant ecosphere composed of lively beings. This mindset leads corporations in capitalist economies to frack, mine, destroy Native lands, and spray pesticides with abandon. Therefore, Alaimo proposes that humans understand themselves as trans-corporeal beings, for viewing "human corporeality as trans-corporeality, in which the human is always intermeshed with the more-than-human world" (2) aids recognition of the value of the more-than-human. Or, as Alaimo notes, "ethical and political possibilities emerge" from understanding humans as trans-corporeal:

[I]hinking across bodies may catalyze the recognition that the environment, which is too often imagined as inert, empty space or as a resource for human use, is, in fact, a world of fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions. By emphasizing the movement across

bodies, trans-corporeality reveals the interchanges and interconnections between various bodily natures. But by underscoring that *trans* indicates movement across different sites, trans-corporeality also opens up a mobile space that acknowledges the often unpredictable and unwanted actions of human bodies, nonhuman creatures, ecological systems, chemical agents, and other actors (2).

Trans-corporeality reveals that humans are always-already enmeshed in the more-than-human, even in ways out-of-sight and thus out-of-mind. Carey's *Ophiocordyceps* is in part horrific because it makes these trans-corporeal interconnections visceral and stark, eliminating the possibility—especially once the spores become airborne—for humans to imagine themselves as disconnected from their environments. Notably, *Ophiocordyceps* is not malicious, but merely seeks its own propagation; it is one of the “fleshy beings with their own needs, claims, and actions” that Alaimo identifies. Reading Carey and Alaimo together can aid us in approaching our own selves trans-corporeally to consider the various agencies at continuous work within, across, and around us. Indeed, hungries are horrific because they retain the semblance of the human while behaving solely like a fungus, mercilessly seeking *Ophiocordyceps*' propagation through biting and consuming humans. Humans 2.0, by contrast, behave like fungus and human intertwined, mediated and enhanced by one another.

Trans-corporeality also highlights the novel's use of fungal agency, wherein *Ophiocordyceps* is an “other actor” that inspires “unpredictable and unwanted actions” as it enters human bodies and transforms them. Kylie Crane's “fungal thinking” proves useful: “Fungi are out ‘there,’ and in ‘here.’ They are doing their work in numerous places—all the time and out of time, and on physical scales large and minute” (239). Fungi are an exterior and, more unsettlingly, an interior material reality. Merlin Sheldrake, a fungi-focused biologist, concurs, adding that fungi are present in our bodies through food and air, highlighting “our total dependence on fungi—as regenerators, recyclers, and networkers that stitch worlds together”; thus, humans “dance to their tune more often than we realize” (19). Fungi, already part of the human self, reveal the falsities of human borders and highlight trans-corporeality. Crane continues: “We are not singular, not ourselves, neither in our present presence, nor in our historical becoming . . . Fungi, like viruses, help us to remember our shared being, across difference” (246).³

³ Crane's idea is also reminiscent of Val Plumwood's notion of continuity as explored in *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. Per Plumwood, continuity expresses a spectrum of relationality between beings, while steering us away from total assimilation, which is a colonial effort of incorporation into the (human) self. Thus, difference is celebrated in continuity, as are interconnections.

Ophiocordyceps is thus an astute way to demonstrate fungal agency and highlight humans' trans-corporeal entanglements. In hybrids like Melanie, human and fungal corporealities and agencies meld into newness together, each affecting and affected in turn, ultimately (re)producing Humans 2.0. Crane's and Sheldrake's work tells us fungi are trans-corporeal, and that humans do not, and cannot, exist without them; Carey's novel illustrates this truth, both for characters and readers.

Thus, while trans-corporeality and fungal agency re-instill value in the more-than-human, they also highlight how the more-than-human contains "dangerous, often imperceptible material agencies"—like cancer-causing pesticides, fracking runoff that contaminates entire watersheds, or a fungus that alters humanity. The realization that we are trans-corporeally in dialogue with an exterior world "may provoke denial, delusions of transcendence, or the desire for a magical fix" (Alaimo 146). *The Girl with All the Gifts* depicts this mindset when Caldwell studies the brain tissues of a hybrid child and discovers "the extent (close to a hundred per cent) to which her own labours [for a cure] over these past seven years have been a waste of time . . . what she's found is so bleak and absolute" (372). In short, Caldwell discovers that there is no "magical fix," no cure for *Ophiocordyceps* infection; there is only eventual submission to it, either by Humans 1.0 becoming a meal for the hungries or turning into hungries themselves. No human agency can counteract the greater, and more precise, agency of the fungus; instead, it creates something entirely new: Humans 2.0. Caldwell must accept, as Alaimo notes, that trans-corporeality "foster[s] a posthuman environmentalism of co-constituted creatures" (146). Posthuman indeed, for with no cure and the release of airborne *Ophiocordyceps* by Melanie at the novel's end, Humans 1.0 will experience complete extinction.

THE UNRAVELED HUMAN

Again, fungal agency and trans-corporeality are often unnoted because their actions are mostly imperceptible; however, Carey renders them visceral through images of infection. For instance, after Sergeant Parks is bitten and infected, his human aspects are eliminated: "His hands circle each other, searching for a meaning that evades them. After a while he goes very still, until the sound of a bird singing on a wire between the houses makes him sit bolt upright . . . His jaw starts to open and close, the hunger reflex kicking in" (Carey 400). As *Ophiocordyceps* winds through his body, Parks loses the ability to transform thought into words. Eventually, the fungus rewires him as it suffuses his body: he is activated by sound, the

hungry feeding mechanism—signified in the working of his jaws—seeking fungal propagation the only action left. Parks’s mental self is eliminated by the fungus as his physical self imperfectly melds with it and becomes its tool. Had Melanie not shot Parks, he would become like the hungries encountered earlier in the novel, in which “[g]rey [fungal] threads have broken the leathery surface of their skin in a network of fine lines, crossing and recrossing like veins. The whites of the eyes are grey too, and if the hungry’s mouth is open you can see a fuzz of grey on the tongue” (178). Fungal intimacy reigns here, and to terrifying effect. As trans-corporeality enmeshes the human in networks of more-than-human intimacy, *Ophiocordyceps* is represented across human skin “in a network of fine lines.” The fungus mirrors trans-corporeal actions, weaving in and out of the skin through “threads” and “fuzz.” The fungal agency of *Ophiocoryceps* subsequently leads to “an unraveling of the human” (Alaimo 3), depicted in Parks’s inability to speak and fungal growths on hungry bodies, which obscure characteristics of humanity. Thus, potential trans-corporeal dangers are also highlighted, suggesting how *Ophiocordyceps* propagation unravels the human self.

Yet, given the evolutionary advantages with which Humans 2.0—the children of hungries—are endowed, the unraveled human is also a positive figure. Children like Melanie are faster, stronger, and smarter than regular humans. They contain enhanced senses and stamina, lack the need for water or excretion, last long periods without food, and are capable of considerable ethical action. For instance, once Melanie realizes she is a hungry, she makes a concerted effort to ensure she will never bite her human companions in case her hunger drive takes over. She saves their lives multiple times, once putting herself between Parks, who previously treated her with violence, and a pack of oncoming hungries. She willingly shares knowledge—such as how buses functioned pre-Breakdown with Gallagher, who was born after society’s collapse—and accumulates knowledge to pass on to those who would benefit from it, as she does when listening to Caldwell explain how *Ophiocordyceps* led to children like Melanie. And, at the novel’s end, she wrestles greatly with whether to release the fungal spores from the hungries-turned-mushroom-trees; ultimately, she determines that “[i]f [Humans 1.0] keep shooting [the hungry kids] and cutting them into pieces and throwing them into pits, nobody will be left to make the new world. [Humans] will keep killing each other, and you’ll . . . kill the hungries wherever you find them, and in the end the world will be empty” (Carey 399). While Melanie recognizes transforming Humans 1.0 into hungries “means they’ll all die, which is really sad,” she also insists, “the children [Humans 2.0] will grow up” to remake a new, better world (399). Melanie, although a child, is so enhanced by the melding of human and

fungus that she can diagnose a situation and determine which actions will bring about the best outcome.

While at the start of the novel Melanie identifies as human, her knowledge and acceptance of the fungus's role in her creation leads Melanie to advocate for trans-corporeality in her choice to prioritize Humans 2.0. This choice relies upon an ethics of the posthuman. Or, as Alaimo defines it in her reading of *Darwin's Radio* by Greg Bear, this kind of ethics involves recognizing

in-habitation, in which what is supposed to be outside the delineation of the human is always already inside. This stuff of matter generates, composes, transforms, and decomposes: it is both the very stuff of (human) corporeality and the stuff that eviscerates the very notion of the human. By thrusting us into an evolutionary narrative, where there are no guarantees, that humans will endure as a species, Bear enacts a powerful posthuman environmental ethics, in which human bodies . . . are inextricably interconnected with material worlds. (25)

We could easily replace “Bear” with “Carey,” for *The Girl with All the Gifts* presents this same “posthuman environmental ethics” in Melanie. Her body is typified by “a kind of in-habitation” of *Ophiocordyceps*, wherein she represents the human and an “eviscerat[ion of] the very notion of the human.” Melanie is therefore part of “an evolutionary narrative” that presents the dawn of a posthuman world. This narrative may be horrific in the extinction of humans, but is also hopeful in that a form of humanity will live on, particularly through Humans 2.0 like Melanie who grow up with an education that instills a deep appreciation for human artistry. The novel blatantly frames Melanie's choice to eradicate Humans 1.0 as the most ethical option, both for (a type of) human and more-than-human survival.

POSTHUMANITY

Prior scholarship on both the novel and 2016 film adaptation also interpret Humans 2.0 as posthuman figures. For instance, Ruzbeh Babae et al. argue that the ending leaves the characters in a “posthuman state” (54); Andreu Domingo contends that the audience “identif[ies] with the living dead . . . In this case, the infected being is presented as posthuman and as hope” (451); similarly, Ösgür Yaren writes Melanie “embodies the hope of a posthuman life on earth” (79); Irina M. Erman's reading through Foucault suggests Melanie's rigorous self-discipline—particularly her ability to control her need to feed around humans—“points to a reconfiguration of the monster

from subhuman to posthuman” (608); Lauren Ellis Christie finds that *Humans 2.0* are “posthuman” and “crucial to the overall understanding of the novel as a scathing depiction of the cruelty of mankind, and abuse of science over nature” (42); and, via transhumanism, Kimberly Hurd Hale and Erin A. Dolgoy assert that the novel depicts a “posthuman future [that] provides a challenge to dominant transhumanist narratives about the nature of [self-guided and technological] human evolution,” and explores “the status of posthumans’ natural and civil rights and their capacity for moral agency, a prerequisite of justice” (344–45).

Clearly, any reading of *The Girl with All the Gifts* should consider posthumanism, but I add a focus on reading the text through trans-corporeality with a concentration on fungal materiality. For example, the posthuman is rendered in images of mushroom-trees in the second half of the novel. These new, abject entities appear as the survivors enter London, and are narrated from Gallagher’s perspective:

[The hungry’s] chest has broken wide open, forced open from within by. . . . A white column, at least six feet high, flaring at the top into a sort of flat round pillow thing with fluted edges—and with bulbous growths on its sides like blisters. The texture of the column is rough and uneven, but the blisters are shiny. . . .

“This . . . is the fruiting body of the hungry pathogen. And these pods are its sporangia. Each one is a spore factory, full of seeds . . . Break one of these open and you’ll be having an intimate encounter with *Ophiocordyceps*,” [says Caldwell]. (250–51)

Trans-corporeality suffuses this scene, in which an image of layered multitudes—human, hungry, tree, mushroom, sporangia, urban environment—encapsulate enmeshment into environmental networks. This environment is not only a part of the self, but transforms the self into the soil and root system from which a fruiting fungus-tree grows. The zombie figure, already monstrous as a distorted human mirror, here showcases intense bodily horror, a decades-long takeover by a fungus that finally matures and sprouts. Readers are reminded that their bodies are not sealed or fully under human control; bodies change and grow—and spurt growths—in ways beyond human agency. The delineation between human-turned-hungry and fungus-tree collapses; neither can exist without the other. Nevertheless, the image of the fungus-tree dominates the scene, rendering both human self and body null in a manner that gestures toward a posthuman world ruled by fungal agency.

Therefore, *Humans 2.0* are posthuman because they illustrate trans-corporeal interconnections, and in so doing offer ethical reconsiderations

focused on the treatment of the more-than-human. For example, humans are incredibly unethical beings in the novel, represented in Caldwell's dissections and inability to see the children as anything but fungal hosts. Per Yaren,

we spurn the overzealous attempts of the scientist, and her means (cruel experiments on the hybrid children) to save humanity . . . they should be saved from being dissected by the scientist, even though the only cure to save the human race from absolute extinction is dependent on the vaccine to be produced through their sacrifice. (79–80)

Yaren's commentary encapsulates how the novel leads to a posthuman consciousness, where readers are encouraged to consider how our ending may have a positive influence on the more-than-human. Indeed, in tormenting the children, Caldwell focuses on the more-than-human "parasite," not the host: "Subject number twenty-two, whose name was Liam if you accept the idea of giving these things a name, continues to stare at her . . . It doesn't mean he's alive . . . It's [just] the parasite" (Carey 38). That Caldwell understands herself as fighting against the fungus—she refers to *Ophiocordyceps* as "her nemesis, her mighty opposite" (352)—underscores human mistreatment of the more-than-human and an inability to understand how humans are always-already trans-corporeal. The brilliance of Carey's storytelling lies in his ability to make readers root for a posthuman world in which Humans 1.0 are eliminated because it is a more *ethical* world. This more ethical world is based in an acceptance and embrace of the fungal agency and materiality of *Ophiocordyceps*, again re-centering readers not on the human aspects of the posthuman, but on the more-than-human.

Posthuman ethics centered on more-than-human fungal agency is also represented in how Humans 2.0 are birthed. Per Caldwell, Humans 2.0 are, at first glance, engendered through heterosexual reproduction: "We thought that was impossible—that hungries couldn't have a sex drive. But once I'd seen the survival of other human drives and emotions—mother love, and loneliness—it didn't seem impossible at all" (378). While Caldwell's phrasing—"a sex drive"—leaves space for queer desire and coupling as an option between hungries, biologically it would take one individual with female reproductive parts and a second with male reproductive parts to birth a child. However, in the conception of Humans 2.0, a third component is necessary: the ungendered figure of *Ophiocordyceps*. The fungus's prominent role in the creation of Humans 2.0 turns this fungus into a third parent, queering the processes by which posthumans are conceived. The novel's ethics and trans-corporeality are

then reliant upon a kind of queerness, or the actions of an other-than-heterosexual and more-than-human fungal entity. Hungry sex is then a kind of human and fungal intercourse, resulting in beings who evolve with *Ophiocordyceps*. As Hale and Dolgoy note, Humans 2.0 exist not in a parasitic but in a “symbiotic” relationship with the fungus, and “represent something evolutionarily new: the end of human beings as they have thus far been understood and a beginning of something humanlike but adapted to the fungus-saturated environment” (346). Humans 2.0 can trace their lineage equally to both humans and fungus in a collapse of the culture and nature dualism; this leads to the existence of a new world, inhabited by figures who, while capable of human qualities, are inherently tied to the more-than-human world because they cannot exist or be understood without *Ophiocordyceps*.

Ultimately, humanity’s future is based in an evolutionary narrative, dependent upon Melanie acting as the trigger event that releases *Ophiocordyceps*’ spores. She uses the turrets on the Rosalind Franklin research station to set a forest of hungry-mushroom-trees on fire, resulting in “a [grey] mist so fine it’s like someone laid a lace curtain across the world” (Carey 397). While Hale and Dolgoy understand this as “a challenge to dominant transhumanist narratives about the nature of human evolution” (344), I contend that Melanie’s actions highlight human trans-corporeal reliance upon an exterior world. She rebirths the world, ending Humans 1.0 and enabling the hungry populace to reproduce so that children like her become “the *next* people. The ones who will make everything okay again” (Carey 399). Melanie exists as a kind of goddess in the text as she changes and reshapes reality; she is a new Pandora who is driven to “open up the box [given to her by Zeus] and [let] all the terrible things out” (11). Per the Greek myth, Pandora needed to open the box to give humans their humanity and awareness of good and evil. Melanie, similarly, needs to open the box—release *Ophiocordyceps*—to instantiate the development of Humanity 2.0, unraveled humans who embrace their trans-corporeal dialogue with an exterior world, and who remind readers that our enmeshment in the more-than-human is not something we can afford to ignore.

SLOW HORROR

While Humans 2.0 are part of the novel’s present, their evolutionary narrative occurs across great lengths of time. Their newness is marked by both destruction and education, particularly from the perspective of Justineau, the only human to survive Melanie’s release of *Ophiocordyceps*. Justineau, preserved inside Rosalind Franklin, mourns the fate of Humans

1.0 but accepts her role as teacher and caretaker of Humans 2.0: “She has a marker pen in her hand. Rosie herself will be her whiteboard . . . She draws on the side of the tank a capital *A* and a lowercase *a*. Greek myths and quadratic equations will come later” (403). Here, Carey plays with the idea of an ending: the reader closes the book just as Melanie has closed the book on Humans 1.0, with the story of Humans 2.0 waiting to be written. Melanie also recreates the classroom originally presided over by Justineau at the base, assembling Humans 2.0 to learn about the world, legacy, and mistakes of Humans 1.0. Thus, “Melanie indeed destroys *Homo sapiens*, but she maintains their legacy” through a liberal arts education of “language, myth, art, and love” (Hale and Dolgoy 358). The narrative of Humans 2.0 begins in full at the novel’s close, although its roots—fungal and otherwise—are in decades prior to the Breakdown, and in the yet-to-be-realized future.

Subsequently, *The Girl with All the Gifts* is also an example of slow horror, a horror that builds incrementally, that is not sudden but slow and lingering, suffusing an entire circumstance with dread. Perhaps due to my working-class Appalachian roots,⁴ I see slow horror mirroring Rob Nixon’s slow violence. Violence, Nixon tells us, is understood as swift and explosively visual; by contrast, slow violence “occurs gradually and out of sight,” and is “a violence of delayed destruction . . . dispersed across time and space” (2). It is “incremental and accretive, its calamitous repercussions playing out across a range of temporal scales,” represented in the often unrecognized “long dyings” that characterize “casualties, both human and ecological[,] that result from war’s toxic aftermaths or climate change” (2–3). Like slow violence, slow horror “occurs gradually and [often] out of sight” and “is dispersed across time and space,” making it difficult to track and yet always affecting lived experience. An example of this horror is the current climate crisis, caused by centuries of fossil fuel use and extraction that will affect our future in horrifying ways.

In storytelling, this horror extends before the events of a narrative and continues afterward, even if by the narrative’s close the horror changes. There is no escape from slow horror: it is ongoing, where all individuals involved—like characters and readers—are anxiously on edge. Slow horror is always present, ebbing and flowing in waves. It is also unending; there is no safe haven, no exorcising priest, no escape from the forest back to civilization. Slow horror claims everything, especially space and time, revealing the underlying fissures and monsters we live with daily and ignore, like the inevitability of death or the trans-corporeality

⁴ In the US, Appalachia is characterized by the Appalachian Mountain Range, which extends from the Northeast into Alabama. This region is fracked and mined extensively.

of our bodies. Slow horror means we cannot imagine horror over *there* and occurring only to others, or as something that happens suddenly and then dissipates in a return to normalcy. Instead, slow horror reveals that horror is everywhere and ongoing, always and already, as inescapable as the material realities of our existences.

In Carey's novel, slow horror is represented in the gradual descent into an apocalypse where, rather than going out with a bang, humans feebly attempt to preserve themselves before ending with a whimper, thus enabling Humans 2.0 to flourish. This evolutionary change occurs not in the swift blitz of Melanie setting the forest alight, but long before and after this event. Indeed, slow horror is represented in the time it takes for *Ophiocordyceps* to infect most of the human population in the Breakdown, for hungries to reproduce and human and fungal bodies to trans-corporeally meld, for what remains of Humans 1.0 to struggle fruitlessly for decades to find a cure, and for how long it will take for the spores of *Ophiocordyceps* Melanie releases to infect the remaining humans. This slow horror spans near-extinction, destruction, trans-corporeal and evolutionary change, and queer fungal entanglements. Arguably, this slow horror is both human- and fungi-centered, particularly in how *Ophiocordyceps* infects and then meshes with the human body to reveal trans-corporeality. As Elana Gomel notes, the story's horror does not end with the final page: "it is the future that is the source of contagion. When Melanie the zombie protagonist releases the fungal spores that will infect the last remaining 'true' humans, she symbolically kills the past and ushers in the brave new world of posthuman monsters" (227). Perhaps what makes this slow horror and "brave new world of posthuman monsters" so arresting is that the readers' alignment with Melanie, and the novel's revealing of human atrocities, makes us both celebrate and pull away from this non-ending to Melanie's story—and our own human-centered world.

This non-ending also reads as an apocalyptic (Christian) rebirth, a troubling notion when some biblical thought casts nature as solely for human use. We could say that the novel depicts the elimination of humanity as much easier than engaging in the difficulties of changing our actions and societies to be more ecologically sustainable. Slow horror, then, is substituted for hard work. However, I contend that while Humans 1.0 are eliminated, ecological devastation is not, even as trans-corporeality becomes a central aspect of life for Humans 2.0. Indeed, Humans 2.0 are now left to deal with the detritus of global society and the effects of climate change, to preserve the art and lessons of the past, and to navigate an unknown future. The slate is not wiped clean; the players have merely evolved. Humans 2.0 combine the culture of their predecessors with trans-corporeality in their fungal ties to a vibrant, exterior world. Care of the

self becomes care of the planet—and vice versa—because neither can be separated or dichotomously opposed to the other any longer. In *The Girl with All the Gifts*, Humans 2.0 present readers with a vision predicated upon ecological hope—even if this hope is ultimately embodied in the horror of our own slow extinction.

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