Biopunk Dystopias

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71

We’ve just opened the great big gene-splicing toy box and people are going to be playing with that for years. (Margaret Atwood, cited in Halliwell 260)

As has been discussed in the last chapter, biopunk is firmly rooted in a variety of socio-political discourses, from globalization to posthumanism to technoscience. With its heritage in cyberpunk, itself a subgenre of science fiction and a cousin (closely related) to the utopian/dystopian tradition, it seems only sensible to begin an analysis of biopunk with the ‘original’ medium from which the formation was born: literature. Within the cultural formation, literary works represent a strong connection not only to the sf genre tradition, but to biological sf, to dystopian critique, and to social commentary. The contemporary public interest in genetics and the posthuman can be noticed not just within the core of the genre, with its hard sf ecocriticism and vivid extrapolations of hybrid posthumanity, but also at the fuzzier edges, where delegates of the high cultural elite pick up on its themes and issues. In this chapter, I will thus provide posthumanist readings of two recent literary works that extrapolate from a liquid modern present, exploring its dystopian dimension and leading towards a posthuman future as critical utopian alternatives. I have chosen two authors and their works that could be argued to assume peripheral and central positions within the spectrum of sf respectively.

On the one end, Margaret Atwood’s recently completed MaddAddam trilogy (Oryx and Crake [2003], The Year of the Flood [2009], and MaddAddam [2013]) functions as a liminal work on the demarcation line between ‘literary’ and ‘genre’ fiction. Atwood herself has been instrumental in the demarcation, insisting on her work being ‘speculative fiction’ rather than ‘science fiction proper’ (‘My Life’ 159). I do not wish...
to engage in the genre debate and will for the purpose of this study simply repeat contemporary genre theory in that genre status is continuously negotiated by ‘communities of practice’ (Rieder 201) and that large parts of the reading community have deemed the MaddAddam trilogy to be ‘science fiction’ and possibly even ‘biopunk’ (as witnessed in the original inclusion of the first two books in the Wikipedia entry [removed in 2010]). Further, her trilogy, which combines science-fictional tropes with realistic narrative technique, has been analyzed excessively by literary scholars and debated in regard to a variety of topics – satire and humor, religion and myth, ecology, capitalism, technology, writing, and many more.¹

In the following, I will approach the novels as literary interventions in the current debate on posthumanism and for that purpose contrast Atwood’s work with that of another sf writer: Paolo Bacigalupi. Whereas Atwood tries to avoid the label of ‘science fiction’ and thus represents the fringe of the genre that would rather appear as a mainstream literary form, Bacigalupi is firmly established in its center. His short stories and novels have garnered virtually every award sf has to offer – the debut novel *The Windup Girl* (2009) alone won the Hugo, Campbell, Nebula and Locus Awards and has in its impact on the genre been compared to Gibson’s *Neuromancer* (see Hageman 187). Posthumanism plays a role in most of Bacigalupi’s work, but for the purpose of my analysis, I will concentrate on *The Windup Girl* and two related short stories, ‘The Calorie Man’ and ‘The Yellow Card Man’ (both from *Pump Six and Other Stories* [2008]), that are part of the same fictional universe and reference the same posthuman beings.²

What brings Atwood and Bacigalupi together is the imagination of a critical dystopian future, extrapolated from our contemporary liquid modernity, in which the posthuman has become a tangible reality that

¹ A full discussion of the secondary material available would go beyond the scope of this chapter – at the moment there are more than 100 articles and book chapters discussing the first two novels in the series. Some examples will need to suffice: satire (Dunning; Dvorak; Hume), religion (Hengen; Hoogheem; Osborne), ecology (Bergthaller; Canavan; Dunlap; Rozelle), capitalism (Davey; Hall), technology (Cooke; DiMarco), and writing (Cole; Storey and Storey).

² Both stories have been collected by Bacigalupi’s publishers Night Shade Books under the title *Windup Stories* as an eBook. The subtitle is ‘Stories from the World of *The Windup Girl*.’ I will use the term ‘Windup stories’ to mean the fictional universe that includes the novel and the short stories. Page numbers for the short stories refer to their publication in *Pump Six*, not in the eBook.
is trying to establish a position in the ‘natural order’ and ultimately ends up threatening to replace the human completely. Both scenarios establish a world of rampant capitalism, of individualistic consumer societies, leading to a global ecological catastrophe, the development of transgenic species (across all biological domains), and ultimately the creation of a rival species of posthumans.

In Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl* the world has undergone drastic economic, political, and ecological changes. After a period of ‘Expansion,’ energy production through fossil fuels collapsed completely, leading to a worldwide economic ‘Contraction’ period: Global transport, industrial production, computing, and high-speed communication have become impossible to maintain and energy necessarily needs to be produced manually. During the Expansion, genetic engineering technology has created corporate interest in food patenting. This lead to food wars, in which so-called ‘calorie companies’ created plagues and pests that destroyed unpatented food, so that they could then distribute their own disease-resistant strains of the same food for large profits. Global warming caused sea levels to rise and the planet’s environment was almost destroyed. The novel takes place in Thailand after the Contraction, when the economy is slowly recovering. Thailand is one of very few remaining independent nation states that resisted the calorie companies due to strictly and violently enforced trade laws and the reliance on a genetic seed bank as a national treasure. The plot revolves around Anderson Lake, a calorie man, a secret trader for the global calorie companies, trying to get his hands on the seed bank and on the renegade geneticist that helps to develop new and secure food sources for Thailand. At the same time, an internal struggle for power erupts in an outright war between the two largest ministries (Trade and Environment), determining the future of the Thai kingdom and sweeping up all of the novel’s characters in its chaos.

Atwood’s trilogy deals with a similarly devastated near future in which climate change made large parts of the earth uninhabitable: Temperatures and sea levels rose, fertile lands became deserts and humanity’s energy hunger depleted most natural resources. The elite population now lives in class-segregated communities (‘Compounds’) and revels in bacchanalian ignorance and consumption, while the masses barely survive in squalor (‘pleeblands’) and constant fear of disease, crime, and natural catastrophe. Nation states have given way to global corporate rule, and especially biotechnological progress and its capitalist consumption have had a major impact on society and environment. But this corporate rule ends when the renegade scientist Crake (a codename derived from an extinct species) genetically engineers a plague that wipes
out humanity, which he sees as faulty and destructive. As an alternative to the human species, Crake creates a race of *posthumans* (referred to as the Children of Crake, or Crakers) that after the demise of the faulty species is supposed to repopulate the earth.

*Oryx and Crake* portrays both the pre- and the post-apocalyptic world through the eyes of Jimmy, a childhood friend of Crake’s who becomes a pawn in Crake’s god game and is spared, to witness the extinction of his world. As Snowman (Jimmy’s self-chosen codename), the ‘last man on earth’ (or so he believes) then becomes guardian and spiritual guide for the Crakers, leading them into the future, mourning for the loss of humanity. But the novel ends with Snowman finding three other human survivors and pondering what to do.

*The Year of the Flood* is not a sequel but a parallel narration that adds a different perspective to the same events. Whereas *Oryx* dealt with the male, privileged perspective of the Compounds, *Year* now interjects with the female, precarious perspective of the pleeblands. Focusing on the story of Toby and Ren, two female members of the eco-religious God’s Gardeners group, which offers an alternative to the corporate, exploitative lifestyle of the Compounds, the novel again portrays the events leading up to the plague, as well as how the women survive after the plague. In the end, both women end up with a group of former Gardeners and geneticists called MaddAddam that separated from the religious group and formed an anti-corporate bioterrorist cell, which is mainly responsible for the genetic work on the Crakers, blackmailed by Crake into compliance with his plans. The novel ends with Toby and Ren searching for another ex-Gardener, Amanda, who has been kidnapped by two surviving Painballers, brutal escaped convicts. They find all three at the beach, when suddenly Snowman appears on the scene.

*MaddAddam*, the third book in the series, then finally offers a real sequel to the events of *Oryx*. Beginning with the encounter between Snowman, the Painballers, and the ex-Gardeners, *Madd* relates the story of the creation of a new community that includes the ex-Gardeners, the MaddAddamites, and the Crakers, as well as their ultimate defense against the escaped Painballers. The post-apocalyptic narration is again interlaced with stories from pre-apocalyptic times, this time from the perspective of Zeb, the leader of MaddAddam and brother to the founder of the Gardeners, filling in many of the gaps the two former novels left open on how the Gardeners came to be and how deep their involvement with Crake was. The novel ends with a showdown with the Painballers and a hopeful look towards a future community with all survivors of the plague, both human and posthuman.
In the following, I will show that in both fictional worlds, the idea of the ‘human’ is under attack by liquid modern realities, losing its categorial integrity through corporate manipulation and environmental influences. Atwood and Bacigalupi, in their works, undermine concepts of human exceptionalism, question the ontological stability of biological categories, and reveal a belief in the interconnectedness of all life on the planet. In both works, the human is reduced by hypercapitalism to become inhuman, non-human animals are introduced to showcase categorial liminality – if not outright transgression – and to reveal the interrelatedness of species, and finally the ‘posthuman’ is staged as an alternative category better equipped to prosper in the post-catastrophic environment, having to negotiate its position in regard to the still-existent ‘human.’

3.1 Eco-Catastrophe, Hypercapitalism, and the Inhuman

What unites the works of Atwood and Bacigalupi is the protean nature of their diegetic worlds and the ecological catastrophe as a catalyst for changes in the concept of the posthuman. The Maddaddam trilogy and the Windup stories discuss the shifting economic and ecological realities of their respective worlds. Both worlds have undergone ecological change due to rampant and unrestrained capitalism. In this, both fictional universes are extreme extrapolations of Bauman’s liquid modernity where consumption becomes the only and all-encompassing urge that drives society.

In both worlds, then, hypercapitalism has brought about a commodification of any and all life on earth, which in turn has led to an acceleration of ‘global change’ within the Anthropocene, as defined by Will Steffen, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill:

We use the term global change to mean both the biophysical and the socioeconomic changes that are altering the structure and the functioning of the Earth System. Global change includes alterations in a wide range of global-scale phenomena: land use and land cover, urbanisation, globalisation, coastal ecosystems, atmospheric composition, riverine flow, nitrogen cycle, carbon cycle, physical climate, marine food chains, biological diversity, population, economy, resource use, energy, transport, communication, and so on. (615)

For the National Research Council, human activity enacting these global changes ‘could eventually lead to a “crisis in the biosphere”’ (cited in
Steffen, Grinevald et al. 843) – could lead to a dystopian vision such as the ones imagined in both the MaddAddam trilogy and the Windup stories.

There are boundaries to human action that should not be crossed, Crispin Tickell argues, and he names nine scientific stops that humanity should note and respect. In Atwood’s and Bacigalupi’s universes, several of these stops have been ignored; Tickell mentions that we have already experienced the results of ‘climate change’ and ‘loss of biodiversity,’ and are on the way to cross further scientific boundaries, such as ‘oceanic acidification,’ ‘changes in land use,’ or ‘chemical pollution’ (927). More to the point, though, he argues, underlying the scientific changes brought about by the Anthropocene are ‘six more general ones where the societal responses are critical’ (927) – six aspects of the liquid modern world the human species needs to realize are destructive and need to change:

First we need to confront the effects of our own proliferation in all its aspects; next to look again at a lot of economics and replace consumerism as a goal; then to work out new ways of generating energy; to manage and adapt to what is in effect climate destabilization; to give higher priority to conservation of the natural world; and last to create the necessary institutional means of coping with global problems in a world in which society is more joined together than ever before. (927)

In the MaddAddam trilogy, the world has become uninhabitable due to climate change, but Atwood only mentions the consequences in passing. In Oryx, Snowman wakes up on the beach, looking out towards the ocean where the ‘offshore towers stand out in dark silhouette […] the distant ocean grinding against the ersatz reefs of rusted car parts and jumbled bricks and assorted rubble’ (5). The scene shows the result of rising sea levels due to global warming: ‘the coastal aquifers turned salty and the northern permafrost melted and […] the Asian steppes turned to sand dunes’ (29). Similarly, Year speaks of ‘the big drought’ hitting the ‘Wisconsin desert’ (56), ‘the southern shores of the Mediterranean – once fruitful farmland, now a desert,’ and the ‘wholesale slaughter of ecosystems’ (90) that haunts the planet. Toby thinks back on her youth and reflects a realization everyone had, but no one talked about: ‘We’re using up the Earth. It’s almost gone’ (Year 239). Jimmy, as Hannes Bergthaller argues, ‘is presented as symptomatic for the larger failure of his culture to tame the destructive appetites of its members’ (733). He watches the world fall apart from the security of his Compound: ‘more
plagues, more famines, more floods, more insect or microbe or small-mammal outbreaks, more droughts, more chickenshit boy-soldier wars in distant countries. Why was everything so much like itself?’ (Oryx 307).

Atwood further focuses her world around the aspect of the proliferation of the human species in consumer society – satirically proposing a radical break with the human as the only option to stop the destruction of the environment. With dwindling natural resources and the continued ecological exploitation of the earth, Crake argues, humanity is doomed: ‘You can’t couple a minimum access to food with an expanding population indefinitely. Homo sapiens doesn’t seem able to cut himself off at the supply end. He’s one of the few species that doesn’t limit reproduction in the face of dwindling resources. In other words – and up to a point, of course – the less we eat, the more we fuck’ (Oryx 145). Humanity, the argument goes, will not learn and stop by itself – self-imposed discipline is impossible.

Consequently, Bergthaller states, Jimmy’s world is one of corporate greed and full-fledged consumption, which has ‘given up any pretence of disciplining people’s desires. Instead, it has instated their stimulation and gratification as the central object of the social order’ (733). It is, in effect, the extreme version of what Bauman describes as liquid modernity: Nation states do not exist anymore; instead an extreme form of ‘corpocracy’ (Appleton 64) rules a consumer society with an eye for maximizing their profit margins, replacing any ethical decision-making. Central to this rampant hypercapitalism is a shift from producing material goods to providing services for the consumer (as product) him- or herself, especially in regard to physical health. As Bauman notes, ‘the human body is in most cases far from perfect, and therefore needs to be tinkerered and tampered with to help it to improve or force it to meet to the desired standards’ (44 Letters 58). Health as a personal goal is being replaced by fitness and beauty – two standards that can easily be manipulated, so that customers can constantly be kept in need of more services. Bauman goes further and describes the creation of ever higher standards in order to increase profits: ‘demand must be created for commodities already launched on the market, thereby following the logic of a commercial company in search of profit, rather than the logic of human needs in search of satisfaction’ (44 Letters 76, original in italics). Corporations will generate a demand for the products, even if it means inventing a specific lack of health – Bauman’s example is ‘eyelash hypotrichosis’ (44 Letters 58), eyelashes that are too short and not dense enough for contemporary beauty standards, which makes them the target of corporate marketing. Instead of natural variety, these short eyelashes now become a medical condition in need of cure.
In Atwood’s fiction this logic becomes even darker and more twisted, as corporations not only provide health and beauty services (satirically reflected in their brand names: ‘HelthWyzer,’ ‘AnooYoo,’ and ‘RejoovenEsense’), making their clientele feel the need for wellness treatments and beauty enhancers. Rather, corporations turn back to health as an option for creating demand where none has been, an ‘economics of scarcity’: “The best diseases, from a business point of view,” said Crake, “would be those that cause lingering illnesses. Ideally – that is, for maximum profit – the patient should either get well or die just before all of his or her money runs out. It’s a fine calculation” (Oryx 256). In Year, the devastating consequence of this logic is demonstrated on Toby’s mother, who becomes ill, is being treated by HelthWyzer, and then finally dies, just after the family’s money has run out (25–26). The corporate machine works flawlessly, as Sarah Appleton remarks: ‘Instead of relying on supply and demand, the corporations have created artificial demands and promoted engineered dependencies. Manufactured diseases necessitate manufactured cures; body enhancements need to be maintained with age’ (71).

Bacigalupi’s world is similarly broken: Here climate change also caused sea levels to rise, making it necessary to build ‘dikes and levees’ (Windup 121) to prevent Bangkok from being drowned. Further, the exhaustion of energy resources has left the remaining civilization ruined: ‘the wrecked tower bones of the old Expansion’ (Windup 60) dominating the skyline of the city and high-rises now nothing more than slums ruled by the Dung Lord and inhabited by thousands of refugees – ‘A remnant glory from the old energy Expansion now become a heated tropic coffin without air conditioning or electricity to protect it from the glaze of the equatorial sun’ (Pump Six 164). But more destructive than the climate, hypercapitalist greed is responsible for the destruction of the earth in this world too. Consumer society still remains and is responsible for shaping the political landscape in most parts of the world into a ‘corpocracy.’

Instead of the health and beauty corporations, Bacigalupi’s ruling powers are ‘calorie companies’ (Windup 6) though, engineering and patenting food sources: In a first step, calorie companies produced genetically altered seeds, ‘so perfect from a CEO’s perspective’ because they were sterile: ‘A genetic dead-end. A one-way street. We now pay for a privilege that nature once provided willingly, for just a little labor’ (Pump Six 114). In a second step, they then created diseases and plagues that wiped out the non-patented (and thus not genetically secured) versions of the food: ‘cibiscosis 111.b, c, d; fa’gan fringe; bitter water mussels and their viral mutations […] blister rust’ (Windup
Unfortunately, the diseases mutated, wiped out the earth’s food supply, and forced the calorie companies to re-engineer their product constantly: ‘If the world is going to keep eating, we need to stay ahead of cibiscosis and blister rust and Nippon genehack weevil. It’s the only way’ (Windup 151). Calorie companies wield the sterile and secure versions of ‘TotalNutrient Wheat,’ ‘SoyPro,’ and ‘HiGro Corn’ (Windup 6) as political weapons, eliminating nation states when they oppose them – only Thailand retains its independence due to the existence of a secret seed bank, ‘while countries like India and Burma and Vietnam all fall like dominoes, starving and begging for the scientific advances of the calorie monopolies’ (Windup 3).

In terms of Tickell’s societal stops, the world of the Windup stories focuses not so much on over-population but rather on energy resources and their depletion, a topic, Bacigalupi argues, that garners too little interest from sf, as it should not simply be ‘window-dressing’ but rather feature ‘as a major component of the story’: ‘Where does energy come from? Where does the food come from? […] We have a perception of post-scarcity already. And that problem is rife in sf. I’d like sf to touch on those questions – it will inform the society we’ll build and the objects we’ll build in the future’ (cited in Newitz, ‘Paolo Bacigalupi’). His world is dominated by energy production after the depletion of fossil fuels, returned to a state as it was before the Anthropocene: ‘energy needed to animate human society came from muscle – human and other animal muscle – and management of water and wind’ (Tickell 929). In order to keep society running, ‘kink-springs’ (Windup 5) need to be wound through muscle power as ‘batteries’ for transportation and production – a world where any calorie spent as energy finds painstaking correspondence in a calorie eaten.

But most poignantly, both Atwood’s and Bacigalupi’s dystopian views also reveal the hypercapitalist exploitation of human life, which transforms the human into the inhuman. Foreshadowed in Bauman’s liquid modern consumer society, these dystopias transform even life and death into commodities. Justified by a system of ‘development,’ as Jean-François Lyotard famously called it, ‘political and socioeconomic decision-maker[s]’ can legitimate any measure to ensure the systemic continuation of, for example, ‘competitiveness’ (5). Within this system, development takes precedence over anything; development itself – as an end, not a means – ‘is reproduced by accelerating and extending itself according to its internal dynamic alone’ (7). The human, Lyotard argues, is ‘in the process of, constrained into, becoming inhuman’ (2), irrelevant as the system perpetuates itself.

In the MaddAddam trilogy, for example, the human body becomes
commodified through genetics. The elite, living in the Compounds, objectify the human body not just by shaping their own bodies, through wellness and beauty treatments, but also by specifying parameters for their offspring, creating made-to-order children via genetic agencies: ‘Infantade, Foetility, Perfectababe, one of those […] They’d have a few trial runs, and if the kids from those didn’t measure up they’d recycle them for the parts, until at last they got something that fit all their specs’ (*Oryx* 302).

Even more tangibly, the human body becomes a source of entertainment for the rich by consuming it as desired in sexual services, such as those exemplified in *Oryx*, whom Crake encounters as part of his university’s ‘Student Services,’ ‘trained professionals’ that provide sex to students that do not wish for ‘pair-bonding’ (*Oryx* 252). Further, intimacy is devalued by making private human acts publicly accessible – sexually through varied internet porn sites such as ‘HottTotts,’ ‘Tart of the Day,’ or ‘Superswallowers’ (*Oryx* 107), but also existentially in websites that commodify death, such as ‘Shortcircuit.com, brainfrizz.com, and deathrowlive.com […] they showed electrocutions and lethal injections,’ or ‘nitee-nite.com’ (*Oryx* 100–01), a website glorifying the suicide of people desperate for attention. At some point Snowman ponders how society could become so fixated on the body, ignoring soul and mind in finding pleasure and instant gratification, no abstract cultural forms (literature, art) necessary: ‘But the body had its own cultural forms. It had its own art. Executions were its tragedies, pornography was its romance’ (*Oryx* 102).

But the inhuman shows even stronger in the commodification of the body as a resource for product testing. The pleeblands, as Crake explains, ‘were a giant Petri dish: a lot of guck and contagious plasm got spread around there’ (*Oryx* 346), and he himself uses the pleeb’s sex clinics and brothels to test his pleasure pill: ‘Scales was testing the Blyss pluss for the ReJoov Corp, so they weren’t handing it out like candy – it was mostly for the top customers’ (*Year* 130).

In the pleeblands, the body can even be reduced to meat for consumption. In times of food scarcity, when ‘meat was hard to come by’ (*Oryx* 29), the fast-food chain ‘SecretBurgers’ is not squeamish about procuring their meat: ‘no one knew what sort of animal protein was actually in them’ (*Year* 33). SecretBurgers recycles street animals and even humans: ‘The local pleebmobs […] ran corpse disposals, harvesting organs for transplant, then running the gutted carcasses through the SecretBurgers grinders’ (*Year* 33). And even the rest of the body can be harvested through such an inhuman system, as the ‘garboil’ dumpsters prove, which can be found anywhere in the pleeblands:
Carbon garboil was made from any sort of carbon garbage — slaughterhouse refuse, old vegetables, restaurant tossout, even plastic bottles. The carbs went into a boiler, and oil and water came out, plus anything metal. Officially you couldn’t put in human corpses, but the kids made jokes about that. Oil, water, and shirt buttons. Oil, water, and gold pen nibs. (Year 76)

In Bacigalupi’s Windup stories, a similar system of recycling and composting exists, but (so far) human beings are not processed in these, unlike the genetically created animals and posthumans that can be found in Thailand. Emiko, a genetically engineered posthuman, a so-called ‘Windup,’ reflects her status as energy source: ‘She is a creature forbidden to them. The Thai men would happily mulch her in their methane composting pools. If they met her or an AgriGen calorie man, it is hard to say which they would rather see mulched first’ (Windup 37). The reference to the calorie man, a similarly illegal invader of Thailand, though entirely human, here indicates the inhuman system, which would see no calorie of energy wasted. The use of genetically altered creatures in energy recycling might feel just as inhuman, but shall be analyzed separately below.

More overtly constraining the human in the system of development in Bacigalupi’s fiction is the treatment of refugees as cheap and entirely inhuman tools for labor in the Thai kingdom. After a racially and religiously motivated genocide in the neighboring Malaysia has led tens of thousands of Malaysian Chinese refugees to flee to Thailand, the so-called ‘yellow cards’ have become a class of subhumans. They live in the ruined skyscrapers of former glory, stacking bodies to the thousands in stairwells, offices, and apartments, or in slums cobbled together from scrap wood and old tarps: ‘Certainly it is better than the Expansion tower internments of the yellow cards. A tarp slum is luxury for him’ (Windup 69). Denied access to official work, they are either forced to steal and cheat (‘another refugee forbidden from feeding herself except by wits and clever machinations’; Windup 24) or are exploited for simple work – eating enough calories so that they can prove their worth in energy: ‘And yet still they try to look vital, try to show that their bony limbs have calories to spare, if only someone will allow them to burn’ (Windup 134). Yellow card calories wind kink-springs or haul goods, but their bodies are worth nothing, when their capacity to spend the energy stored in them is gone. In ‘The Yellow Card Man,’ Tranh works unloading potato sacks when an accident shatters his knee and kills Hu, his co-worker. His employer is more upset about him than about the dead man, quickly discharging Tranh and hiring ‘a young man, fresh
and grinning’: ‘The manager looks back at Tranh with pity, then glances at Hu’s body and shrugs. It is an easy acquiescence. Hu will demand no reparations’ (Pump Six 188).

How reductive that systemic view of human bodies as potential sources of energy really is becomes clear in The Windup Girl when the yellow card Hock Seng visits the Dung Lord, a shady mobster living in luxury by exploiting the labor of yellow cards. The Dung Lord lives in a skyscraper, which still has an operational elevator, powered by the calories of human bodies: ‘[The man] is whisked up into darkness. A minute later, ballast men slide into view in the secondary shaft. They squeeze out of the lift and dash for the stairwell in a herd’ (Windup 135). The human body is reduced to weight and calories – no more than a commodity available in superfluous amounts.

As I have shown, in both Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy and Bacigalupi’s Windup stories, all life has become a commodity for hypercapitalist consumption and is employed to further corporate interests. In this, both fictional worlds are extrapolations of Bauman’s concept of consumer society within liquid modernity. But neither Atwood nor Bacigalupi arrests their dystopian vision there. In both cases, capitalist ingenuity goes further than simply exploiting existing nature – it rather creates new forms of genetic hybrids, designed for specific purposes.

3.2 Interconnectedness, the Animal Other, and Genetics

The figure of the animal, Cary Wolfe notes, has been part of (Western) cultural history going back at least to ancient Greece and Egypt, functioning as reminder and reflector of ‘the constitutive disavowals and self-constructing narratives enacted by that fantasy figure called “the human”’ (Animal Rites 6). ‘The animal’ has long been other to the construction of ‘the human,’ and as Wolfe further argues, the ‘transcendence of the “human” requires the sacrifice of the “animal” and the animalistic’ (Animal Rites 6) – resulting in the institutionalization of speciesism within Enlightenment humanist thought. In a similar vein of argument, Jacques Derrida sees the human as participant in an ‘unprecedented transformation’ (392) of human–animal relations that began 200 years ago but continues to intensify and accelerate even now. In a continuous process of development (Lyotard’s concept seems somewhat appropriate at this point) ‘the human’ has radically upended the ‘traditional forms of treatment of the animal’ for sacrifice, food, ‘domestication,’ or ‘exploitation of […] energy’ (Derrida 394) through
scientific progress and technological innovation. Derrida argues that through development, ‘we’ have transformed the concept of what an animal is:

This has occurred by means of farming and regimentalization at a demographic level unknown in the past, by means of genetic experimentation, the industrialization of what can be called the production for consumption of animal meat, artificial insemination on a massive scale, more and more audacious manipulations of the genome, the reduction of the animal not only to production and overactive reproduction (hormones, genetic crossbreeding, cloning, and so on) of meat for consumption but also of all sorts of other end products, and all of that in the service of a certain being and the so-called human well-being of man. (Derrida 394)

In the extrapolation of this ‘transformative process’ into the transgenic creation of new hybrid species, both Atwood and Bacigalupi engage in the debate on human exceptionalism and speciesism by on the one hand blurring the distinctive lines of species discourse and on the other hand disclosing a deep interconnectedness of all life on earth. Within the systemic thought of such dystopian hypercapitalist societies, both authors reveal that liberal humanist technoscience sees animals simply as ‘parts of human economic constellations and human-centered ecosystems: They are economic resources, commodities and means of production for human use’ (Noske 185). Life thus simply becomes a mechanical object to be manipulated and changed according to the needs of superior and exceptional ‘man’ – with all its horrible consequences for an intrinsic ethical value of life:

A nature represented in mechanistic terms as inferior, passive and mindless, whose only value and meaning is derived from the imposition of human ends, is simply replaceable by anything else which can serve those ends equally well – it can be reduced and regimented […] As you wipe out one species of fish, it can be replaced with another, in theory without limit. (Plumwood 49)

3.2.1 Animal Engineering for Human Use

Both Atwood’s MaddAddam trilogy and Bacigalupi’s Windup stories challenge this mechanistic reduction of life to a replaceable function within the anthropological order (Warkentin 86) by introducing transgenic species into their fictional universes that have surpassed their
Biopunk Dystopias

genetic programming and proven to be rather adaptive. In both worlds, new species of animals are genetically engineered to answer specific needs within human culture that other animals could not provide for. Some of these species are harmless and ‘function’ according to their specified parameters: In Atwood’s fiction, for example, the Mo’Hair sheep created with long colorful hair to provide humans with artificial hair extensions do not interfere with nature and indeed live harmoniously with their conventional brethren, even though they are not meant to be part of wildlife: ‘The long hair of the Mo’Hairs isn’t in good shape – there are clot-like snarls in it, and twigs and dry leaves. Onscreen, in advertisements, their hair had been shiny [...] But they’re not faring so well without their salon treatments’ (Year 238). Atwood actually engages in literary experimentation with these critters, providing the world of her trilogy with a complete “surreal zoo” of transgenic species’ (Bouson 140). Aside from the Mo’Hairs, other rather harmless beings include the rakunk – a splice between skunk and raccoon, created as a pet, ‘a clean animal, with a nice disposition’ (Oryx 60); the kanga-lamb – designed as a food source, ‘a new Australian splice that combined the placid character and high-protein yield of the sheep with the kangaroo’s resistance to disease’ (Oryx 352); glow-in-the-dark bunnies (just like Eduardo Kac’s ‘Alba’); and butterflies with ‘wings the size of pancakes [...] [in] shocking pink’ (Oryx 252).

Similarly, in Bacigalupi’s world, genetically designed beings exist that are created for specific purposes and do not interfere with the ‘natural’ order. For example, engineered ‘megodonts,’ ‘fifteen feet at the shoulder, ten tons of muscle’ (Windup 17), are used to provide all necessary power for transportation and production of material goods: ‘The massive creatures barely resembled the elephants that had once provided their template DNA. Generippers had honed them to a perfect balance of musculature and hunger for a single purpose: to inhale calories and do terrible labors without complaint’ (Pump Six 102). Further, there are genetically engineered sniffer dogs that signal the presence of forbidden materials (like illegal seeds) via their fur: ‘It snuffled his clothing, bared hungry teeth, sniffled again, then its black ruff iridesced blue and it relaxed and wagged its stubby tail’ (Pump Six 99). Interestingly, these creatures are not marked by the narrative, but function as ‘genetic window-dressing,’ in Atwood’s case to satirically signal the possibilities of splicing, in Bacigalupi’s case to illustrate aspects of necessity in his energy-scarce world. Though they are not part of any natural habitat, they are nonetheless harmlessly integrated into both natural and anthropological order – they have an economic purpose, which they fulfill without larger complications to nature or man.
3.2.2 Invasive Species and the Environmental Cost

Some species, though, are more adaptive and surpass the original intent for their genetic programming by far – thus becoming a human-made form of evolutionary intervention, as Bacigalupi argues for his world’s neo-felines: ‘Cheshires were a way to illustrate the unforeseen consequences of an invasive species. Something that initially seems harmless and entertaining turns out to have ecosystem consequences as it tears through the songbird population’ (cited in Vorda 17). In his stories, Bacigalupi’s cheshires function as a reminder that human hubris and curiosity will lead to unforeseen side effects:

Hock Seng has heard that cheshires were supposedly created by a calorie executive – some PurCal or AgriGen man, most likely – for a daughter’s birthday. A party favor for when the little princess turned as old as Lewis Carroll’s Alice. The child guests took their new pets home where they mated with natural felines, and within twenty years, the devil cats were on every continent and Felis domesticus was gone from the face of the world, replaced by a genetic string that bred true ninety-eight percent of the time. (Windup 26–27)

Just like the cat from Carroll’s Alice in Wonderland, the cheshires can blend with their environment, appearing only as shimmers in the shadows, surviving either as fierce predators or as carrion eaters, hard to kill and perfectly adapted to their hostile surroundings: ‘They are clever, thriving in places where they are despised. Almost supernatural in their tenacity. Sometimes it seems that they smell blood before it is even spilled. As if they can peer a little way into the future and know precisely where their next meal will appear’ (Windup 27).

The chameleon-like abilities of the cheshires make them better-adapted predators and thus superior to natural evolution: ‘We create a new species in a heartbeat of evolutionary time, and our songbird population disappears almost as quickly” (Pump Six 115). In the fictional world of the Windup stories, cheshires function as reminders that genetic engineering allows a purely cultural intervention into nature – both in the sense of their inception stemming from a work of literature and in the sense of their artificial human creation, spliced together by generippers for the sole purpose of supplying a superfluous consumer demand. The hypercapitalist desire, fulfilled without consideration of ecological consequence, leads to more than simply a new species – instead the cheshires become symbols of the fragility of natural hierarchies, in which the human sees itself at the top, at least for the
moment: ‘A high-tech homage to Lewis Carroll, a few dirigible and clipper ship rides, and suddenly entire classes of animals are wiped out, unequipped to fight an invisible threat” (Windup 114). The cats and their ‘ever-present, and unceasing gaze,’ as Andrew Hageman argues, are constant reminders of the inability to control natural adaptation: ‘It is their gaze rather than their famous dazzling smiles that is deeply unnerving as it shines from the dank darkness of alleyways and garbage piles’ (296). In introducing the cheshires, Bacigalupi signals to readers the deep interconnection with nature and the posthuman subjectivity at play – that humans are not separate from zoe, but always ‘become with’ other species, as Haraway argues: ‘species of all kinds, living and not, are consequent on a subject- and object-shaping dance of encounters’ (When Species 17). Culture and nature interact; they shape each other and are never separate. All species are part of this rhizomatic network of connections and cheshires are the fictional prompt of the unforeseeable intricacy of these interactions.

In terms of a mechanized and utilitarian view of nature, this uncontrollability and clear transgression of their anthropological purpose pushes the cheshires into a monstrous ontological state, though – neither natural nor cultural, the cats remain outside of their clearly hierarchical position and defy the human symbolic order. In the stories, cheshires are consequently symbolically banished from that order; they are rejected as horrific and soulless. Most characters react to them with ‘instinctive recoil’ and ‘gut revulsion’ (McKibben, cited in Bouson 153) against anything genetically engineered. Further, cheshires are hunted and declared felis sacra, to appropriate Giorgio Agamben’s term – killing them ‘carries no karmic cost’ in Buddhist Thailand, as they are considered unnatural ‘empty vessels. No soul fills them’ (Windup 173–74). Nonetheless, their spiritual status as soulless and thus as exempt from the Buddhist cycle of rebirth cannot hide their uncertain ontological status. The doubts of an agent of the Environment Ministry tasked to kill them make this clear:

‘They bleed like any other animal [...] I’ve killed thousands of them. Thousands. I’ve killed six men in my life and never regretted any of them, but I’ve killed thousands of cheshires and have never felt at ease.’ He pauses, scratches behind his ear [...] ‘I sometimes wonder if my family’s cibiscosis was karmic retribution for all those cheshires.’
‘It couldn’t be. They’re not natural.’
Somchai shrugs. ‘They breed. They eat. They live. They breathe.’ He smiles slightly. ‘If you pet them, they will purr.’
Jaidee makes a face of disgust.

‘It’s true. I have touched them. They are real. As much as you or I.’ (Windup 174)

In their ontological liminality, the cheshires are truly monstrous creatures: ‘they 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’ (J. Cohen 6). Suspended on the boundary of life and death (as empty, soulless vessels), nature and culture, and there/not-there (due to their shifting fur), the cheshires undermine any hierarchical clarity. They threaten the established order and are a constant reminder that ‘the human’ finds itself in a similarly precarious position in regard to the posthuman as the ordinary housecat when faced with cheshires. As Hageman notes, this fierce antagonism towards the genetically engineered nature of both cheshires and posthumans unites them in that Emiko, the representative of the posthuman in the novel, feels kinship with the creatures and understands their transgressive, even revolutionary power: ‘They are too much improved for this world, I think’ (Windup 113; see Hageman 296).

The same superiority, the impossibility of fitting into any natural niche, is true for quite a few examples of Atwood’s transgenic creations. The inhabitants of this ‘brave new biosphere’ represent emergence and flux in the relationship between humans and other species (Rozelle 70). The best example of this flux might be found in the change that overcomes the relationship between humans and dogs, which Haraway calls the ‘fleshly material-semiotic presences in the body of technoscience [...]. Partners in the crime of human evolution, they are in the garden from the get-go’ (Companion Species 5). In Oryx and Crake, this most domesticated of all companion species is turned into a weapon to be wielded – called ‘BioDefences’: ‘They aren’t dogs, they just look like dogs. They’re wolvogs – they are bred to deceive. Reach out to pat them, they’ll take your hand off’ (249–50). Created to manipulate human emotion and to use that evolutionary link to the companion species, the wolvogs represent the ultimate perversion of that ‘obligatory, constitutive, historical, protean relationship’ (Haraway, Companion Species 12) that exists between the two species. It reduces the complexity of the species’ interrelation, which encompassed the full array of positive and negative – ‘waste, cruelty, indifference, ignorance and loss, as well as [...] joy, invention, labor, intelligence and play’ (Haraway, Companion Species 12) – by producing the animal as a genetic commodity, ‘commission work’ (Oryx 250) for the security company, nature fully separated from
culture and the animal as object of specific use. Already in its genetic design, this species incorporates the impossibility of fitting into a natural niche, while at the same time threatening its anthropological purpose. As guard dogs, the wolvogs are nearly impossible to handle – ‘no way of making pals with them’ (Oryx 250) – but after they escape they become an even larger threat to the human population. Indeed, after the plague has wiped out most human life, non-human life begins to thrive in the novels, as Lee Rozelle rightly remarks: Instead of an ecological wasteland, the world surrounding Snowman is full of life – it reveals ‘a resilience and increased adaptive capacity of plant and animals species’ (65), including the transgenic species.

The problem – at least for the remaining humans – is that the new transgenic species challenge any remaining delusions of a mastery over nature by adapting to life beyond their preconceived functions. Where geneticists (very reminiscent of the biopunk manifesto) design new life forms ‘as an after-hours hobby’ by simply ‘fooling around’ because ‘create-an-animal was so much fun […] it made you feel like God’ (Oryx 59), it seems only fitting that many of the genetically engineered creatures do not remain fixed in natural niches and threaten all categorization: ‘the snat, an unfortunate blend of snake and rat: they had to get rid of those’ (Oryx 59–60), or the bobkitten, created to hunt glow-in-the-dark bunnies. In their transgression of genetic and anthropological purpose, bobkittens thus strongly repeat the matrix of Bacigalupi’s cheshires:

Those things were introduced as a control, once the big green rabbits had become such a prolific and resistant pest. Smaller than bobcats, less aggressive – that was the official story about the bobkittens. They were supposed to eliminate feral cats, thus improving the almost non-existent songbird population. The bobkittens wouldn’t bother much about birds, as they would lack the lightness and agility necessary to catch them. Thus went the theory. All of which came true, except that the bobkittens soon got out of control in their turn. Small dogs went missing from backyards, babies from prams; short joggers were mauled. (Oryx 199–200)

Just as with the cheshires, the genetically created species does not adhere to genetic program, instead expanding its natural niche and proving threatening to the human in both the symbolic and the ontological order by becoming monstrous.
3.2.3 Human-Becoming-Animal or Animal-Becoming-Human

The one creature in Atwood’s trilogy that ‘transgress[es] natural barriers and challenge[s] the solid line between humans and nonhumans’ (Galbreath 2) most aggressively is the pigoon, created as medical organ donors for humans:

The goal of the pigoon project was to grow an assortment of foolproof human-tissue organs in a transgenic knockout pig host – organs that would transplant smoothly and avoid rejection, but would also be able to fend off attacks by opportunistic microbes and viruses, of which there were more strains every year. A rapid-maturity gene was spliced in so the pigoon kidneys and livers and hearts would be ready sooner, and now they were perfecting a pigoon that could grow five or six kidneys at a time. Such a host animal could be reaped of its extra kidneys; then, rather than being destroyed, it could keep on living and grow more organs. (Oryx 27–28)

What makes the pigoons categorically so challenging and transgressive is their infusion with human DNA – first they are ‘customized, using cells from individual human donors’ (Oryx 28) so that customers can have their own body parts regrown, then later in the novel, the pigoons are spliced with human brain tissue: ‘It’s the neuro-regeneration project. We now have genuine human neocortex tissue growing in a pigoon. Finally, after all those duds!’ (Oryx 66). This, of course, is the central argument for all blurring of categorial order, as Warkentin rightly notes: ‘The purpose of this process is to make a pig’s body less pig-like so that it can become more compatible with human bodies, and in essence, more human (at least on a physiological level)’ (90).

As a result, the pigoons completely undermine any conception of human exceptionalism and frightfully cast into doubt the neat boundaries of nature/culture and human/animal that liberal humanism builds subjectivity upon. On the one hand, pigoons clearly destabilize exceptionalist views by becoming in part human. When human organs can be replaced by parts grown in other animal species, this process reduces the human itself to be a part of a technoscientific, mechanized view of nature. As Chung-Hao Ku argues, Atwood’s ‘bioengineered creatures […] eventually interrogate their human creators’ physical constitution and hierarchical supremacy […] [they] do not simply negate animality […] their partial resemblance to human beings actually challenges the human form as well’ (112). Further, both pigoon and
human are reduced from life forms to mere values in a utilitarian system of hypercapitalist consumption, ‘reducing both non-human animals and humans to controllable commodities’ (Dunlap 3).

On the other hand, pigoons once more exemplify the ‘unscrupulous use of zoe’ (Botta 244), which capitalism practices without regard for animal subjectivity or the interconnection of natural ecosystems. Pigoons are ‘non-human slaves and voiceless properties in the Compound-plantations, [...] judged by their utility to humanity’ (Galbreath 3). Their use is degraded to medical organ farm or to food source – which, in connection with the destabilization of human/animal boundaries, becomes an even bigger challenge to existing hierarchies. As Jovian Parry notes, eating animal flesh is in itself a destabilizing act in the human/animal divide:

Although the act of eating meat can be seen as a powerful assertion of human supremacy and dominance over nonhuman animals and the natural world [...] thus serving to maintain this distinction, it simultaneously blurs it. The act of eating animal flesh has often been thought to transmit those desirable qualities which humans have filed under ‘animal,’ such as strength and virility (244–45)

When the pigoons are first introduced and infused with human DNA (not yet the neocortex tissue), the categorial insecurity already shows through, exemplified in Jimmy’s reaction to the rich assortment of pork products in the cafeteria:

‘Pigoon pie again,’ they would say. ‘Pigoon pancakes, pigoon popcorn. Come on, Jimmy, eat up!’ This would upset Jimmy; he was confused about who should be allowed to eat what. He didn’t want to eat a pigoon, because he thought of the pigoons as creatures much like himself. Neither he nor they had a lot of say in what was going on. (Oryx 29)

At the heart of this insecurity lies the cultural acceptance of anthropophagy. If human and pigeon life are gradually becoming the same – as Ku states, ‘crossing the frontier between human and animal, pigoons are now the double – the demoting yet curing, fearful yet adorable other – of human beings’ (113) – then eating human flesh becomes acceptable. The practices of meat consumption regarding SecretBurgers support this argument. And in MaddAddam, confronted with the posthuman other of the pigoons, humanity (what remains of it) has no trouble at all in ‘turn[ing] them into bacon’: ‘Frankenbacon, considering they’re splices. I still feel kind
of weird about eating them. They’ve got human neocortex tissue’ (*Madd* 19). Even though the MaddAddam group not only knows that pigoons are posthuman (in the sense of their technoscientific creation and incorporation of human DNA) but features many members recruited from an environmentalist group that promoted a *zoe*-centric approach to life, the surviving humans have no qualms about slaughtering the pigoons: “‘Dig in, sweetie. Pig in three forms: bacon, ham, and chops.’ It hadn’t taken them long to backslide on the Gardener Vegivows, thinks Toby’ (*Madd* 34). Parry argues that inherent in this urge to eat meat is the humanist assumption of an exceptional and superior position over nature, as well as the ideology that eating meat (exerting power over nature) is ‘an inescapable part of true human nature’ (252).

Ironically, it is exactly this assumption of ‘human nature’ as rightfully on top of the food chain that is being challenged by the pigoons. From novel to novel, Atwood presents the pigoons progressively more as posthuman, disrupting the superior position of the human not only by ‘dehumanizing’ it, but also by manifesting human-like traits in the pigoons – thus depicting them as ‘men in porcine masks’ (Ku 114).

In *Oryx and Crake*, the pigoons are first shown to grow tusks and become wild, ‘reverting to type now they’d gone feral, a fast-forward process considering their rapid-maturity genes’ (45). They turn into aggressive predators, at some point starting to hunt Snowman for food – reversing the food chain and making the human edible meat. The human neocortex makes them more predatory, and Snowman experiences first-hand their tactical thinking: ‘Those beasts are clever enough to fake a retreat, then lurk around the next corner. They’d bowl him over, trample him, then rip him open, munch up the organs first […] A brainy and omnivorous animal, the pigoon. Some of them may even have human neocortex tissue growing in their crafty, wicked heads” (*Oryx* 284). And indeed, the pigoons recognize weapons, retreat from perceived threats, communicate with each other, and plan their attack by cutting Snowman off from his escape route and trapping him in a gatehouse:

> Now one of them spots him through the window. More grunting: now they’re all looking up at him [...] Team players, the pigoons. There’s a lot of muscle out there. If they can’t push through the door they’ll wait him out. They’ll take it in relays, some grazing outside, others watching. (*Oryx* 322–23)

The pigoons, as Sharon Wilson notes, ‘get revenge on human beings who lack reverence for other beings or the natural world. Like the pigs
in *Animal Farm*, the pigoons in this cautionary tale show intelligence and teamwork: on Snowman’s quest to the destroyed compound, they maliciously watch and attack’ (113).

Wilson’s comment, especially the intertextual connection, suggests human qualities (revenge, politics), thus an anthropomorphizing of the pigoons, which at least for *Oryx and Crake* could still be relativized in that it is Snowman’s feverish perspective (localized in the narration) that ascribes the human traits, perhaps still retained from his childhood experiences and reemerging when he is threatened by the categorically transgressive beings: ‘The adults were slightly frightening [...] [t]hey glanced up at him as if they saw him, really saw him, and might have plans for him later’ (*Oryx* 32). In *The Year of the Flood*, though, Atwood adds Toby’s perception of the human qualities of the pigoons. After she notices three ‘huge pigs’ by her vegetable garden that are not deterred by the fence but begin to dig (‘They’ll tunnel under’; 18–19), she kills one of them with her rifle – driving the rest off. The pigs return one night and get into the garden: ‘They’ve dug under the fence, then gone on a rampage. Surely it was less like a feeding frenzy than a deliberate act of revenge. The earth is furrowed and trampled: anything they haven’t eaten they’ve bulldozed’ (*Year* 319–20). Once again, the narrative is internally focalized on a human threatened by extinction, blurring the line between objective reality and Toby’s perception when she notices the group looking in her direction: ‘Beady eyes, one per pig: they’re looking at her sideways. They’ve been watching for her: it’s as if they want to witness her dismay. Moreover, they’re out of range: if she shoots at them she’ll waste the bullets. She wouldn’t put it past them to have figured that out’ (320). So, when Ashley Dawson argues that the pigoons ‘engage in lamentable human behavior such as the revenge-driven destruction of Toby’s vegetable garden’ (68), an anthropomorphizing view of the splices seems to manifest itself in the novel. Or it may just be the human(ist) failure to make sense of a non-human animal culture.

Indeed, Atwood makes it hard not to establish a human baseline when evaluating the pigoons’ actions when she describes their treatment of the boar that Toby shot in the beginning of the novel: ‘There are fronds scattered about, on top of the boar’s carcass and beside it [...] Also flowers. Are those rose petals, from the roses by the driveway? She’d heard of something like this [...] about elephants [...] But pigs? Usually they’d just eat a dead pig, the same way they’d eat anything else’ (*Year* 328). Toby here functions as reflector of the humanist, anthropocentric view that ‘excludes animal forms of society, culture and language by definition’ (Noske 187). Confronted with proof against such reductionist views of culture, Toby begins to voice concern, though:
'Could the pigs have been having a funeral? Could they be bringing memorial bouquets? She finds this idea truly frightening. But why not? [...] We believe the Animals have Souls. Why then would they not have funerals?’ (Year 328). In allowing doubt that the pigoons have some sort of culture, Atwood again undermines the clear-cut demarcation of the animal/human boundary and questions the belief in human exceptionalism. In fact, the pigoons seem to have evolved beyond their genetic program: ‘the practice of mixing human and pig genetic material for numerous generations has endowed pigoons with a certain amount of human similarity’ (Warkentin 93). In this, the novels clearly show that ‘organisms can and will respond to biological and ecological changes in unpredictable ways’ (Warkentin 94).

Moreover, in MaddAddam, the final novel of the trilogy, Atwood goes so far as to endow the pigoons not simply with the agency to find a natural niche, attack the humans threatening their niche, and create an animal culture, but also with enough intellectual reasoning power to become fully subjective posthuman creatures. The novel’s concluding parts reveal a tribal community of pigoons, capable of interspecies communication, politics, law, and diplomacy.

Atwood even introduces compassion for the pigoons and an understanding of their culture through the other posthuman creatures in her story world. The Crakers can ‘speak’ with the pigoons via their ‘Craker voice, not human’ (Madd 223) – they function as ‘translators’ between the human and the animal. At first Toby and the other MaddAddamites are skeptical of any communication, dismissing the experience as the result of drugs and hallucinations, but soon the pigoon community appears to seek help from the human group: ‘It’s weird. They’re marching. It’s like a pig parade’ (Madd 267). More than 50 adult pigs plus their young have gathered, offering a temporary ‘ceasefire’ (‘They have said they will not harm you today; Madd 268), carrying a dead piglet (‘A tiny one, with its throat cut. Its front trotters are tied together with rope’; Madd 269) and presenting the humans with a proposition for interspecies cooperation:

They are asking for help. They want to stop those ones. Those ones who are killing their pig babies [...] They want you to help them with the sticks you have. They know how you kill, by making holes. And then blood comes out. They want you to make such holes in the three bad men. With blood [...] And in return [...] they will never again try to eat your garden. Or any of you [...] Even if you are dead, they will not eat you. And they ask that you must no longer make holes in them, with blood, and cook them in a smelly
bone soup, or hang them in the smoke, or fry them and then eat them. Not any more. (*Madd* 269–70)

A deal between pigoons and humans is struck, the posthuman Crakers facilitating an understanding between cultures (‘We’re too stupid, we don’t understand their languages. So there has to be a translator’; *Madd* 270). But this translator obviously problematizes the depiction of a pigoon culture – there is a double distancing at work here, as Blackbeard (the Craker boy) translates pigoon snorts and thinking into human language, without himself fully grasping the human concepts. It is thus unclear in this passage if the pigoons use concepts such as ‘bad men’ or ‘smelly bone’ or if these are Blackbeard’s constructions. Is Blackbeard responsible for the assortment of terms for food preparations (cooking, smoking, frying) or are the pigoons? Maybe these concepts are even the results of another distancing, that of human recording of posthuman translation of animal language. The novel itself presents as an epistolary-style recording, written by Toby, thus implying another agency at work.

Consequently, the anthropocentric view of that animal culture remains, in the writing but also in the character’s reflection. When the pigoons leave their dead piglet for the humans to consume, Toby judges the act by human ethical standards: ‘Curious funeral rites, thinks Toby. You strew the beloved with flowers, you mourn, and then you eat the corpse. No-holds barred recycling. Even Adam and the Gardeners never went that far’ (*Madd* 271). Here Atwood dwells on the funeral rite as iconic sign for the existence of culture, returning to the ritual of flowers and composting several times. When two humans need to be buried later, the pigoons carry the dead ‘as a sign of friendship and interspecies co-operation,’ and once more, cultural understanding has to be facilitated by translation:

Following a short discussion, the Pigoons understood that we did not wish to eat Adam and Jimmy, nor would we wish the Pigoons to do that. And they concurred. Their rules in such matters appear complex: dead farrow are eaten by pregnant mothers to provide more protein for growing infants, but adults, and especially adults of note, are contributed to the general ecosystem. All other species are, however, up for grabs. (*Madd* 373)

As before, the anthropocentric position lingers and the reader remains uncertain who used the term ‘friendship’ and what it designates for the pigoons. Are the pigoons really reasoning for an economy of protein?
Do they have an understanding of the term ‘ecosystem’ or ‘species’? Readers are unable to breach the conceptual distance, which exists in these passages because of translation and narration.

In the battle between the MaddAddam group (recruited from both humans and pigoons) and the Painballers, Atwood portrays the pigoons as fine military tacticians, standing guard and clearing away possible cover (340), scouting possible routes and dangers, using messengers and running in formation (‘the main van of older and heavier Pigoons: the tank battalion’; Madd 346). Later, they take part in a tribunal, voting in unison on the death of the Painballers (Madd 370). Interestingly, the Crakers do not understand the concepts of ‘voting’ and holding a ‘trial’; nonetheless they function as cultural translators. Aside from the military cooperation, Atwood also includes a scene of communal bliss, showing pigoon families enjoying a swimming pool: ‘The younger ones enjoy splashing and squealing; the older sows and boars take brief dips, then watch over their piglets and shoats indulgently, lounging at the poolside. Toby wonders if pigs get sunburn’ (Madd 284). And later, when all have agreed to uphold their contract for the future, two pigoon adolescents are found in the garden, technically breaking the agreement:

A conference was called. The Pigoons sent a delegation of three adults, who seemed both embarrassed and cross, as adults put to shame by their young usually are. Blackbeard stood as interpreter. It would not happen again, said the Pigoons. The young offenders had been threatened with a sudden transition to a state of bacon and soup bones, which seems to have made the desired impression. (Madd 378)

In these scenes, as one reviewer remarks, Atwood seems to offer a ‘walking, snorting tribute to Animal Farm’ (Churchwell 43), fitting well with the anthropomorphic and clearly satirical tone of the scenes. Unfortunately, the same tone and intertextual reference also undermines any posthumanist reading. The depiction of the pigoons as ‘men in porcine masks’ goes beyond the indeterminate reading of posthuman–human translation present in the scenes discussed earlier. Pigoons as military masterminds, as summer guests at the poolside, or in the roles of disobedient, rebellious youth and shamed, disapproving parent – all of these are blatantly anthropocentric, not due to narrative unreliability or translational distance.

Bacigalupi’s depiction of the transgressive and categorically ambivalent cheshires shows a subtle questioning of the position of the human in face of the posthuman, thus allowing for a posthumanist reading that
challenges notions of humanist subjectivity and engages its readers in critical dystopian thinking. It reveals a *zoe*-centric worldview, in which the human is interconnected and always *becoming with*, as Haraway put it, other species and the environment. Atwood’s trilogy, on the other hand, gestures towards a ‘rejection of the anthropomorphic viewpoint [...] [which] struggles to re-position humanity as one species among many in a web of natural connections’ (Hatch 181) but in the end returns to the safe harbor of humanist thinking. Pigoon society can be accepted because of its human construction – even when direct communication fails, the liberal humanist concepts of freedom, equality, and brotherhood somehow seem to apply. Brothers in arms come together over their similarities rather than having to negotiate the ‘*differénd,*’ the ‘absent phrase’ of the ‘broken discourse between humans and animal others’ (Galbreath 3) that led to suffering and the mechanized view of nature (how easy it was to forget Gardener teachings and utilize animals).

Atwood’s trilogy does open negotiations of human–animal relations; it proposes the possibility of non-anthropocentric culture and accepts an interconnection of humans with their environment – as such the books allow for the posthuman view to be expressed. But the humanist view is similarly present and grows stronger towards the third installment, culminating in the positive outlook towards the future that is owed mainly to its humanist values. Utopia lies in the posthuman – simply because it is seen to be human in essence.

### 3.3 The Better Human: Posthumanity and the Replacement of ‘Us’

As we have seen, the depiction of animal–human hybridity in both Bacigalupi and Atwood has already undermined clear-cut distinctions of categorial separateness and human exceptionalism. Furthermore, both writers understand the potential of genetic manipulation by contemporary technoscience as deeply troubling and threatening to human subjectivity and the position of the human within the interconnected web that is *zoe*.

To illustrate such a threatened position, both Atwood and Bacigalupi thus enact the posthuman not simply categorically by undermining human conceptions and values but by introducing a posthuman, genetically engineered species as a tangible danger to human superiority.

In Atwood’s trilogy, the Children of Crake, or Crakers, are created by a genius geneticist as an improvement on the human species. Financed by the corporation as ‘floor models’ (*Oryx* 363) for the creation of made-to-order children, the Crakers are designed by Crake to be ‘the future
human race,’ ‘the art of the possible’ (Oryx 366–67), with customizable features to be chosen out of a catalogue. Physical beauty, rapid growth, and resistance to diseases and environmental hazards are part of the package, as is the removal of any ‘negative’ features of the human (according to Crake) such as hierarchical, symbolic, or competitive thinking. The Crakers are docile, vegetarian, friendly. They have no concept of time, death, God, or art. They can resist UV radiation, repel insects with a citrus smell, fend off predatory animals via marking their territory, and come into heat in regular intervals in order to consensually mate in groups, favoring communal social interaction and not pair-bonding (Oryx 363ff.). As Gerry Canavan argues, the Crakers ‘should be understood as a hyperbolic version of the fantasy that we might turn back the clock and begin history anew, this time avoiding the mistake of so-called “civilization”’ (152).

In Bacigalupi’s world, on the other hand, the posthuman is created solely for utilitarian purposes, a species of servants, soldiers, and workers. His New People are genetically altered to serve specific functions and to address the demographic changes in Japan, where too few young need to care for too many old. New People are endowed with superhuman characteristics, such as perfect appearance – symbolized in their almost flawless skin without pores –, augmented senses (Windup 35), extreme speed (Windup 300), and near-perfect hand-eye coordination. In order to control such superhuman beings, New People have been created with fail-safe mechanisms such as genetically forced obedience (‘canine DNA’; Windup 184), sterility, and (except for the military models) the eponymous characteristic of ‘stylized and deliberate movements,’ so reminiscent of nineteenth-century automata that they are called ‘windup’ (Windup 36).

3.3.1 Hierarchies of Power: Laughing at the Posthuman

Bacigalupi uses this feature of ‘artificial’ movement to negotiate the necessity of power hierarchies between the species, combining in this one element a marker that excludes and one that demotes. Her movements reveal Emiko as other and as inferior: ‘All they see are stutter-stop motions. A joke. An alien toy. A windup’ (Windup 36). Designed as a courtesan, a geisha of ancient Japan, Emiko is made with a specific purpose in mind that already historically links her to inferiority and servitude. In that limited cultural context her motions seem almost ‘natural’: ‘The girl is perfect, precise as clockwork, and contextualized by the tea ceremony, all her motions take on a ritual grace’ (Windup 297). Her ‘natural’ position is that of servant, and thus obedience is both genetically engineered
and culturally instilled by training within a crèche (Windup 153–54). Within that original cultural niche, Emiko’s position would already be conflicted, as she merely fulfills a specific purpose, nonetheless gaining a certain amount of respect for performing well: ‘She is loyal, thoughtful, and skilled. A necessary tool. She is as necessary as a hoe for a farmer or a sword for a samurai’ (Windup 298). Interesting to note is the contradiction inherent in her creation by modern technoscience (genetics) and the comparison with outdated technology that references back to ancient Japanese traditions, such as a hoe or a sword. But even though this utilitarian view of New People as replaceable technology dominates, it is relativized by a belief system that supports the hierarchical position as ‘almost human’ and promises the reward of progression: ‘Their duty was to serve, their honor was to serve, and their reward would come in the next life, when they became fully human. Service would yield the greatest rewards’ (Windup 153–54).

Outside this specific niche, Emiko reveals herself as alien other in several different ways: First, she is a Japanese among the Thai, and for the social and cultural differences alone ostracized (‘the dirty Japanese get what is coming to them’; Windup 38). Second, due to her privileged position in Japanese society, as a rich man’s servant, Emiko is ‘manufactured to have a porcelain skin and reduced pores, but it means she is subject to overheating’ (Windup 300) outside of air-conditioned rooms. In the swelter of Contraction-era Thailand, she is continuously dependent on others to provide her with cost- and calorie-intensive cooling (ice, water, fans), again emphasizing both her inferior position and categorical otherness. Third, when she moves with control, others see her motion as artificial and ‘stutter-stop flashbulb strange’ (Windup 35), but when Emiko is forced against her will to move in a sexual rape act on stage, her motion becomes the object of a power play, ridiculing her, and revealing her for what she is, inferior, inhuman, and helpless:

[E]veryone is laughing at how Emiko’s body twitches and jerks now that she is in a panic, coughing the liquid from her lungs. She is nothing but a silly marionette creature now, all stutter-stop motion – herky-jerky heechy-keechy – with no trace of the stylized grace that her mistress Mizumi-sensei trained into her when she was a girl in the crèche. There is no elegance or care to her movements now; the telltales of her DNA are violently present for all to see and mock. (Windup 37)

The tone of ridicule and degradation is important in this scene. Emiko’s otherness is displayed in front of an audience as a release
valve – providing distance from the threats that her ontological status represents, but also from the socio-economic reality of inferiority of those that cannot afford the luxury of such items as genetically engineered labor. But at the same time, the value of New People as a species is diminished; they are relegated to their position as inferior within the ‘natural’ order – a position that Emiko accepts by implicit agreement with the ridicule. The passage is internally focalized through Emiko and thus reveals her own silent complicity, as she defines herself solely through the obvious distinguishing mark: ‘Her limbs twitch and flail, giving everyone a chance to see her true nature’ (*Windup* 37).

Most characters in the book treat Emiko as inferior, using her movement as a telltale marker of otherness. Emiko is confronted with racist remarks and actions – her movement is ridiculed and singled out as signature of an unnatural creation. Emiko’s own reaction seems to confirm the obvious success of this social strategy as she demurely accepts an inferior position. For the reader, the indignity of the scene and the repeated rape and torture that Emiko has to endure throughout the novel have a different effect though. The allegorical nature of Emiko’s struggle becomes obvious and forces readers to question their own positions of privilege and strategies of accepting or rejecting otherness. The characters in the novel laugh at otherness to hide their anxiety about the threat it represents; the reader on the other hand is forced into compassion. The abuse and violence of the scenes are so drastic and overtly described that they reveal the perpetrators as inhuman. As Bacigalupi himself argues, ‘it seemed like the reader needed to be in the room during her abuse, so that her later actions would seem acceptable’ (cited in Vorda 18). Emiko’s mistreatment is so hard to bear that readers are driven to empathize with her – realizing posthuman subjectivity and a fundamental connection despite her perceived otherness, not because she is human, but as Derrida argued (for animals, but true here for the posthuman nonetheless), because she suffers. To pose the question, ‘Can they suffer?’ he says, means to be implicitly asking about an inability to act and realizing the powerlessness of that position:

Being able to suffer is no longer a power, it is a possibility without power, a possibility of the impossible. Mortality resides there, as the most radical means of thinking the finitude that we share with animals, the mortality that belongs to the very finitude of life, to the experience of compassion, to the possibility of sharing the possibility of this nonpower, the possibility of this impossibility, the anguish of this vulnerability and the vulnerability of this anguish. (Derrida 396)
The reader cannot ‘deny the suffering, fear or panic, the terror or fright’ (Derrida 396) that is present in Emiko, and ‘the undeniable of this response’ (Derrida 397) then changes the argument of humanist exceptionalism. Being witness to this creature’s suffering makes it impossible to ignore the existence of a common nature – all species can suffer and die. Emiko’s movements are ridiculous, and she is laughed at consistently throughout the novel. By focalizing the narration on Emiko, though, the reader becomes painfully aware of her subjectivity and the suffering the laughter causes, and is thus narratively forced into a communion with the posthuman.

Margaret Atwood, in her MaddAddam trilogy, also uses specific behavioral patterns and physical differences to mark the Crakers as posthuman, and, similarly, these markers generate ridicule among the other characters. In reducing genetics to a toolkit of useful abilities, Crake designed the Crakers with an eye for function, not for aesthetics and human customs, and thus their natural behavior elicits ridicule among the remaining humans. In concentrating on the physical differences from the human as standard, Stephen Dunning points out, it ‘is hard to take these purring, multi-colored, blue-bottomed, blue-penised, excrement-eating, perimeter-pissing, citrous-scented [sic] creatures seriously’ (95). Accordingly, characters satirically comment on the genetic features: They describe their purring as ‘making a noise like a kitchen mixer’ (Madd 12) and ask, ‘are they like batteries that have to be recharged?’ (Madd 99). Their insect-repellent smell is described as ‘citrus air freshener’ (Madd 90) and their general non-aggressiveness makes them ‘walking potatoes’ and ‘vegetables’ (Madd 19).

One aspect of their nature that is more strongly singled out for ridicule is their digestion, which Crake copied from a rabbit and its ability to recycle its own excrement. Snowman is disgusted by the concept, even though it is clearly superior to his starving from malnutrition: ‘He finds the caecotrophs revolting [...] However you look at it, he’d said, what it boiled down to was eating your own shit’ (Oryx 194). Crake argues it is necessary when eating raw plants, and that any ‘objections to the process were purely aesthetic’ (Oryx 194). But not only is Snowman disgusted, he also jokes about the feature when he reduces the Crakers to bobkitten prey because of this one aspect of their genetic make-up: ‘they can smell the rabbity aroma of the caecotrophs’ (Oryx 194).

But even more than the ‘edible poo’ (Madd 92), as Toby ridicules the essentially designed-for-survival ability, the Crakers reproductive mechanisms are constantly made fun of. Craker women are sexually receptive ‘once every three years’ (Oryx 200), thus making the mating cycle rather scarce. For their mating, Crake has combined baboon
and octopus DNA, so that the woman in heat signals her status via ‘the bright-blue colour of her buttocks and abdomen’ (Oryx 201) and a pheromone release that, in turn, makes the males react similarly. Snowman’s description of the mating ritual already expresses his malice:

Courtship begins at the first whiff, the first faint blush of azure, with the males presenting flowers to the females [...] Their penises turn bright blue to match the blue abdomens of the females, and they do a sort of blue-dick dance number, erect members waving to and fro in unison, in time to the foot movements and the singing: a feature suggested to Crake by the sexual semaphoring of crabs. From amongst the floral tributes the female chooses four flowers, and the sexual ardour of the unsuccessful candidates dissipates immediately, with no hard feelings left. (Oryx 201)

The ironic distance present in this description is mainly evoked through the doubled voice of free indirect discourse: It is clearly the heterodiegetic narration presenting the scene, but Snowman’s laconic tonality and diction that dominates it, without any markers of him ever thinking or speaking, though. Nonetheless, it becomes clear that Snowman ridicules the mating ritual and thus marks the Crakers as other.

Similarly, the feature is commented upon by almost all the other human characters in the trilogy. When Toby first sees the Crakers, she thinks they are a hallucination and shakes the image off by reminding herself not to go crazy – ‘no naked blue-tinged singers’ (Year 165). Ren, even though she has been warned about them, similarly jokes (‘nudist camp’; Year 408) before feeling threatened by their ritualistic signaling. She can only help herself stay calm by ridiculing the Crakers, denying them equal humanity, and placing them as inferior: ‘At this, the men all smile [...] and their penises point at me and wag from side to side like the tails of happy dogs. Four? All at once? I don’t want Toby to shoot any of these men [...] but also I don’t want those bright-blue penises anywhere near me’ (Year 410). Ren’s contradictory reaction is dominated by fascination, but ultimately without understanding, in that she calls them ‘men’ while at the same time comparing them to ‘happy dogs’ and fearing the need to have Toby shoot them if they don’t conform to her standard of behavior.

But more importantly than the human characters’ relentless ridicule – as the abovementioned ironic distancing shows – Atwood herself seems to poke fun at the Crakers. Readers identify with the narrative position, and thus with the main characters and their evaluation of the situation and of the Crakers. Critics have consequently called the
Crakers ‘a kind of bizarre spectacle and extended authorial joke’ (Bouson 141), ‘a living satire of the errors of the utilitarian imagination’ (Brydon 453), ‘a sideways, funhouse-mirror, only-kidding glimpse’ at humanity (Canavan 152), and finally ‘outwardly human yet emotionally and mentally retarded’ (Pordzik 153). Their overtly prejudiced description, the naïveté of their actions, and the repeatedly mentioned mating ritual – all point toward Atwood’s own stance on the position of the Crakers as non-human: ‘I’d call them clever primates’ (cited in Case and McDonald 43). There does seem to be a certain compassion for the Crakers, described either as harmless animals and thus inferior or as ‘Crake’s children, and like children tremendously vulnerable’ (Ingersoll 168): ‘The Children of Crake, for all their innocence and peaceful ways, are fundamentally nonhuman – are fundamentally subhuman’ (Parry 252). Nonetheless, they remain other.

In contrast to Bacigalupi’s New People, whose suffering elicited compassion and an active engagement with the posthuman condition, the Crakers function as a satirical commentary and a comic relief for readers that feel threatened not by the creatures but by the potential of their creation. Being replaced by these creatures would mean losing everything that makes us human; it is, in Francis Fukuyama’s words, ‘a devil’s bargain [...] sorry, but your soul just died’ (8–9) – a sentiment many critics seem to read in Atwood’s treatment of the Crakers. Their features and behaviors are ridiculous to us – mainly because we cannot identify with them. In connection to the human, edible poo and blue-tinged penises are bizarre and ridiculous; they need to be relegated to an inferior position so as not to threaten our ontology. But as Rozelle notes, ‘when we observe these traits in other species, they are understood as appropriate to specific adaptive functions’ and thus might best be evaluated ‘without undue anthropomorphism’ (68).

It is interesting to note, then, that Atwood does not relativize any readerly perceptions of her posthumans by allowing identification with them. In Oryx and Crake as well as The Year of the Flood, the Crakers remain passive reflections of the failure of human civilization and voiceless allegories for the potential of genetic engineering. They are present without ever really featuring as characters – rather they seem to be living props, similar to the Painballers or the Mo’Hairs, pigoons, and bobkittens, just another species of ‘animal’ that populates the new world, either as threat or as resource. Only with MaddAddam does Atwood grant the Crakers their own voice, although it is deeply tinged with humanist conceptions of history, religion, and culture, as we shall see below.

What is remarkable, in regard to the depiction of Craker culture in the last part of the trilogy, is that Atwood still does not allow
compassion to arise – the satirical narrative voice remains and positions the Crakers continuously as inhuman in Lyotard’s second sense of the term: Humanity is thus not born ‘human,’ not ‘led by nature, not programmed’ (Lyotard 3), but needs to be educated to become human. Humans need to ‘acquire a “second” nature which […] makes them fit for life’ (Lyotard 3). In this conception, which of course is deeply humanist and reduces the human to a well-cultured, privileged position, children are thus inhuman in the sense that they lack this second nature, this education in cultural norms – ‘not able to calculate its advantages, not sensitive to common reason’ (Lyotard 3) – and adults retain this ‘obscure savageness of childhood’ (Lyotard 4) to a degree, prompting them to continuously fight against it – marking humanity, in the humanist notion of the term, as transcendence of that savage state, the inhuman which is always already present in the human.

In MaddAddam, the Crakers function as reminders of the inhuman in that sense, reflecting for the human characters their inner savageness and the need to ‘educate’ against this. A good example can be found in Toby, who takes over from Snowman the charge of caring for the Children of Crake and providing them with stories every evening, depicted as just that – a bedtime story for children: entrenched rituals need to be observed, deviation from already heard stories needs to be justified, constant questions about unknown concepts interrupt the storytelling, explanations only provoke more questions and more explanations in an endless cycle, and above all, the Crakers constantly burst into song. The Crakers show the inhuman savageness especially in their lack of understanding of the language, but also in their swiftly changing interests and complete lack of social norms. Toby is irritated, but reminds herself of the need for patience, educating them even about her frustration: ‘I am doing this thing with my hands on my forehead because I have a headache. A headache is when there is a pain in your head. Thank you. I am sure purring would help. But it would also help if you would stop asking so many questions’ (Madd 85). While the Crakers and the humans live together, Toby’s narrative becomes suffused with an interior commentary – an aside of how to explain to the Crakers what she is doing at the moment, or better put: a string of answers to possible Craker questions which again lead to more questions. The Crakers are a frustrating symbol of the cultural savagery of children, of their incompleteness as human beings.

Thus, when Toby teaches the young Craker Blackbeard how to write, it is his voice that finally breaches the gap between the cultures – not by giving insight into the posthuman, but rather by having acquired the ‘second nature’ of human values and concepts. Ironically,
when Blackbeard becomes the storyteller, he is just as irritated by the interruptions and the crystalline singing (that drives Toby to have headaches): ‘Please don’t sing. […] Please don’t sing yet. […] An umbrella is a thing from the chaos. They used it for keeping the rain off their bodies. I don’t know why they did that’ (Madd 385–86). Blackbeard has become sufficiently ‘cultured’ by copying Toby in her duties, completing the ritual and conforming to expectation, but he is lacking true understanding of human culture. Similarly, the novel never allows the reader to understand the posthuman culture by showing an acceptance of the inhuman as it is. Even in Blackbeard’s voice, the Crakers remain aloof, inhuman, and childish other.

And that Crakers are indeed born naturally ‘Crakerish’ and not ‘human,’ thus revealing their inhumanity instead, becomes dramatically clear in a scene at the beginning of MaddAddam. Once more, the mating ritual of the Crakers is the focus of othering. Even though Crake designed the Crakers not to feel constant sexual desire, they read the continuous signaling of human female pheromones as being in heat (all the time), thus aggressively initiating their mating ritual. When the ‘Crakerish’ reaction of choosing four partners does not occur, their genetic code does not allow them to relinquish activity but causes them to pursue it further. They do not understand the female’s unwillingness to mate, as a Craker woman giving off such signals would indeed be in heat and willing. But instead of handling the situation with compassion for the inhuman/posthuman, the narrative evokes a frenzied rape scene that is disturbing, yet bizarrely ridicules the Crakers:

The Craker men, sniffing Amanda: She is the blue one! She smells blue! She wants to mate with us! Give her the flowers! She will be happy!
Amanda scared: Stay away! I don’t … Ren, help me! Four large, beautiful, flower-toting naked men close in on her. Toby! Get them away from me! Shoot them! […] The Craker men: She is blue! She is blue! We are happy! Sing to her! The other one is blue also! […] Toby looks over, across the fire: A manda has disappeared in a flickering thicket of naked male limbs and backs. Ren throws herself into the sprawl and is quickly submerged. (Madd 12–13)

Toby’s reaction displays her helplessness, but also her complete incomprehension: ‘This is a major cultural misunderstanding. If only she had a pail of cold water!’ (Madd 13). In fact, the cultural misunderstanding is hers, not that of the Crakers. She sees creatures that look like humans and simply presupposes a common ‘human nature,’ something that an education, a provision of a ‘second nature’ might reveal. The problem
is not that the Crakers are not allowed subjectivity, but that they are allowed humanist subjectivity only, in which they are children: inhuman, unfinished, and in need of education.

In following confrontations, whenever Craker sexuality is concerned, they are described as ‘in the process of becoming human’ and unsure of their ‘Crakerish’ nature: ‘Ever since they’ve learned that rambunctious group copulation is not acceptable, they don’t know what’s expected of them’ (Madd 100). They are trained to ignore their nature, because it does not conform to human standards. Indeed, the narrative voice satirically comments on their sexuality as ‘wrong,’ ridiculing them. Craker subjectivity, as being different but valid, is denied:

*Is she blue? One is blue. Two others were blue, we joined our blue to their blue but we did not make them happy. They are not like our women, they are not happy, they are broken. Did Crake make them? Why did he make them that way, so they are not happy? [...] These women scream with fright, they do not choose us even if we give them a flower, they do not like a wagging penis. We do not make them happy, we do not know why they scream.* (Madd 100–02)

Though the passage is marked as dialogue, it remains unclear if Toby hears this being said or thinks this would be the Crakers’ discussion. The satirical stance of the narration remains active, but the reader’s laughter about the innocence and ignorance of the Crakers as inferior children here gets suffused with a feeling of unease, which originates in the humanist value system presenting itself in a euphemism (a ‘cultural misunderstanding’; Madd 216) for a behavior that among humans would be considered rape, but that the yet-unfinished humans cannot be held responsible for. The Crakers’ subjectivity is thus constantly undermined by a stream of commentary that reduces them to children and points out their potential to become human, instead of accepting difference, complexity, and hybridity. The reader has no other choice but to view the Crakers through this deeply humanist lens, hoping that ‘[g]iven time, even the Children of Crake may come to count as human, as their language develops, as they mythologize and epigeneticize’ (Cooke 123).

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3 Italics are used by the text to mark both authentic dialogue between characters and inauthentic interior dialogues Toby has with herself – for example imagining to explain certain terminology to the Crakers (e.g. ‘immune system’; Madd 101). In both cases, the narrative voice remains Toby’s.
3.3.2 Nature, Culture, and Xenogenesis: Becoming (Post)Human

And indeed, at the heart of the trilogy is the question of human nature, as Margaret Atwood herself has put it: ‘What features are at the core of our being? What a piece of work is man, and now that we ourselves can be the workmen, what bits shall we chop off? What is it to be human?’ (‘My Life’ 162). In the trilogy, she explores these questions extensively through her human characters, as well as through the Crakers. Especially in regard to her depiction of the Crakers, there are noticeable contradictions, though, because the narrative simultaneously presents them as both potential humans and inaccessible other.

By stylizing Snowman as guardian, storyteller, and shaper of Craker culture, Atwood instills in her narrative the assurance that human nature is defined by those aspects which Crake tried to eliminate: ‘the centrality of the creation of symbols and metaphors’ (Bosco 164). But the elimination failed, Atwood suggests, when claiming that ‘Art and religion – and particularly narrative – are wired in’ (cited in McKay), are inherent to human DNA and thus waiting to manifest in Craker DNA as well. So it is little wonder that many critics agree with Atwood in viewing the Crakers as inhuman-becoming-human and in need of humanist values and concepts to ‘reach their full potential’ (Brydon 453) and become human: ‘Yet what Snowman finds his charges needing most [...] is, precisely, culture: explanation, understanding, stories of origin and purpose [...] The need for meaning lies too deep in human nature, it seems, for even Crake to have eradicated it’ (Deresiewicz 30). Similarly, Canavan argues, the Crakers lack ‘the creative vitality of humanistic thought – and they only begin to seem potentially worthy successors to Homo sapiens to the extent that they turn out to retain this capacity after all’ (147). Understanding the Crakers as simple and ‘limited,’ as subhuman (by intellectual standards), Francoise and Jeff Storey argue that Snowman provides them with basic instructions, educates them in a primitive ‘second nature,’ an act that amounts to ‘creating and recording History. [...] the human urge to do this is compulsive and inescapable’ (136; see also Bosco 165).

There is another side to the Crakers, though, which has prompted critics to analyze them as a ‘pastoral fantasy’ of ecological humanism, in which the ‘wildness’ has been bred out of humankind, ‘creating a species of human beings that will be congenitally unable to soil the planetary oikos’ (Bergthaller 735). In this reading, the genetically modified human ‘allegorize[s] the radical transformation [...] necessary in order to save the planet’ (Canavan 152). For ‘us’ not to be a threat to nature any longer, we would need to become like the Crakers, ‘noble savages perfect
in every way [...] physically, biologically, in their social relationships as well as in their existential experience’ (Jameson, ‘Then You Are Them’ 7). In this reading, though, a human future would have to leave behind parts of what humanism considers human nature, as Parry argues:

The Crakers, then, may be peaceful and vegetarian, incapable of violence and content to live simply and harmoniously on a diet of grass and berries, but they are also incapable of abstract thought, of art or poetry or self-reflection [...] For all their virtues, the Crakers are clearly something less than human. (252)

But read as abstract environmental fantasy, the Crakers remain outside of ‘our’ reach: ‘no matter how we try, we could never become the Crakers, nor (as with their caecotrophy) can we really even understand their subjectivity and the way they see the world’ (Canavan 154). The future would only be possible for them: ‘hope, but not for us,’ as Canavan titles his reading of the novels.

The true critical posthuman potential, in my opinion, lies in the middle and in realizing that the ‘end of one understanding of the human is the beginning of another,’ that ‘what counts as human will shift’ (Cooke 123). The Crakers – and this is contrary to the reading of human nature manifesting itself in DNA – are not simply defined by their genetics alone. They are also participating in what Bernard Stiegler introduces as ‘epigenetic’ and ‘epiphylogenetic memory’ (177) and reserves solely for the human – the cultural memory, into which they are born and which exists beyond them, and the technological support structure that ensures its existence beyond the individual death (e.g. technological artifacts, but also language and history). Grayson Cooke argues that *Oryx and Crake* foregrounds the destruction of these support structures, effectively staging the end of the human:

Without the epigenetic and epiphylogenetic function of language and technics, Atwood suggests that there would be no human, only meaningless questions and meaningless answers – the meaninglessness of toast without a toaster, for instance. The human is always in flux, always becoming, always materializing, transducing, taking itself apart, putting itself back together, dis- and re-membering. Without memory, however, and therefore without memory supports, there can be no re-membering. (Cooke 122)

Concerning the human (i.e. only Snowman in *Oryx*) this might be true, but Cooke ignores the fact that the Crakers possess epigenetic memory
as well. ‘Language is a perfect example. It is not genetic; it is acquired, and yet it has its own history, its own genealogy, its own memory that exceeds the individual. In entering into language, it creates a past for us, and we acquire this past, which we continue as our own’ (Barnet). The Crakers experience a different but similar epigenetic event – they are born into a language and they shape it – later word creations like ‘the Pig Ones’ attest to that. It is true that human culture as Jimmy experienced it has become lacking a referent, but the environment around the Crakers is just as much determinant for their culture. So, when Ralph Pordzik argues that ‘Natural environment, the human body, and cultural production are intrinsically connected, each evolving in response to another’s position or activity in a complex network of relationships’ (155), this holds true for Craker evolution also. When Snowman is missing, feverishly wandering the Compounds, they erect a statue to remind them of him. The stand-in figure, representative of the absence of Snowman but also a memory technique, becomes their first epiphylogenetic event, ‘marking the first semiotic space in their culture: by distinguishing absence from presence and thus reintroducing into their discourse a new essential dichotomy’ (Pordzik 155).

With the continuation of the plot in MaddAddam, epiphylogenetic memory is continued, as the Crakers learn about writing and set down words to materially remain in memory beyond the individual death:

Now I have added to the Words, and have set down those things that happened after Toby stopped making any of the Writing […] I have done this so we will all know of her, and of how we came to be. And these new Words I have made are called the Story of Toby. (Madd 387)

How strongly genetic and epigenetic events interact to shape the culture becomes clear, once more, in terms of the mating cycle of the Crakers. The MaddAddam group discuss the epigenetics of the Crakers:

How much of Craker behaviour is inherited, how much is cultural? Do they even have what you could call a culture, separate from the expression of their genes? […] The mating cycle is genetic, obviously […] as are the changes in the female abdominal and genital pigmentation that accompany estrus, and the male equivalent, leading to the polysexual acts. (Madd 139)

Later, when Crakers and humans have had more cultural interaction, and epigenetic experiences of language have shaped both species, the Crakers
record their cultural adaptation of this genetically shaped behavior – as it evolved in the complex relationship of the Crakers living with the humans – and hand it over into epiphylogenetic memory:

[O]ur Beloved Three Oryx Mothers, who showed us that we and the two-skinned ones are all people and helpers, though we have different gifts, and some of us turn blue and some do not. So Toby said we must be respectful, and always ask first, to see if a woman is really blue or is just smelling blue, when there is a question about blue things. (Madd 386)

As I have noted, both humans and Crakers are shaped by the encounters and interactions; both adapt and form a new culture. Ku argues, ‘the Crakers dilute humanity insidiously. Even though they remain human in form, their eyes, bones, flesh and body odor are extracted from jellyfish, coral, mango, and citrus fruit’ (115). This is true only in terms of genetics, while at the same time, human epigenesis and epiphylogenesis shapes the Crakers – the categorial uncertainty is doubly present, both for the human and for the non-human. In the end, it might be the hybridity of both that allows for a posthuman utopian horizon to open up.

The utopian potential inherent in Atwood’s trilogy lies neither in the Crakers becoming fully endowed with humanist values nor in the extinction of the human and a ‘hope, but not for us’ – it rather lies in the critical posthuman subjectivity that sees both groups as the ultimate ‘companion species.’ Haraway argues that ‘to companion is “to consort, to keep company,” with sexual and generative connotations always ready to erupt’ (When Species 17), while ‘species’ refers to the act of seeing similarity and difference. In biology the term signifies ‘the dance linking kin and kind. The ability to interbreed reproductively is the rough and ready requirement for members of the same biological species’ (When Species 17). Consorting with and crossing the boundaries of species is possible for Haraway in many ways (e.g. she speaks of ‘symbiogenesis,’ of being licked by her dog; When Species 15), but in the case of Craker–human interaction, the ultimate companionship might prove the interbreeding of species.

In a discussion of a biological marker for humanity, Ivory Bill – one of the MaddAddam group – adheres to the above definition of species, arguing that if the Crakers can ‘crossbreed with us, then case [for their humanity] made. Same species. If not, then not’ (Madd 206). But Manatee, another member, invokes the fertility of the next generation as key marker, reminding everyone of the mule as sterile hybrid: ‘We wouldn’t know for sure until the next generation’ (Madd 207). The
discussion rages on, especially in regard to the different sexual functions and their genetically induced signals (‘the woman has to be in heat’; Madd 208). When White Sedge, a female member of the group, remarks that ‘Women aren’t dogs’ (Madd 208) and is offended at the discussion, the inherent problem of the distinguishing marker of biology becomes clear – it once more establishes a humanist discourse of mechanized nature, reducing species interaction to simple biomechanical functions and women’s sexuality to a sort of simplistic instrument to determine ontological difference.

How differently the cultural factors come into play can be seen in the reactions of different female members of the group when confronted with their pregnancy. Whereas the scientist Swift Fox is cheerful and jokingly remarks about the paternity of her children (twins, as it turns out) – ‘I’ve been doing an experiment in genetic evolution. Reproduction of the fittest. Think of me as a petri dish’ (Madd 273) – both Amanda and Ren, who have had no say in getting pregnant, are afraid that their children might be ‘Frankenbabies,’ fathered by a ‘gene-spliced weirdo monster’ (Madd 216). Swift Fox’s remark is important, as both she and Amanda had sexual intercourse with Crakers and humans – the birth of hybrid children would signal a strong genetic dominance. And indeed, all four children are Craker–human hybrids, at birth only noticeable through the ‘green eyes of the Crakers,’ but raising the question, ‘What other features might these children have inherited?’ (Madd 380).

Atwood leaves the future and the final determination of species equality open (whether the hybrids themselves can have children), but adds that the group grows, through human, Craker, and hybrid children alike. In this potential for a hybrid, multiple, and changing humanity (both genetically and epigenetically) lies the critical posthuman potential: ‘The Crakers also help us to remember that as a species, humans are not exempt from adaptations and mutations that occur through processes of evolution, despite our various advances’ (Rozelle 69). Nonetheless, as mentioned above, this posthuman utopian potential is at least somewhat relativized by the narrative’s commentary based in humanist values and the conflicted depiction of the posthumans as inhuman and inferior.

In contrast to Atwood’s novels, where Craker–human hybridity is possibly the only option to imagine a future for any humanity (evolved or otherwise), as most human life has simply been wiped out, in Paolo Bacigalupi’s The Windup Girl the human and the posthuman vie for the same natural niche in an overextended ecosystem, both claiming the top position of the proverbial food chain. What in Atwood’s trilogy becomes an experiment in communal survival, in The Windup Girl promises to be an outright evolutionary conflict. In Emiko, Bacigalupi enacts the
empowerment of the posthuman species that is culturally and genetically controlled and held in servile positions.

Having been rejected from her ‘natural’ habitat as a companion (in Haraway’s definition of someone to be with, socially and sexually), Emiko struggles with a genetic contradiction that her training is supposed to mask:

Mizumi-sensei taught that there are two parts to a New Person’s nature. The evil half, ruled by the animal hungers of their genes, by the many splicings and additions that changed them into what they were. And balanced against this, the civilized self, the side that knows the difference between niche and animal urge. That comprehends its place in the hierarchies of their country and people, and appreciates the gift their patrons provide by giving them life. [...] Two sides of a coin, two sides of the soul. Mizumi-sensei helped them own their souls. Prepared them for the honor of service. (Windup 154)

Here, cultural training (the human side) is supposed to keep in check the natural urges (the animal side) of Emiko’s being, which is ironic, as it is due to the genetic splicing that the urge to obey has been triggered in her in the first place. Nonetheless, after the abandonment by her master, Emiko is confronted with a living environment that negates if not reverses the training – when she is maltreated and debased, her internal struggle grows and she wishes to resist her genetics. The strength of this desire is obvious when she is raped and sees herself manipulated by the far-removed geneticists that created her, that forced her body into obedience and sexual willingness: ‘Her body performs just as it was designed – just as the scientists with their test tubes intended. She cannot control it no matter how much she despises it. The scientists will not allow her even this small disobedience. She comes’ (Windup 38).

In the beginning Emiko’s resistance is passive. She expresses contempt through thoughts and words, shows her emotions but is swiftly punished, but when Emiko hears about enclaves of escaped windups living in freedom, she realizes that a possibility to resist her DNA exists. Emiko is left ‘alone with a pounding heart and a sudden urge to live’ (Windup 46). This desire to survive supersedes all genetic obedience programming and she actively begins to plan an escape and to assert herself as an empowered subject. It takes her a while to realize, but when she is confronted with certain death, she manifests extraordinary abilities such as superhuman speed and extremely powerful body coordination: ‘Emiko watches them, puzzled. They are halfway across the roof, but
they are so very very slow [...] Their every motion drags [...] So slow [...] Emiko smiles. Optimal. She steps up onto the roof ledge’ (Windup 199). She escapes the clutches of the environment ministry’s agents, becoming fully aware of how ‘optimal’ she is in terms of physique. Her body can withstand much more than any human’s and she begins to realize her potential. She becomes self-assertive and empowered, starts to feel her embodiment not as a prison but as a gift and fully embraces her subjectivity:

She is New People, and she moves through the crowds so smoothly that they do not know she is there. She laughs at them. Laughs and slips between them. There is something suicidal ticking in her windup nature. She hides in the open. She does not scuttle. Fate has cupped her in its protective hands. She slips through the crowds, people jerking away startled from the windup in their midst, from the bit of transgressive manufactory that has the effrontery to stain their sidewalks, as if their land were half as pristine as the islands that have ejected her. She wrinkles her nose. Even Nippon’s effluent is too good for this raucous stinking place. They simply do not recognize how she graces them. She laughs to herself, and realizes when others look at her that she has laughed out loud. (Windup 252–53)

So when the next onslaught of rape and abuse comes, Emiko’s flight to freedom slowly dies inside, and ‘the falcon if there is any falcon in Emiko at all, if it ever existed, is a dead thing, dangling. Not meant to live or fly or escape. Meant to do nothing but submit’ (Windup 257). This time, she is pushed too far, though, and realizes that she has nothing left to lose: ‘She is dead [...] The falcon lies dead. And then she thinks that some things are worse than dying. Some things can never be borne. Her fist is very fast. Raleigh-san’s throat is soft’ (Windup 259). She kills not only her captor but also the men that have debased her – 11 men dead within seconds: ‘His eminence the Somdet Chaopraya’s neck has been ripped entirely away, breaking it, snapping and tearing so that though the spine seems attached still, it acts as a hinge rather than a support. “It looks like a demon tore him open”’ (Windup 280).

At this point, the posthuman, culturally relegated to an inferior and servile position, asserts itself and realizes its full potential and natural superiority to the human. Emiko’s act of survival reveals the underlying conflict of evolution and finally triggers open warfare in the city, between conservative and progressive forces, represented in the two ministries of
Environment and Trade. When the smoke clears, thousands have been killed, Bangkok has been flooded, and most humans have fled the city. Emiko remains, surviving and symbolically claiming the remnants of human civilization as her own: ‘The days pass. She becomes comfortable entirely in her world of water and scavenge’ (Windup 356). In fact, in the new physical environment, Emiko is the better-suited species: ‘in the genetic warfare of Bacigalupi’s world, they have a great advantage, for the moment, when it comes to surviving filth, pollution, and bodily waste’ (Sullivan 521). By depicting Emiko’s empowerment and resistance against her mistreatment, Bacigalupi stresses the posthuman potential for change and a radical new subjectivity. Emiko emancipates herself from the inferior position, proving self-assertion and self-reliance, and she thus cleverly undermines the nature/culture divide and her servile ‘natural’ position.

What is more, though, Bacigalupi – just like Atwood – adds the dimension of miscegenation and procreation to the commentary on a possible posthuman future. Emiko’s physical otherness, in contrast to the Crakers’ otherness, does not lead to reactions of fright and ‘cultural misunderstanding’; on the contrary: Her perfect skin and natural beauty make her an object of desire and fascination. The monstrous in her brings forth ‘simultaneous repulsion and attraction,’ her body becomes ‘dangerously enticing’ (J. Cohen 17, 19), and both Emiko and the calorie man Anderson Lake (who is the main human reflector) describe the uncertainty of the attraction. At the core of the representation of Emiko’s sexuality is the question of whether she is in control of it or her genetic programming is. Lake thinks: ‘Does she wish this? Or only acquiesce? Is she even capable of refusing? Her breasts press against him. Her hands slip down his body. He’s shaking. Trembling like a sixteen-year-old boy. Did the geneticists embed her DNA with pheromones? Her body is intoxicating’ (Windup 115–16). Lake does not understand the attraction, feels compelled by invisible DNA and clever posthuman design – he is constantly aware of her otherness and is drawn in by it.

Emiko, on the other hand, seems capable of forgetting her otherness only in exactly those moments – losing her non-human nature when her cultural and genetic programming is so effectively fulfilled:

Emiko is surprised at how happy she is that he delights in her, that he runs his hands over her skin, that he wishes to touch her […] It is a relief to be loved, even if it is only for her physicality […] Emiko presses herself to him, and their mouths find one another, and for a time she forgets entirely that people call her windup and
heechy-keechy. For a moment she feels entirely human, and she loses herself in the touching. In Anderson-sama’s skin. In the security of pleasure and duty. (Windup 221)

The union of human and posthuman thus negates their respective categories: Lake, the human, becomes fascinated and drawn into a posthuman subjectivity and wants to understand Emiko’s programming and the genetic machinations of her actions. Emiko, though, forgets her DNA and her otherness; she becomes human in the act of sexual intercourse. In both cases, the subjective narrative position allows the reader to connect the respective desires, see the similarity and the complementation. The posthuman–human intercourse opens a utopian potential and blurs the subjective positions of each.

But it does not produce hybrid offspring, as does the relation of species in Atwood’s trilogy. On the contrary, the most important aspect of a natural sexuality – that of procreation – has been forcibly removed from New People. In a longing moment, Emiko discusses the lessons learned from cheshires: ‘Just think if they had made New People first […] Generippers learned too much from cheshires’ (Windup 114). Lake realizes the threatening potential behind such longing, and the security embedded in Emiko’s DNA:

She doesn’t say anything else, but Anderson can guess what’s in her mind. If her kind had come first, before the generippers knew better, she would not have been made sterile. She would not have the signature tick-tock motions that make her so physically obvious […] Without the lesson of the cheshires, Emiko might have had the opportunity to supplant the human species entirely with her own improved version. Instead, she is a genetic dead end. Doomed to a single life cycle, just like SoyPRO and TotalNutrient Wheat. (Windup 114)

The potential for New People to replace the human population is the threat that looms over the story and shines through every aspect of her depiction: It can be found in Emiko’s better resistance to any of the genetically engineered diseases, in her physical superiority – a geisha with the powers of a supersoldier – in the desire she evokes in men, but also in her creation with markers of otherness, in her movement, her overheating, and the obedience genes, her strict cultural training and integration into a hierarchical society. New People, the story suggests, are far better suited for the new world, but humans fear them and shackle them to their DNA. Expressed through the words of generipper Gibbons
and suffused with the hubris of a god (‘The world is ours’), the novel’s underlying message becomes clear, though:

We should all be windups by now. It’s easier to build a person impervious to blister rust than to protect an earlier version of the human creature. A generation from now, we could be well-suited for our new environment. Your children could be the beneficiaries. Yet you people refuse to adapt. You cling to some idea of a humanity that evolved in concert with your environment over millennia, and which you now, perversely, refuse to remain in lockstep with.

Blister rust is our environment. Cibiscosis. Genehack weevil. Cheshires. They have adapted. Quibble as you like about whether they evolved naturally or not. Our environment has changed. If we wish to remain at the top of our food chain, we will evolve. Or we will refuse, and go the way of the dinosaurs and Felis domestica. Evolve or die. It has always been nature’s guiding principle. (Windup 243)

In this speech, Gibbons undermines the human position as exceptional and superior and prophesizes its replacement – through simply evolutionary necessity. In his view, ‘hope, but not for us’ is fully acceptable and thus it is little wonder when he becomes the agent of change and the posthuman utopian potential in the end of the novel. Gibbons meets Emiko and stages himself like a god pleased with his own creation, showing off how much he knows about her. In their conversation, Gibbons proves sympathetic to New People and offers a future unimagined by Emiko before:

The windup movement is not a required trait. There is no reason it couldn’t be removed. Sterility […] Limitations can be stripped away. The safeties are there because of lessons learned, but they are not required; some of them even make it more difficult to create you. Nothing about you is inevitable […] Someday, perhaps, all people will be New People and you will look back on us as we now look back at the poor Neanderthals […] You cannot be changed, but your children – in genetic terms, if not physical ones – they can be made fertile, a part of the natural world. (Windup 358–59)

As Heather Sullivan argues, ‘Bacigalupi’s novel embraces,’ fully realized in Gibbons’s offer to create non-sterile New People, ‘the reproductive option for its creature’ (522), and thus projects a truly posthuman future and the eventual replacement of the human. But just as Atwood’s
trilogy concludes with a continuum of human–posthuman possibilities, a future as potentially utopian as it is dystopian, so Bacigalupi’s novel shows ‘Emiko and her projected posthuman progeny [...] poised, like the genetically-engineered cheshires in relation to the feline predecessors they decimated through competition, to put a challenge to the concrete structures of technoscience, geopolitics, ecology, economy, “Nature,” and the “human being”’ (Hageman 298).

3.4 Posthumanism and the Interregnum

As we have seen, both Margaret Atwood and Paolo Bacigalupi imagine a world of ecological disaster, caused by the human inability to see the consequences of its hypercapitalist endeavors and the environmental changes caused by the Anthropocene. As such, both worlds are dystopian extrapolations from the liquid modern realities of contemporary society and represent a creative intervention into recent sociological discourse. In both cases, though, the authors go further in their criticism, when they reveal that humanity is challenged by new forms of life, mainly in the guise of genetically engineered animals and posthumans – all of which are, again, products of the same hypercapitalist tendencies that have been revealed as existent today. In dissolving the boundaries between humans and others, be they non-human animal, inhuman, or posthuman, both Atwood and Bacigalupi revoke the humanist subject position as superior and exceptional.

In Atwood’s case, even though humanist ideals and values remain at the heart of her commentary, the satirical depiction of a hybridized future nonetheless contains the possibility of a critical posthumanist subjectivity in the hybridization of society. Within the dystopian landscape of her novels, the community of pigoons, humans, and Crakers, with its hybrid, complex, and shifting conceptions of subjectivity, is poised to become a new form of society that incorporates a zee-centric view of life and fosters interconnected relations between different species, earth, and technology – thus a truly posthuman society.

In Bacigalupi’s world, the critical posthumanist position is more vocal, in that he allows the posthuman perspective its own narrative voice and thus a connection with the reader. But just as with Atwood, the dystopian surroundings of the world dominate the new subjectivity. The human suppresses posthuman technology through the mechanics of consumer society and relentlessly hunts genetically altered creatures without mercy. But the representation of suffering and torture in the posthuman is exactly what connects the reader to its subjective position
and thus allows for the conceptual space of posthumanity to take hold. In the end, as with Atwood, humanity is destroyed (or at least in retreat from the novel’s locale) and the posthuman is once more waiting to take charge, to step in and reveal itself to be the ‘better option’ for survival, the ecological alternative to the destruction represented in humanity.

Both authors thus express a position on the brink of a radical transformation, at the end of the conceptual security of what it means to be ‘human’ and already deep in the process of altering the social, ecological, and ontological make-up of their respective worlds. In their fiction, the human is a concept of the past and cannot capture the realities of an interconnected life on earth. But the new zoë-centric concept to grasp the possibilities that lie ahead has not established itself yet.

In Bauman’s terms, then, both authors allegorically describe a moment of interregnum, that ‘extraordinary situation’ when the social, political, and cultural frame has lost its grip and ‘a new frame, made to the measure of the newly emerged conditions […] is still at the design stage, has not yet been fully assembled’ (44 Letters 120). What is so radical about the fictional interregnum presented in Atwood and Bacigalupi is that they posit not simply a political sovereignty that is ‘underdefined and contentious, porous and poorly defensible, unanchored and free-floating’ (Bauman, 44 Letters 120) but the human condition itself. The interregnum described is that of a time in which the human has come under attack and the new, posthuman condition is the concept that is still underdefined, porous, and free-floating. The moment described in the novels, the interregnum between the human and something that follows in its stead, is still undecided – posthuman subjectivity is just on the brink of fully realizing itself. As such, the novels propagate the utopian possibility to explore an alternative in the reader’s present, to already allow for a posthumanist perspective. They stage, as Eric Otto suggests,

a productive tension between what is (im)possible for their protagonists and what is still possible for us. There are social, political, economic, and cultural forces that work against the realization of ecologically and socially better ways of being today. But these forces have not fully interrupted our ability to care for nonhuman species […] to balance economic and cultural production with reproduction […] and to disseminate the understanding that the human body, like all other species’ bodies, is always in ecosystems. (189)

An ecologically aware, zoë-centric, and interconnected way of thinking – a critical posthumanism in Braidotti’s sense – is thus still possible
for us, and the utopian impulses enacted in the dystopian landscape of their fiction reveal this to us. In biopunk fiction, such as that of Atwood and Bacigalupi, we thus find examples of what Vint calls an ‘ethical posthumanism which acknowledges that self is materially connected to the rest of the world, in affinity with its other subjects [...] It is a posthumanism that can embrace multiplicity and partial perspectives, a posthumanism that is not threatened by its others’ (Bodies 189).