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"Hear My Tale": Bearing Witness to the Nonhuman, from Frankenstein's Creature to the Animal Industrial Complex

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In April 2025, a fifty-three-year-old Alabama woman named Towana Looney had a pig kidney removed that she'd lived with for one hundred and thirty days; she is the most recent of only a handful of American humans to benefit from a process known as xenotransplantation, the transferring of organs from one species to another (*Associated Press* 2025). Looney's record-breaking tenure with the pig organ ended when the kidney stopped functioning and Looney was forced to return to dialysis, although her medical team was happy to have "learned a tremendous amount" in the process (Cohen 2025). In order for xenotransplantation to be successful, patients rely on immunosuppressants so that their bodies might not reject the foreign organs. Crucially, the pig organs used in xenotransplantation are gene-edited to include human genes, a process made more readily available thanks in part to innovative and relatively nascent technologies such as CRISPR. Still, xenotransplantation is new, uncertain, and ethically murky at best. In the US alone, over 100,000 humans are waiting for organs and, tragically, twenty a day die while waiting (Nguyen 2024); the figures are similarly harrowing in Canada, the UK, and Europe.[1] Simply put, there is not enough supply for urgent demand. Ethically and legally, human clinical trials have, thus far, not been permitted and it is difficult to procure organs from

[1] According to preliminary 2024 data, over 4,000 patients were waiting for organ transplantation in Canada; over 200 patients waiting for organ donations the preceding year died before receiving a transplant (Canadian Institute for Health Information 2024). 2025 figures released by NHS Blood and Transplant note that over 8,000 patients were on the transplant waiting list in the UK and, in 2024, 463 patients died while on the waiting list (NHS Organ Donation 2025). In 2023, over 56,000 patients across Europe were on the waiting list and over 7,000 people died while waiting for donation (*Newsletter Transplant* 2024).

human cadavers; consequently, researchers have turned to nonhumans, "which they could [legally] kill and take their organs" (Nguyen 2024). Xenotransplantation by way of harvesting pig organs offers what many perceive as a modern techno-fix to a dire problem.

While the dream of sustained and successful xenotransplantation has captured the imagination of the medical and scientific world, technoscience has ethical implications for animal farming, too. Modern farmed animals are selectively bred, bioengineered, and genetically modified to yield greater meat production and larger profits for industrial animal agriculture. Globally, tens of billions of animals are raised and slaughtered for food products each year. Biotechnology companies, such as Precigen, Inc., and Recombinetics, purportedly pursue new scientific techniques to adapt to animal welfare concerns and the climate crisis. In response to these increasingly bioengineered animals, some have taken to referencing Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) to draw attention to these animals' chimeric genetic makeup. For instance, the most popular breed of broiler chicken in North America, the Ross 308, has been called a "Frankenchicken" by activists due to painful living conditions caused by industry desires for faster growth. An RSPCA poultry expert, Kate Parkes, says that "the standard organic chicken grows to its weight for slaughter in 81 days. In fast-growing breeds it's just 35 days" (Smith 2023). This speed of growth causes enormous problems for the chickens, including lameness, leg blistering, heart conditions, and even heart attacks. Hugh Fearnley-Whittingstall argues that "people really need to know this is the standard life of way over 90% of the chicken we eat" (Smith 2023). Other bioengineered animals, such as the AquAdvantage Salmon, or attempted creations of hornless cows, have been dubbed "Frankenfish" and "Frankencows" respectively.

Adding the prefix "Franken" makes clear critics' discomfort with obvious gene editing, a nod to Mary Shelley's famous hybrid creature and an indication that something has been unethically or dubiously spliced together. The general public's reaction to the systemic exploitation of selectively bred farmed animals, on the other hand, tends to be less reactive because our consumption of their bodies is seen as "normal, natural, and necessary" (Joy 2020, 86). The creation and exploitation of animals within what Barbara Noske has called the animal-industrial complex[2] can often sound like systems and

[2] Barbara Noske first put forward the term animal-industrial complex (AIC) in 1989. Richard Twine conceives of the AIC as the "partly opaque and multiple set of networks and relationships between the corporate (agricultural) sector, governments, and public and private science. With economic, cultural, social and affective dimensions it encompasses an extensive range of practices, technologies, images, identities and markets" (Twine 2012, 23).

processes out of a science fiction or Gothic novel.[3] Whether we are harvesting their modified organs or consuming their modified flesh, what responsibility do we bear towards these individuals created in the name of scientific progress?

The titular natural philosopher of Mary Shelley's seminal text, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus* (1818), wrestles with this question. Although it was released over two hundred years ago, Shelley's work still raises timely questions about our duties towards other animals, asking us to contemplate what it means to extend our ethical considerations beyond our own species in the age of the Anthropocene. I read Shelley's text through a Critical Animal Studies (CAS) lens, an interdisciplinary field of study that challenges strict ontological dichotomies, critiques systems of oppression, and examines the social, political, and ethical entanglements between humans and other animals. By exploring dominant Western and Eurocentric attitudes towards animal others, as well as Kathryn Gillespie's concept of bearing witness, I suggest that Frankenstein's creature is a useful figure to think alongside when learning to responsibly respond to other life on a warming planet, and especially to those lives we have altered, modified, and in some cases, created altogether.

Human Exceptionalism and Bearing Witness

As a liminal creature straddling species borders, the creature of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* has a natural affinity to the animals currently being bred for use of their bodies (whether for meat or for organs). The uncanniness of both Frankenstein's creature and modern farmed animals stems from humans' inability to meaningfully respond to those beings we find difficult to categorize, both like and unlike us; by defining others as monstrous and abject, we are able to objectify subjects. The creature, who learns to speak human language, read literature, and even create narrative (a skill widely believed to belong solely to humans), is nevertheless excluded from moral consideration based on speciesist markers of difference. Victor Frankenstein's insidiousness is often conceived of as scientific hubris. Drawing upon Kathryn Gillespie's work on the politics of witnessing, I suggest that Victor's failure is not only one of dubious scientific

[3] Although pig xenotransplantation might initially seem categorically distinct from animal agriculture, bioethicist L. Syd Johnson argues that the future of xenotransplantation "would absolutely be factory farming" because "these are pigs that are being grown and created and controlled by these private biotech companies with this hope that we might actually have on-demand organs for everyone who needs one" (Nguyen 2024). This type of large-scale project, Johnson says, could involve breeding millions of animals.

responsibility and species myopia, but a specific failure to interrogate human exceptionalism; his failure to meaningfully witness the creature's embodied experience and rich interior life in many ways anticipates the subjugation of animals in the animal-industrial complex (AIC), as well as species anxieties in the face of bioengineered domesticated animals. Reading *Frankenstein* with an eye toward the creature's nonhuman status can produce new understandings of our ethical entanglement with and obligations towards today's strange, uncanny creatures.

Human exceptionalism helps fuel industrial animal farming and bioengineering. Lori Gruen reminds us that human exceptionalist discourse features two distinguishable claims. "The first," she says, "is that humans are unique, humans are the only beings that do or have X (where X is some activity or capacity); and the second is that humans, by doing or having X, are superior to those that don't do or have X" (2021, 4). Upon seeing his own reflection, Frankenstein's creature immediately understands that his physical appearance—so unlike the human villagers he observes and learns from, the De Laceys—will be the central reason for his exclusion from society. He does "not yet entirely know the fatal effects of this miserable deformity," because he is reluctant to accept that "it was indeed [he] who was reflected in the mirror" (Shelley 2017, 93); the creature does, however, acknowledge that his "miserable deformity" will have "fatal effects" (93). The creature's chimeric physical makeup destabilizes clean ontological borders. Who belongs to the category of the human is complex as well as historically and culturally contingent, and human exceptionalism has been used to socially, ethically, and legally exclude not just animals, but non-white and racialized people, women, queer people, those with disabilities, and immigrants, among others.

Gillespie's concept of bearing witness proves useful in understanding Victor's particular failure towards the creature. In her ethnographic fieldwork bearing witness to cows raised for dairy in the Pacific Northwestern United States, Gillespie powerfully centers the animal as a subject within capitalist infrastructure and ideologies that seek to render these lives as commodities. She succeeds in "lay[ing] bare moments of emotional and physical turmoil not seen as such—the lives that are rendered ungrievable—and examin[ing] how we can and should respond to them" (2016, 572). Gillespie teases out the strengths and limitations of witnessing animal others' suffering and emotions, arguing that witnessing "requires a political engagement with the subject's embodied experience" (573), and that *feeling with* animal others is one such way to make this act political. Witnessing, for Gillespie, is a response to legalized and routine violence, an embodied practice of extending empathy, radically "making the ethical and political dimensions of animals' predicaments visible, and thus, actionable" (585). Emelia Quinn suggests that it is indeed "acts of wilful blindness in *Frankenstein* [that] provide … a surprisingly pertinent metaphor for the systemic blindness to, and disavowal of, the brutality inflicted upon nonhuman animals in the contemporary period" (2021, 47).[4] This paper explores these moments of wilful ignorance, the failure of human society to bear witness to the creature and the ramifications therein.

I map Gillespie's theory of witnessing-as-politics onto "uneven hierarchies of power" between humans and nonhumans broadly, and particularly onto Victor's relationship with the creature.[5] However, salient differences between the creature and modern farmed animals are manifold, including the fact that the creature is not systematically commodified or consumed. Yet, like farmed animals, the creature's life and subsequent death is considered insignificant. But, as Gillespie says, "grieving the ungrieved … disrupts the dominant narratives that circulate to reinforce the notion that some lives and deaths simply matter less than others" (2016, 580). The creature makes explicit the ways in which human exceptionalism deems certain lives as inherently superior to others; he asks to be witnessed by human society and is repeatedly denied empathy, eventually dying an ungrieved death.

Since the domestication of certain nonhumans, humans have had strangely intimate relationships with other animals, and this is especially apparent from industrialization onwards. With its use of Gothic aesthetics and uncanny atmosphere, Shelley's text makes visible and literal this human-animal collision. Victor's failure as a mentor, parent, and guardian is well-known and well-documented by Romantic and literary scholars, but we can apply these prudent lessons to our modern relationships to creatures brought into existence by human hands.

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[4] This essay does not explicitly engage with Emelia Quinn's concept of the "monstrous vegan" or the creature's mostly vegetarian diet, but these ideas and more can be found in Quinn's influential monograph, *Reading Veganism: The Monstrous Vegan, 1818 to Present.*

[5] I have purposefully used "creature" throughout this paper rather than the other names that Victor uses, such as monster, daemon, and wretch. Anat Pick, in her text *Creaturely Poetics,* says that "the creature, then, is first and foremost a living body—material, temporal, and vulnerable" (2011, 5). As Pick indicates, a creaturely poetics means "reading through a creaturely prism [which] consigns culture to contexts that are not exclusively human, contexts beyond an anthropocentric perspective" (5). This paper similarly focuses on attentiveness to vulnerable bodies.

"What Was I?": Disruptive Hybrid Creatures

In his pursuit to (re)create life, Victor requires biological materials. To supplement his theoretical knowledge, Victor robs graves, engages in vivisection, and takes human bones from charnel houses (Shelley 2017, 38-9). Literary scholars have paid less attention to the fact that Victor also steals body parts from *both* "the dissecting room and the slaughter-house" (39), although recent scholarship, particularly from writers working within ecocriticism and CAS, has begun to rectify this gap.[6] Because the creature Victor builds is comprised of both human and animal parts, he troubles anthropocentric notions of strict species categories from his conception and becomes emblematic of the collapse of Cartesian paradigms. Shelley's text strategically avoids revealing which of the creature's body parts belong to which species, and these details are among the few that Victor knowingly withholds from Captain Walton.

However, Dawn Kaczmar and Alan Richardson offer viable hypotheses about certain constituents of the creature's body, postulating that the creature's body involves nonhuman blood, a hybridized brain, and components of grazing animals, including the creature's stomach.[7] Their arguments for these hypothesized hybrid components are as follows. In her article, "*Frankenstein,* slaughterhouses, and blood," Kaczmar makes the compelling case that the material Victor lifted from slaughterhouses was nonhuman blood. Kaczmar reminds us that "blood … would have been difficult to obtain" from dissecting rooms and charnels because "blood coagulates soon after death and is then difficult to extract in substantial amounts" (2021, 2097). Nineteenth century private slaughterhouses were ill-defined but ubiquitous, "not a 'type' of facility: rather, 'slaughterhouse' referred to any building in which butchers happened to slaughter their animals—generally behind a retail meat shop in residential areas" (2095). Kaczmar notes that "when Shelley includes slaughterhouses among dissecting rooms, churchyards, and charnel houses, then, it is in part because slaughterhouses were already so closely associated with death, human or otherwise, that its presence in the list of locations does not necessarily call

[6] See Carol J. Adams's seminal *The Sexual Politics of Meat,* as well as the work of Emelia Quinn, Mascha Hansen, and Jackson Petsche for further scholarship on this topic.

[7] Alan Richardson notes that the creature's vegetarianism might be less of a dietary choice or an ethical stance, and more of a restriction of his own biology. "The Creature [*sic*]," Richardson writes, "may simply have too many ruminant components to tolerate meat, resulting in the appetite, if not the stomach altogether, of a grazing animal" (2020, 781).

attention to itself" (2097). More than their ubiquity, slaughterhouses were intimately linked to blood:

> In fact, slaughterhouses were so closely associated with the enormous amounts of blood they produced that Louis-Sebastien Mercier writes of Paris that 'The rue-du-Pied-de-Boeuf has a number of dirty little alleys that are soaked in the blood of slaughtered animals. Some of this collects in puddles, the rest trickles in small streams to the Seine.' When Paris attempted to geographically consolidate its slaughterhouses in La Villette, the quarter was nicknamed 'La Cite du Sang,' or the city of blood. (2097)

Kaczmar remarks that the slaughterhouse's connection to blood is particularly important in terms of Victor's experiments "because it is likely that Shelley included slaughterhouses in the list of locations Victor as a resource for blood" (2097). If we are to buy Kaczmar's argument (and I do), the creature's ability to live is at least partially indebted, then, to the "animal blood circulat[ing] throughout his entire body" (2097).

Richardson, in his thorough article "Wild Minds: *Frankenstein,* Animality, and Romantic Brain Science" posits that the creature's brain itself might not be entirely human. Although scholars have long assumed that the creature's brain is human, Richardson argues that "Shelley's text give no support for this claim" and that cultural conceptions around the origin of the creature's brain might instead be drawn from filmic adaptations, wherein these movies "typically feature a human brain that is variously dropped, switched intentionally or accidentally, or otherwise compromised before transplantation" (2020, 781). But, drawing our attention to popular Romantic-era science, Richardson suggests instead that Victor might have similarly viewed the "conception of the brain as an 'assemblage' of neural organs" and, thus, "what would prevent Victor from engaging in some creative reassembly?" (781) We might, then, accept that the creature's brain itself is a hybrid organ, drawing upon myriad species for its creation. Reflecting on contemporaneous "anxieties concerning the intermixture of human beings and cattle" (781) and Victor's access to slaughterhouses, Richardson suggests that cattle and oxen body parts might have been utilized for the creature's giant, eight-foot body. Richardson further offers a self-proclaimed "tendentious claim" (781), and one that I believe holds weight. He notes that:

> One of Victor's favorite epithets for his Creature, one he tends to use in moments of great anger—namely, "devil"—may harbor a rather vicious taunt regarding the Creature's stockyard ancestry. For, although the Creature himself identifies with Milton's sublime Satan—gigantic, winged, and still showing traces of his original brightness—the devil of the popular imagination continued to feature the horns, hooves, and tail of the Frankenstein Creature's bovine kin. (781)

Pace Richardson and Kaczmar, I would like to suggest that the creature's eyes themselves might not be human. The creature's eyes and surrounding skin are described as yellow, which could indicate jaundice in a human body. Yet even with modern refrigeration techniques, the human eye is difficult to preserve after death. Recalling the proximity of slaughterhouses, Victor might have had better access to fresh eyes if procuring them from a nonhuman body—perhaps, if I may offer my own tendentious claim, a goat's eyes. As J. Boyazoglu et al. claim, "the goat was the first animal domesticated to produce for the consumer," and goat farming was popular in eighteenth century Europe (2005, 13).[8] Victor's access to a deceased goat body, like blood from the slaughterhouse, might have been more readily available than a functional post-mortem human eye. As Kaczmar teases out, Victor's horror grows once his creature awakens for the first time, and Kaczmar rightly notes that the creature's agitated limbs are a specific part of Victor's discomfort but so, too, is the first opening of the creature's "dull yellow eye" (Shelley 2017, 41). Nonhuman eyes within an otherwise human face would produce a particularly uncanny effect, a face rendered both familiar and unfamiliar to Victor. When the creature climbs through Victor's window the same night as Victor flees in terror, Victor is disturbed by the creature's eyes and goes as far as to say they might not deserve the moniker eyes at all: "[the creature's] eyes, *if eyes they may be called,* were fixed on me" (43; emphasis added). Goat eyes have features distinct from human eyes, including an amber or yellow color, stronger night vision, eyeshine and, of course, distinctive horizontal pupils. The creature becomes mostly nocturnal for practical reasons (in order

[8] Goat eyes might further explain Victor's repeated references to the creature as a "devil." Western cultural traditions of aligning goats with Satan, devils, or demons are partially indebted to Pagan associations and Biblical scripture, as well as iconography inherited from art and literature in the Middle Ages. In "Aesthetics of Evil in Middle Ages: Beasts as Symbols of the Devil," Ricardo Piñero Moral explains that the "presence of evil [in medieval art] becomes visible through animals and mounstrous [*sic*] hybrids" (2021, 2). Certain nonhumans depicted as diabolical or sinister at this time include but are not limited to chimeras, satyrs, centaurs, pigs, and goats (particularly male goats).

to act covertly and avoid being seen), but his nighttime activities—including cutting wood, which requires careful precision—are perhaps made significantly easier due to the origin of his eyes. Furthermore, the creature kills William, Henry, and Elizabeth at night and without any artificial light. Henry's death speaks to the strength of the creature's nighttime vision. The magistrate and his brother-in-law describe hearing Henry's murder at around ten o'clock in the evening and note that "it was a very dark night, as the moon had not yet risen" (146). Unlike human eyes, the unique pupils and retinas of goat eyes enable their excellent night vision.

Regardless of the precise biological breakdown of the creature's body parts, we know the creature is an amalgamation of multiple species. Spanning the end of the eighteenth century until the mid-nineteenth century, the Romantic era saw, in many ways, seismic cultural shifts in attitudes towards animals and the nonhuman world. The importance and value of nature was idealized in juxtaposition to increasingly industrial urban centers. René Descartes believed that animals were mere automata, mechanical creatures responding mindlessly to stimuli. Vivisection of animals was justified in part due to influential Cartesian ideas that animals had "no central consciousness in which pain could be felt" (Perkins 2003, 3). But during the Romantic era, perceptions of animals evolved from unintelligent brutes to complex creatures deserving of moral, ethical, and artistic attention. Literature began to more meaningfully feature animals, not merely as metaphors for humanity, but as individuals "each with [their] own unique character and life history" (3), character-building techniques found in Shelley's text.[9] Public abuse directed at animals became increasingly distasteful. Care and justice for animals grew alongside other significant social justice movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, intersecting with critiques of oppressive ideologies and systems. David Perkins, in *Romanticism and Animal Rights,* argues that "whoever was for rescuing slaves, prisoners, foundlings, and other human victims was likely to feel a kindred impulse with respect to animals, and many an animal lover also supported other humanitarian causes" (3-4). Divides between humans and other animals were reconsidered and redefined with less stable borders,

[9] David Perkins tells us, too, that "animals conventionally viewed as repulsive offered particularly challenging tests of sympathy, and writers seized upon them" (2003, 4). Perkins points to Samuel Taylor Coleridge's "Rime of the Ancient Mariner" as a clear example of this type of literary challenge as the poem features snakes who the mariner initially views as slimy and foul, but later as "beautiful and happy," creatures he can love (4). Perhaps it comes as no surprise then, that Shelley, who both heard Coleridge recite this poem and references it in *Frankenstein*, radically depicts a monstrous human-animal hybrid as deserving of empathy.

reason for both celebration and fear. Richardson details these Romantic-era specific fears: "The Creature as represented in Shelley's novel quite literally embodies her era's anxious, if not horrified, response to the breaching on multiple fronts of any absolute distinction between humans and other animals, with profound and far-reaching ideological, religious, and philosophical repercussions" (2020, 785). The creature's hybridity foregrounds the ways our treatment of animals—legally, socially, morally—depends on their species, status, and purported use-value.

When he awakens and opens his eyes, the creature requires a response from Victor, but the scientist refuses; he flees, and hides, and neglects his progeny. Gillespie explains that witnessing involves a face-to-face meeting between individuals that, ideally, prompts ethical action. She writes that "this moment of locking eyes involves seeing the animal as an embodied individual, rather than as an abstract faceless population, and is integral to the act of witnessing—a Levinasian moment of coming face-to-face that requires a response" (2016, 576). Victor's prior experiments—conducted in order to gain knowledge and perhaps materials for his final creation—recall the number of ungrieved lives lost for Victor's pursuit and reorient his attention to the creature as an embodied individual rather than an abstraction or a hypothesis. Victor "tortured the living animal to animate the lifeless clay" (Shelley 2017, 39) and he is forced to confront both the tortured/dead animals and the farmed/living animal when the creature first awakens. Through this confrontation, Victor's conception of the human-nonhuman binary is threatened. Victor responds to the creature's awakening with fear and anguish, admitting that "breathless horror and disgust filled [his] heart" (42).

Victor's creature is paradigmatic of the fear of species instability. In response to the creature's birth, Victor does not call him son, child, family, or friend, nor does he name him. Instead, Victor uses nonhuman language to describe the creature, calling him monster, creature, wretch, daemon, devil, and "vile insect" (79), among other nonhuman names. Syl Ko argues that "just calling someone an 'animal' or 'nonhuman' is more than enough to justify extreme violence toward that person. The justification is *in the choice of that term itself*. There is no need to appeal to anything external" (2017, 41-42; emphasis in original). Being clear about our own species, then, becomes important for how we are treated. As Richardson says, this horrifying breakdown of "any absolute distinction between humans and other animals" has far-reaching consequences that, even today, we implicitly sense (2020, 785). By distancing the creature from himself through nonhuman language, Victor tries to restore humanistic order.

Although the species breakdown of the creature is left ambiguous, we need only briefly consider our differing treatment of animals to understand why the creature's amalgamation of parts is so horrifying for both the Romantic reader and the contemporaneous one. Liza B. Bauer reminds us that "filters determining which animals serve as 'food,' 'pets,' or 'livestock' are *discursively* constructed and therefore culturally specific" and that "the categorization of animals based upon their species membership as 'wild,' 'companion/pet,' 'edible,' 'inedible,' 'pure,' 'impure,' or 'farm/livestock' animals constitutes an integral part of" their exploitation and use within the animal industrial complex (2024, 157; emphasis in original). Companion animals (especially dogs and cats) are often treated like family members and benefit from legal protections. Many have access to healthcare. Physical and emotional violence towards farmed animals, on the other hand, is built into the systems in which they are designed to live: castration and tail docking,[10] predominately without anesthetic; pregnant sows forced into gestation crates that do not enable them to turn around; calves separated from their mothers so that her milk can be sold for profit; the brutal culling of male chicks in the egg industry, to name but a few injustices. These guidelines prioritize agricultural productivity and efficiency over concern for sentient beings.[11] Animals used in medical testing and scientific research face similarly opaque guidelines. Although the Romantic era saw large cultural shifts in attitudes towards certain animals, the legal system regarded animals as property; Perkins reminds us that in the late eighteenth century, when Victor was practicing vivisection in Shelley's text, the law was unable to directly protect animals because they held no rights (2003, 16). "There were no legal controls [regarding vivisection]," Perkins says, "and any amateur or crackpot could perform any experiment he liked so long as the victim was his property" (15). Today, laws in Canada, the US, and the UK offer only basic or limited

[10] It should be noted that some of these practices are enacted upon companion animal species or even unique to certain breeds of cats and dogs, specifically the acts of docked tails, cropped ears, and declawing. At the same time, many of these practices are widely considered animal cruelty and certain states and provinces have banned these procedures for cosmetic purposes. No federal bans on the practices of declawing, ear cropping, or tail docking for companion animals exist yet in North America.

[11] For instance, sections 444 and 445.1 of the Criminal Code of Canada and British Columbia's Prevention of Cruelty to Animals Act address the treatment of farmed animals, but the former only considers mistreatment towards animals a criminal offense if the pain has been "willfully" caused and is "unnecessary"—but "causing distress to an animal is legal if the person is using generally accepted practices of animal management" (BC SPCA 2025). In the US, the Humane Methods of Slaughter Act includes cows, pigs, sheep, goats, horses, and mules but excludes fishes and birds. To put into perspective how many individuals are left out of this Act, 9.2 billion chickens alone were killed for human consumption in 2022 in the US (Bolotnikova and Torrella 2024).

protections for certain nonhuman animals bred, raised, and killed in laboratories for biomedical research.[12] Anthropocentric language used in statues and guidelines means that experiments deemed "useful" or "necessary" can override ethical concern for animal subjects. Cultural conceptions of species membership—and, vitally, legal definitions and frameworks—continue to determine other animals' fates, including the duration and quality of their lives, whether they receive any formal protections, however minimal, and the timing of their deaths.

Bioengineered animals make explicit our discomfort with beings that defy easy categorization. For instance, Aquabounty Technologies developed the AquAdvantage Salmon and was approved by the FDA in 2015. The Government of Canada even announced that they had "determined that the genetically modified AquAdvantage Salmon is as safe and nutritious for humans and livestock as conventional salmon" (Government of Canada, 2025). Regardless of this government assurance, AquAdvantage Salmon were critiqued by Indigenous groups and fishing communities and rejected by uneasy consumers. These genetically engineered all-female Atlantic salmon, augmented with a hormone gene from Chinook salmon in order to encourage rapid growth, were sometimes referred to as Frankenfish (Molyneaux 2025). Brazil was hopeful to host the world's first hornless dairy herd—a response to danger posed by stressed animals who could hurt each other or human workers with their horns—but were forced to drop their plans. The idea was to pass on the DNA of a gene-edited hornless Holstein bull named Buri, but the FDA discovered a worrying fact before Buri's semen could be used to breed approximately ten calves. Klok writes that something had gone awry in the gene-editing process: "Part of the editing machinery, the piece of bacterial DNA that delivered the desired gene into Buri's cells, called a plasmid, had accidentally gotten pasted into his genome. He was, in fact, part bacteria—a teeny tiny part,

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[12] The Animal Welfare Act (AWA), signed into law in the US in 1966, was designed to provide protections for nonhumans used in scientific experimentation and entertainment, among other contexts. But, as Courtney G. Lee rightly argues, the AWA faces glaring ethical issues, including the fact that "the species that comprise over 90% of laboratory subjects now are omitted completely from the very definition of 'animal' in the statute," such as rats and mice (2016, 197). Canada has no federal regulations regarding animals used for research, and the 1968 Canadian Council on Animal Care (CCAC) has many limitations; troublingly, "with the exception of Ontario, all animal-based experimentation in [Canada] is either not subject to any oversight at all, or confined to oversight by the CCAC, which is itself a *voluntary* body" ("Between the Idea and Reality" 2022, 8; emphasis added). In contrast, the UK's 1986 Animals (Scientific Procedures) Act (ASPA) requires a higher threshold of licencing systems and transparency in reporting, although non-cephalopod invertebrates fall entirely outside of the Act's legal protection due to their species.

around 4,000 base pairs out of about 3 billion" (Molteni, 2019). Brazilian regulators determined that "[Buri] was bacteria enough that [he]—and any of his progeny—could no longer be viewed as not GMO" (Molteni, 2019). Having "unwanted DNA from another species has sealed [the genetically engineered cows'] fate" and three of the five edited bulls were "incinerated" upon this discovery (Regalado, 2019).

Generalized discomfort with bioengineered animals recalls Victor's ontological terror upon confronting his hybrid experiment. The "monofunctionalization of animal use, as in the breeding of laying hens as distinct from broiler chickens, for example, and the specialization of animal husbandry" are entwined with the history of animals used for food, and stricter animal categories "were established with the industrial revolution in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries" (Bauer 2024, 157). The creature's fragmented biology confuses Victor's sense of where to place the creature within anthropocentric hierarchy, much the same way that bioengineering farmed animals troubles fixed cultural distinctions of who and what is edible. While the average person need not "lock eyes" with the pigs used for xenotransplantation or the cow whose milk fills our glasses, Victor does indeed lock eyes with his nonhuman progeny, only to look away when categorization proves futile. Shelley's Gothic and sci-fi text demonstrates that "in addition to breaking with conventional notions of species, the sf [*sic*] trope of biotechnological enablement problematizes the divide between 'indispensable' and 'disposable' beings, which can be connected to asking bioethical questions" (Bauer 2024, 167). Ethically, species matters. This is a lesson the creature learns when he tries to assimilate to humanity, when he attempts but fails to move from "disposable" to "indispensable."

"A Fatal Prejudice Clouds Their Eyes": Trying and Failing to Become Human

The creature's self-told tale is one of massive and rapid cognitive and cultural development. I read this process as the creature attempting to move from a state of nonhuman animality to the valorized category of human, particularly a white, European human male. Although he learns about and adapts to humanity, the creature is ultimately denied entry based on certain biological markers, borne of his chimeric composition discussed in the previous section. In this section of Shelley's text, the creature is aligned in several ways with modern farmed animals. The creature begins in a state of animality, as we might understand that broad category within anthropocentrism: sense-based and intellectually simple or primitive. The creature tells Victor that, initially, "no distinct ideas occupied my mind; all was confused. I felt light, and hunger, and thirst, and darkness; unnumerable sounds rung in my ears, and on all sides various scents saluted me: the only object that I could distinguish was the bright moon, and I fixed my eyes on that with pleasure" (Shelley 2017, 84). After being injured and chased out of the first village he enters, the creature "fearfully [takes] refuge in a low hovel, quite bare" (86). This pig hovel is adjacent to the De Lacey cottage, "surrounded on the sides which were exposed by a pig-stye and a clear pool of water" (86). The creature describes this pig hovel as "miserable" and a "kennel," albeit sufficient shelter that is "tolerably warm" thanks to its proximity to the De Lacey home (86-7). Presumably this hovel originally hosted pigs, although they are conspicuously absent now, ostensibly sold or consumed for meat. Approximately eight feet tall, it might come as no surprise that the creature has difficulties fitting in this hovel (86), but the hovel's incompatibility with the creature's size has an uncanny resonance with modern pig farming and particularly the cruelty of gestation crates.

The creature learns cultural mores and develops a sense of human morality based on behaviours he observes from the De Laceys, and from a collection of articles and books he finds in an abandoned leather suitcase and reads in his hovel (Shelley 2017, 105). Throughout his literary education, the creature is made starkly aware of humanity's reign, of European civility, politics, and religion. Syl Ko succinctly teases out the conceptual sleight of hand underpinning the rigid category of humanity:

> The domain of the "human" or "humanity" is not just about whether or not one belongs to the species homo sapiens. Rather, "human" means a certain way of being, especially exemplified by how one looks or behaves, what practices are associated with one's community, and so on. So, the "human" or what "humanity" is just is a *conceptual way to mark the province of European whiteness as the ideal way of being homo sapiens*. (2017, 23; emphasis in original)

Faithfully, the creature studies the practices, behaviours, and values of European society, but he becomes troubled by the difference between his appearance and those of the humans he observes. He laments this predicament, asking deeply reflective questions: "My person was hideous, and my stature gigantic: what did this mean? Who was I? What was I? Whence did I come? What was my destination?" (106) Understanding the failure of his appearance, the creature's humanization endeavor involves another hopeful path towards joining humanity: acts of service.

The creature is not only aligned with pigs but with another farmed animal mentioned only once in the novel, a dairy cow who lives near the creature's hidden shelter.[13] While acknowledging that the De Laceys live in poverty, the creature notes that "their nourishment consisted entirely of the vegetables of their garden, and the milk of one cow, which gave very little during the winter; when its masters could scarcely procure food to support it" (89-90). This cow is referred to as an "it" by the creature, who has learned, at this point in his storytelling, anthropocentric hierarchy (98). But the creature, like this dairy cow, eases the burden of labour for the De Laceys, contributing to their nourishment and flourishing. The creature cuts, stacks, and provides wood, "clear[s] their path from the snow," and performs other daily tasks routinely completed by Felix De Lacy in order to offset their struggle (94). The De Laceys, however, do not attribute these contributions to the creature, but to a higher power. The creature reflects on this: "I afterwards found that these labours, performed by an invisible hand, greatly astonished them; and once or twice I heard them, on these occasions, utter the words *good spirit, wonderful*" (94; emphasis in original). The creature's work mirrors that of the dairy cow in that both of their contributions are vital to the De Lacey's survival, yet their labour disappears through naturalization and misattribution. In this way, Shelley's text anticipates later debates over what counts as labour and which labourers are rendered visible.

Today, growing scholarship suggests that animals in animal agriculture are engaging in forms of labour. Industrial animal farming would not be possible without the enormous reproductive labour and maternal productivity of cows and pigs (and other animals who are permitted, however fleetingly, to engage in brief maternal care towards their young), not to mention, as Dinesh Wadiwel reminds us, the "billions of animals [who] are required to spend their life engaged in a metabolic labour to produce their own bodies as products, which will be transformed into food commodities after their lives are extinguished" (Blattner et al. 2021, 244). Although the De Laceys benefit from their cow's milk production—made possible only because she was impregnated and separated from her calf—they do not acknowledge her labour. Gillespie asserts that "the

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[13] Emelia Quinn rightly points out that the presence of this cow used for her dairy production "raises several pertinent questions" that haunt Shelley's text: "Where is the bull who must have impregnated her for her to keep lactating year on year? Where is the calf, or calves, for whom the milk was destined? Why does Shelley imply it is food, rather than pregnancy and birth, that effects milk production across the years?" (2021, 50)

hegemony of animal agriculture creates common-sense narratives that erase the violence of routine industry practice and perpetuate the notion that farming practices, like the production of dairy and eggs, are benign" (2016, 574). On the other hand, the creature's labour, which more closely resembles human labour, is met with gratitude and awe. Nonetheless, the creature's engagement with labour disrupts human exceptionalist beliefs that only humans engage in meaningful, intentional work.[14]

Through his acquisition of human language, both verbal and written, the creature slides between anthropocentrically defined human and animal states. Language, in the narrow sense it has historically been defined in the Western tradition, is "regarded philosophically and scientifically both as a uniquely human characteristic and as central to what it means to be human" (Taylor 2017, 49-50). In *When Animals Speak: Toward an Interspecies Democracy*, Eva Meijer argues that anthropocentric conceptions of language stem, in part, from an Aristotelian inheritance that views human language as superior and categorically distinct from other animals. This strict line between humans and others, as articulated by Aristotle, "defines political speech: *logos*, meaning speech informed by reason, is contrasted with *phonè*, the sound of the voice, which can express pain or pleasure. Non-human animals have voices and express themselves, but they cannot speak in the proper sense because they cannot use their voices to decide between just and unjust; they do not have *logos*" (Meijer 2019, 3). Narrow conceptions of language also have troubling implications for humans, subjugating those with disabilities or who speak in non-oral languages as uncivilized, unintelligent, or less-than-human.[15]

Meijer reminds us that language is not limited to human speech but includes "gestures, movements, and other nonverbal expressions," which are

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[14] In a strict Marxist sense, labour has historically been conceived as a solely human endeavour. Marx compared human and animal labour, arguing that while human work involves foresight, planning, and intention, animal labour relies on instinct. He grants animal work some credibility but ultimately privileges human labour as cognitively superior. He says: "A spider conducts operations which resemble those of the weaver, and a bee would put many a human architect to shame by the construction of its honeycomb cells. But what distinguishes the worst architect from the best of bees is that the architect builds the cell in his mind before he constructs it in wax" (qtd in Clark 145).

[15] As Sunaura Taylor points out in her seminal book, *Beasts of Burden,* sign language was not officially taught until 1760. Taylor writes that "even as deaf individuals were increasingly recognized as being capable of language and thus rationality, sign language itself came to be seen as primitive—an earlier stage in the development of a more advanced and civilized mode of spoken communication" (2017, 50). It might come as no surprise, then, that part of the creature's self-education in the latter half of the eighteenth century is his recognition that entry into the moral community in which his creator already belongs necessitates human language acquisition.

vital components of nonhuman language and used across species (2019, 46). Shelley's text highlights the ways in which gestures and other non-verbal communications are interpreted and valued differently depending on the species of the individual. Felix De Lacey, upon meeting Safie, who does not yet know French, appears to easily engage in embodied communication. The creature observes that Safie "uttered articulate sounds, and appeared to have a language of her own, [but] she was neither understood by, or herself understood, [by] the cottagers" (Shelley 2017, 96). Yet when Safie holds out her hand to Felix, he happily takes and kisses it. Although Safie "did not appear to understand [Felix]" verbally, she smiles in response, indicating mutual understanding (96).

By contrast, when the creature first awakens—before he learns to speak French—he and Victor share a nearly identical exchange of gestures with a vastly different outcome. Victor perceives the creature as "mutter[ing] some inarticulate sounds," the non-rational nonhuman phonè, as opposed to the creature's later recollection of Safie's "articulate sounds," or logos. Victor acknowledges that the creature "*might* have spoken," but that "[he] did not hear" (43; emphasis added). When the creature enters Victor's room, Victor notes that the creature's "hand was stretched out, seemingly to detain me" (43). The creature's movement here is understood by Victor not as a gesture of good will, companionship, a plea for help, or even a truce, but as a threat. Due to the creature's ambiguous species identity, Victor immediately (mis)reads the creature's embodied communication as less-than-human and sinister.

Most often, the burden of language acquisition falls to nonhumans to interpret human language and not the other way around or, as Meijer puts it, "other animals are forced to fit into human material and ideological structures" (2019, 75). Here, we can think again of other animals and specifically farmed animals. Human exceptionalism suggests that describing cows, chickens, pigs, or other animals farmed for consumption as screaming or crying is mere anthropomorphizing—projecting so-called human traits onto other animals. But it is important to consider body language as an important part of a shared interspecies language. Companion animals are excellent exemplifiers of this embodied communication. In these relationships, body language becomes easy to parse across species lines. Subtle changes in facial expressions, posture, ears, or tails can reveal anger, grief, happiness, or fear. Few would push back on the notion that their companion animal comes to understand minute gestures and even eye movements, or that we can understand their desires in similarly tiny changes in facial expression or the movement of tails or bared teeth.

Victor, by denying the creature logos and refusing to engage in reciprocal, attentive interactions, reinstates Western paradigms that privilege human-centered speech over the “speechless” nonhuman. Rather than attempt to engage in interspecies communication, Victor dismisses the creature as a “demoniacal corpse” (Shelley 217, 43). But the creature soon troubles Victor’s rigid binaries regarding who is allowed to speak. Initially, the creature is afraid of his own voice, applying human exceptionalist ideals onto himself: “Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again” (84). The creature’s “own mode” of communication is undignified, a marker of his nonhuman status. At first, the creature sees human language as a mysterious, “godlike science” but learns by “great application” simple words and, eventually, advanced sentence structure and patterns of speech (91).

Yet the creature’s language acquisition is depicted as a kind of trick, dismissed on similar grounds to other animals who communicate with humans. For instance, several chimpanzees, gorillas, and bonobos have been evidenced to communicate through forms of gesture such as American Sign Language (ASL) or other non-verbal means of communication, including magnetic symbols which represent objects. Notable examples include Washoe, “the first chimpanzee to use ASL. . . who learned an estimated 200 words” in the 1960s (Gruen 2021, 10); Koko the gorilla, who could “combine words in spontaneous ways” (11); and an orangutan named Chantek and a chimpanzee named Nim Chimpsky who each learned at least 150 signs (11). However, each instance has drawn criticism from linguists and cognitive scientists, some of whom argue that no other animals can use language by definition, or that these animals are merely engaging in associative learning (10-13). Although analyzing the specifics of this type of interspecies communication is important, Gruen rightly points out that “our commitment to human uniqueness may bias our observations and even the way that empirical research is conducted” (13), leading to the cultural insistence on “an insurmountable divide between humans and others … even in the face of clear evidence establishing continuities between human skills and the skills used by some nonhumans” (12).

The creature’s use of oral language is initially accepted by De Lacey, who is blind; De Lacey’s inability to see momentarily enables him to effectively bear witness to the creature’s plight (Shelley 2017, 111-113). De Lacey suggests that they share an affinity: like the creature, he and his family have also been unfairly judged (113). In *Unbecoming Human,* Felice Cimatti troubles human exceptionalism and the conceit that we might only extend rights to other beings who share in human behaviours, appearance, traits, or mental states. "Why would these rights be assigned only to those creatures we (arbitrarily) consider as being *like* humans?" Cimatti asks. "Is being human so important, such that we take ourselves to be the yardstick for all living beings?" (2020, 16; emphasis in original) But, as Cimatti reminds us, beings should not need to be identical to humans to be valuable: "A beaver is a complete living being, and to ask ourselves if it is endowed with something that another animal has is meaningless – it would be like asking if *Homo sapiens* has feathers, or gills" (15). In attempting to justify himself as a fellow-creature to the elder De Lacey, the creature outlines his own benevolent, helpful demeanor: "I have good dispositions; my life has been hitherto harmless, and, in some degree, beneficial; but a fatal prejudice clouds their eyes, and where they ought to see a feeling and kind friend, they behold only a detestable monster" (112). But the creature's fluency becomes insufficient for the granting of human status once the other cottagers see his appearance. He is exposed as an interloper, a being who might insidiously mimic humanity—as with the chimpanzees and orangutans seen to be only performing language through association—but he is never fully assimilated, exposing anxieties around humanity's amorphousness. The creature gestures towards the possibilities of rich multispecies relation, based not on identical traits or capacities, but on kinship, reciprocity, and recognition. Yet species prejudice, as the creature fears, propel the remaining De Laceys to react in fear, anger, and physical violence. The creature has attempted to cross the literal and figurative threshold of humanity, the De Lacey's cottage, only to be driven back to animality, where he lies "unperceived" in his pig hovel (113).

Notably, the creature does not merely learn to speak with humans but tells his own tale. His narrative is at once a personal history and a self-reflection on virtue, character, and ethics. As Bauer cogently points out, "critical readers may be kept from taking animal focalizers or narrators seriously," a tendency rooted in Western ideologies to link moral and narrative credibility to the capacity for human language (2024, 106). Skepticism towards nonhuman narrators might be linked to "the anthropocentric reasoning according to which nonhuman animals' lack of *human* language capacities indicated their lack of means for communication in general," indicating that we need not take these animal characters or their real-world counterparts seriously (106; emphasis in original). The creature is unique because he gains the ability to communicate via human language, but other markers of difference keep him from being accepted. David Herman offers a useful conceptual framework for understanding what is at stake in the creature's radical act of self-narration as a hybrid being. As Herman argues, cultural ontologies define "what sorts of entities should be profiled as a 'who' and not just a 'what'," and that a given culture's storytelling practices "settle the question of which entities should be matched with the assemblage of traits that are deemed to constitute selfhood, including subjective experiences, or the capacity to have a perspective on events" (2018, 25). The creature's self-narration challenges anthropocentric assumptions that only humans can access or represent inner life.

As noted earlier, embodied communication between companion animals and humans is a culturally accepted practice; these animals are not mimicking or failing to understand us or vice versa but are collaborators in meaning making. There is, however, intense cultural and economic pressure to deny this same capacity for expression in animals used for farming and experimentation. To acknowledge that cows may mourn the loss of their calves, or that mice express fear and stress, would destabilize the ideological foundations of the AIC. These behaviours are instead often ignored or reclassified as mechanical or meaningless. But the creature's act of self-narration suggests a continuity between himself and humanity, highlighting the tension of anthropocentric hierarchies which imply that nonhumans have limited or valueless perspectives on themselves and their own experiences. By entangling Victor's self-narrative with the creature's, Shelly's text explores "how narratives about self-other relationships that cross the species boundary can engage more or less critically and reflexively with established ontological categories, in some instances unsettling not only hierarchical understandings of kinds of life but also the human-animal distinction itself" (Herman 2018, 27). The creature's perspective and experience of the world, although dismissed by Victor and other humans, is legitimized by the text itself. Through storytelling, language acquisition, and labour, Victor's creature unsettles ideas of the "human," not because he fails to become fully human, but because he almost succeeds, revealing humanity to be constructed, amorphous, and porous, not divine and singular. His abilities, behaviours, and capacities are necessary but not sufficient for his entry into the realm of "human." Shelley's text shows us that, like modern animals, the creature is ultimately rejected based on what he is thought to lack, a common anthropocentric attitude used to justify mistreatment and exploitation towards animals within the AIC.

"Hear My Tale": Failing to Bear Witness

"Hear my tale," the creature implores Victor. "The sun is yet high in the heavens; before it descends to hide itself behind yon snowy precipices, and illuminate another world, you will have heard my story, and can decide" (Shelley 2017, 82). Confronting Victor in Chamonix Valley, the creature gives him two choices: once he hears the creature's story in full, only Victor can decide if the creature leaves civilization or continues to haunt and stalk Victor's "fellow-creatures." What the creature demands here is that Victor witnesses his life: his perspective, his pain, his joy, his suffering, and his labour. Gillespie, in describing the act of bearing witness, builds upon Lori Gruen's conception of entangled empathy, defined as

> a type of caring perception focused on attending to another's experience of wellbeing. An experiential process involving a blend of emotion and cognition in which we recognize we are in relationships with others and are called upon to be responsive and responsible in these relationships by attending to another's needs, interests, desires, vulnerabilities, hopes, and sensitivities. (Gruen 2015, 3)

One of the many motifs in Shelley's novel is responsibility—to whom do we owe it, and to what degree? In telling his story, the creature repeatedly demonstrates to us that he has been failed both by Victor and by human society at large, due to species prejudice and discomfort toward the creature's lively, undomesticated animal parts. Gillespie argues that "telling the stories of those whose lives often go unremarked is an act of resistance that makes a statement about whose lives matter and have meaning" (577). As an agential storyteller, the creature renegotiates his position within the subject-object binary and reaffirms that he is a "who" rather than a "what," to use Herman's terminology. Although Victor engages in a form of witnessing by relating the creature's tale to Walton, [16] he strips the creature's origin story and the subsequent act of witnessing its political, actionable power by failing to feel with the creature.

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[16] Captain Walton's relationship to the creature is intriguingly ambiguous. Walton witnesses the creature's "exclamations of grief and horror" and involuntarily shuts his eyes in response, partly due to the creature's "appalling hideousness" (Shelley 2017, 183). Yet Walton is swayed "by a mixture of curiosity and compassion" towards the creature when Walton hears the creature's pained regret; it is the creature's hybrid appearance and unearthly "ugliness," coupled with his violence, that reaffirms the creature's monstrosity for Walton (184).

Despite being in relation with the creature, Victor is unresponsive and negligent, refusing to attend to the creature's vulnerability. Ultimately, Victor shirks his responsibility to the creature and both suffer as a result.

Gillespie acknowledges that "witnessing is often characterized by a profound imbalance in power between 'witness' and 'witnessed'" (578). Originally, the position of power belongs to Victor, as the creature's creator, parent, and guide, but Victor fails to provide mentorship or even the basics of care towards the life he's brought into existence. Pressured by the creature, Victor initially agrees to create a companion for the creature but, terrified of "a race of devils" who might annihilate humanity, he destroys the female creation to ensure the creature cannot procreate (139).[17] Gillespie reminds us that witnessing is "a moment of recognition of the animal subject that attends to the ways in which our conception of ourselves—as observers, consumers, humans—is characterized by grave power imbalances and requires a new understanding of subjectivity that extends beyond the human experience to multispecies lifeworlds" (576). Victor's myopia means he cannot conceive of living peacefully alongside the creature or the half-finished companion. Although he grants that the female "in all probability was to become a thinking and reasoning animal," he can only imagine her to be either malignant or wretched, or drawn to the "superior beauty of man" (Shelley 2017, 139). Multispecies kinship falls outside the scope of Victor's imagined reality. This lack of companionship and a possibility of community is the final straw for the creature, who reverses their power dynamic and overtly refers to himself as Victor's master:

> Slave, I before reasoned with you, but you have proved yourself unworthy of my condescension. Remember that I have power; you believe yourself miserable, but I can make you so wretched that the light of day will be hateful to you. You are my creator, but I am your master;—obey! (141)

Here, the creature troubles notions of animalized bodies as inert, unfeeling objects. In his rage and grief, he provides a paradigmatic rupture: through his agency—demonstrated first by his sympathetic self-humanizing project, and second by his vengeful anger—the creature pushes back against

[17] There is a resonance between this moment and capitalist animal agriculture. Although the desire is directly inverse—those who profit off of animal agriculture fear the cessation of forced insemination and animal breeding/procreation, while Victor fears the creature's hypothetical offspring—the underlying logic is similar: that a nonhuman being might (or might refuse to) procreate in a way meaningful to them and, importantly, in a way we cannot control.

Enlightenment ideals of a romanticized, domesticated nonhuman other available for dominion and exploitation. By swapping hierarchical positions with Frankenstein and taking up the mantle of "master," traditionally codified as a human position, the creature's power reversal suggests that control and domination is situational and context-dependent, not innately tied to species identity. Denied his own community, the creature thus resolves to destroy Frankenstein's. Johnstone tells us that "on his deathbed, Victor … acknowledges that he is not just responsible *for* the creature but also responsible *to* him" (2017, 204; emphasis in original). At this point, of course, it's too late to repair the fracture.

Entangled Futures

"Am I to be thought the only criminal," the creature asks, "when all human kind [*sic*] sinned against me?" (Shelley 2017, 185) The creature's rhetorical challenge to Captain Walton is a prescient one. In the Anthropocene, learning to live alongside and responsibly respond to sentient beings on a warming planet is increasingly urgent—especially for those animals we have created for human use. As Jodey Castricano astutely reminds us, "the road to the Anthropocene has been built upon the illusion of domination" (2024, 144). The creature's story highlights the fact that humanity is, indeed, a fictitious category, a violent, unstable, and untenable construction. The creature learns the language and culture of humanity and still fails to be meaningfully witnessed, exposing the limits and arbitrariness of human supremacy.

As discussed in the introduction, xenotransplantation has been initiated as a twenty-first century technofix: the potential use of animals for organ donation in the face of tragic human loss that hasn't yet, however, seen success. We began with one human woman and one pig organ, but that story does not name or mention the countless other animals who were reared, experimented upon, and killed in order to make that procedure possible; instead, these beings are written out of dominant narratives, sacrificed in the name of scientific progress. Animals brought into existence for food are similarly ignored, tucked into gestation crates, stuffed in overheated barns, pushed onto kill floors, and all killed at a fraction of their lifespan, not to mention the consequences for the animalized humans who work in these cruel and environmentally destructive systems. Perhaps we should not look to other animals for how alike they might be to us—as this exclusionary way of thinking continues to perpetuate racism, colonialism, sexism, and other forms of subjugation—but do away with the yardstick of humanity altogether, considering similarity but also honoring difference, a key tenet of CAS. Shelley's text makes explicit the weight of interspecies responsibility and anticipates the limits of human exceptionalism as the criteria for which life is valued. Johnstone says that, "in her development of a creature who suffers so greatly because he is despised and rejected by an intolerant human society, [Shelley] asks us to consider our obligations to our creations before we bring them into being" (2017, 207). Like the creature, animals within the AIC are born into an isolated life, separated from any sense of community, forced to interpret and navigate inhospitable spaces they did not choose and cannot escape.

The first feeling of anthropocentric collapse may be one of Burkean sublimity, but this liminal space reveals possibilities for entangled, reciprocal kinship. One of the Gothic's enduring powers, then, is a lesson from a brilliant teenager in 1818: that the collapse of a binary is initially terrifying and subsequently elucidating. Victor's human-animal creature is brought into existence for human ends, abandoned and self-educated, and retreats into a barren, isolated world of ice. He forever longs for connection, community, and camaraderie, and is ultimately doomed to a lonely death after a short and solitary life. Prior to destroying the female creature, Victor imagines awful possibilities of nonhuman reign and human destruction, but we could instead imagine entangled futures based on respect and flourishing, rather than uneven power dynamics and violence. Twenty-first century animals used in the AIC are much closer to us than the creature—geographically, and sometimes biologically. Unlike Victor, it is not too late for us to course correct. Might we brave anthropocentric collapse, bear witness to their subjectivity and suffering, and finally welcome these animal kin into our ethical communities?

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