The Human and its Others: A Posthumanist Reading of Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

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Abstract:
This paper examines how Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* deconstruct the naturalised discourses by which hegemonial systems of power define the human and its others, using Herbrechter and Callus' method of a posthumanist reading. This analysis is done in order to reveal the novels' underlying assumptions about what it means to be human, and the political motivations and implications of such a conceptualisation. It will be argued that *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* use the discursive nature of the human and the other to speak up against the othering and subsequent oppression of minority groups. They both stay, however, within the framework of humanism and its belief in a human essence, and only *The Fifth Season* manages partly to break with anthropocentrism by de-centring the human from its allocated point of exceptionalism.

1 While questions of humanity and otherness are currently discussed as part of social justice movements such as #MeToo and Black Lives Matter, the increasing role of popular culture in the creation of discourses becomes ever more apparent. This allows for the analysis of contemporary works of fiction to reveal how notions of who is to be considered a human are constructed, criticised and subverted by authors in the context of oppression and marginalisation. As part of the increasing research in the topic, this paper examines two novels that deconstruct the naturalised discourses by which hegemonial systems of power define the human and its others: Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*.

2 The primary texts discussed in this paper are both contemporary works of speculative fiction written by US-American women of colour that deal with the themes of oppression and othering. Both feature at least one protagonist who belongs to a group oppressed by a system in power, and both works have cultural significance: Jemisin became the first black person to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel for *The Fifth Season* in 2016 (Alter n.p.), while *Children of Blood and Bone* was one "of the most-anticipated books of 2018" (Canfield n.p.), reaching its 72nd week on the *New York Times* Young Adult Hardcover Bestseller List as of July 25, 2019 ("Young Adult" n.p.). Both novels have also been linked to current political movements, such as Black Lives Matter, with both authors being public about part of the inspiration for their works being institutionalised racism and instances of police brutality in the US in the last decade (Newkirk n.p. and "Black Lives Matter" n.p.).

3 This paper examines these two novels in order to reveal their underlying assumptions

about what it means to be human, and the political motivations and implications of such a conceptualisation. It will be argued that *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* use the discursive nature of the human and the other to speak up against the othering and subsequent oppression of minority groups. They both stay, however, within the framework of humanism and its belief in a human essence, and only *The Fifth Season* manages partly to break with anthropocentrism by de-centring the human from its allocated place of uniqueness. To argue this, the paper will attempt a posthumanist reading of the primary works. Through this lens, different group of beings or entities in the novels will be analysed in terms of their portrayal as human or other on different narratological levels, in order to demonstrate how the novels use a humanist baseline to argue against the oppression of marginalised groups.

The Human as a Discursive Construct

4 The notion of the human as a discursive construct has developed through the anti-humanism and "demythologisation" (Herbrechter and Callus n.p.) processes of the 20th century. Discourses "do not faithfully reflect reality" (Riggins 2), but rather construct them by making "a selection, an interpretation, and a dramatization of events" (2). Because of this, all discourses are to be seen as context specific rather than presenting an objective truth, representing one interpretation of a pluralistic reality. Humanism is the historically specific discourse on the human. Pramod K. Nayar identifies various beliefs central to its idea of human features: "autonomous, self-conscious, coherent and self-determining" (6). Autonomy, self-consciousness, self-determination and rationality are here to be understood as one set of characteristics used to explain how the human differs from other beings. Jacques Derrida gives several examples for other characteristics formerly believed to be unique to the human: "laughing, mourning, burial" (373). These features have been abandoned by humanism, exemplifying how defining the human is an ongoing, context-specific process that changes to reflect cultural developments. Connected to humanism is anthropocentrism, the belief in human uniqueness with "special, central, even cosmic significance" (Butchvarov 1).

5 Since the human is a context-specific discursive construct, the belief in a human core, a human essence, an ontological purity or cosmic uniqueness is not justified. As Foucault points out, the human, if his "arrangement were to disappear as they appeared . . . would be erased, like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea" (387). Because of this the discourse about the human can be analysed to reveal what characteristics are used to define this specific conception of it. In the tradition of humanism, every other animal and the environment have generally been defined as non-human others, in a reading which is "very difficult to overcome

because it is deeply rooted in Western thought" (Marchesini 75). Meanwhile, some marginalised groups such as women and people of colour, who historically have not been assumed to be human or only sub-human, have become more central to the definition of the human, who in "classical Humanism . . . is white, European, handsome and able-bodied" (Braidotti, "The Posthuman" 24).

6 Anthropocentrism and humanism have been under attack by different groups, such as critical animal studies. These theorists question the traditional human-animal distinction (Calarco n.p.). Cary Wolfe summarises some of animal studies' findings in his statement that many of the features that traditionally have been used to characterise the human "(first it was possession of a soul, then 'reason', then tool use, then tool making, then altruism, then language, then the production of linguistic novelty, and so on) flourish quite reliably beyond the species barriers" (*Animal Rites* 2). These theorists argue that the human-animal distinction is no longer supported by contemporary Western scientific culture. Thus, the conception of the human can no longer hinge on a binary opposition to the non-human animal. Other theorists have problematised the human-machine distinction. According to Donna Haraway, this distinction has been breached by "[l]ate twentieth-century machines [that] have made thoroughly ambiguous the difference between natural and artificial . . . and many other distinction[s] that used to apply to organisms and machines" (152). Cyborg theorists claim that the human-machine divide, like the human-animal divide, can no longer be seen as delineating two separate ontological categories. Instead, machines share some characteristics that in the humanist tradition have been assigned to the human. Haraway names several examples of things that challenge the distinction: "machines were not self-moving, self-designing, [and] autonomous" (152) previously and could thus be categorically distinguished from the human.

Monster Theory and the Politics of Othering

7 The construction of identity is an exclusionary practice, in which a self and an other are created through "discourses of . . . difference and similarity" (Riggins 4). By expelling that which does not belong, an identity of self is created. At the same time, expelling an other constitutes that other. The creation of discourses is a process which is characterised by inherent power dynamics and hierarchies. Michael Krumer-Nevo and Mirit Sidi define othering as "discursive processes by which powerful groups . . . define subordinate groups into existence in a reductionist way which ascribe problematic and/or inferior characteristics to these subordinate groups" (300). Entities belonging to the other are perceived as a

homogeneous group, leading to the creation of stereotypes and prejudices.

8 The power dynamics inherent to discourses become apparent in the naturalisation of those perceived as common sense, which resist to be questioned. They tend to not be given a name; instead, the discourse centring on the opposing perspective is named, and the "unnamed . . . is likely to be read as apolitical commonsense" (Riggins 12). Because they remain unnamed and hide themselves in naturalness, these discourses are additionally perceived to be without an alternative (Riggins 12), appearing inherently as 'that which just is as it is'. These naturalised and unnamed discourses are typically created by groups in power, who define themselves as the norm against which the named other is measured.

9 Elaine Graham uses a genealogy of "boundary-creatures" (14) to trace human others through the discourse on monsters. Graham conceptualises the current attacks on humanism as the "blurring of boundaries" (11). These "boundaries between humans and almost-humans have been asserted . . . through the discourse of 'monstrosity'" (Graham 12), where monsters function both by "marking the boundaries between the normal and the pathological but also [by] exposing the fragility of the very taken-for-grantedness of such categories" (Graham 19). As Margrit Shildrick describes it, monsters "signify both the binary opposition between the natural and the non-natural" and simultaneously "carry the weight not just of difference, but of *différance*" (2). Derrida's différance describes "the trace within that signals disruption" – the recognition of the same within the others and the others within the same that disrupts binary oppositions (Badmington 157). Monsters thus are both one incarnation of the others and simultaneously demonstrate through *différance* that this opposition is questionable. According to Graham, this "exposure of the redundancy and instability of the ontological hygiene of the humanist subject" (12) is what makes the monster monstrous.

10 Examples such as "Native Americans [who] were presented as unredeemable savages" (Cohen 8) in Western cultures demonstrate the power dynamics inherent to the creation of discourses, because "others have been 'constructed' as 'monstrous' . . . by being represented, classified, subjected, supervised, and disciplined (by modern culture) solely in order to determine by contrast a purified (albeit fictionalised) standard of (white male) normality" (O'Hara 109). In short, the others are constructed as monstrous by being expelled from the category of the white, male human through the discourse of humanism, which "constructs and reconstructs itself as not raced, as not queer, as not coloured, and always as not other" (Morris 81) while "that which is different must be located . . . in black people, in foreigners, in animals, the lower classes, and in women" (Shildrick 5). These others that are conceptualised as entities of monstrosity are victims of the "malevolence towards those designated as

different" (Graham 53). This happens through the cultural process in which "what is different becomes pathologized as 'monstrous' and thus inhuman, disposable and dangerous . . . . [further as] deviance (as measured against a hegemonic norm) which becomes equated with other pathologies in a process of scape-goating" (Graham 53). Marginalised groups thus become defined as monstrous and sub-human, and therefore become victims of systematic oppression and malevolent actions. These actions are in turn approved by the hegemonial power systems that control the discourses which conceptualised them as others and monstrous in the first place. The process of othering is therefore a highly political one, being steered by a hegemonial system in power to marginalise those who it does not see as self (Jensen 65), and in the case of the human subsequently as inhumane.

Posthumanism and Speculative Fiction

11 There are different positions which are discussed under the umbrella term of posthumanism, and different conceptions of what is meant by sub-groups of posthumanism (Wolfe, *What Is Posthumanism* xii), such as transhumanism and critical posthumanism. It makes sense in the context set by the previous chapters to understand posthumanism foremost as "the entire discourse . . . which embraces the 'posthuman'" (Herbrechter 16). As Stefan Herbrechter points out, the term can additionally be understood through its ambiguity: 'post'-humanism with a temporal 'post-' stresses the possibility "that a certain humanism has reached its end", while post-'humanism' emphasis the discourse concerned with the deconstruction of humanism (16). Nayar sets another understanding of the term forth, stating that "[p]osthumanism . . . refers to an *ontological condition* in which many humans now, and increasingly will, live with chemically, surgically, [and] technologically modified bodies" (3).

12 The here relevant strand of *critical posthumanism* does not belief in an inherent human essence: "critical posthumanism disputes [a human essence] by demonstrating how the human is a congeries, and human qualities or characteristics have co-evolved with other life forms" (Nayar 8). Herbrechter delineates the stance of critical posthumanism as to "investigate the possible crisis and end of a certain *conception* of the human", with an "openness to the radical nature of technocultural change" while stressing a "continuity with traditions of thought that have critically engaged with humanism, and which, in part, have evolved out of the humanist tradition itself", pointing towards positive achievements of humanism, and the changed technological conditions of the present (original emphasis, 3).

13 From this position, Herbrechter defines the task of critical posthumanism as to "re-evaluate established forms of antihumanist critique, to adapt them to the current, changed

condition, and, where possible, to radicalise them" (3). These forms of antihumanist critique, on which critical posthumanism builds, are postmodernism and poststructuralism, whose "critique emphasises the radically local and temporal context-specificity, negates the immanence of signification and instead stresses the politically conflictual construction of meaning" (Herbrechter 12). As such, critical posthumanism "is the radical decentering of the traditional sovereign . . . in order to demonstrate how the human is always already evolving with, constituted by and constitutive of multiple forms of life and machines" (Nayar 2). It is this radical de-centring which Francesca Ferrando describes as "post-centralizing, in the sense that it recognises not one but many specific centers of interest" (30). Instead of relying on a new "frontal dualism or antithesis", critical posthumanism "offers a reconciliation of existence in its broadest significations" (Ferrando 29) by demonstrating how the human has always been a construct with an imperfect ontological hygiene alongside many other possible centres separated from each other by humanism and anthropocentrism through exclusive discourses (Aretoulakis 173). Nayar therefore sees critical posthumanism as a "*critical-philosophical project* that unravels the discursive, institutional and material structures and processes that have presented the human as unique and bounded even when situated among all other life forms" (29). For Nayar, this includes "a systematic deconstruction of cultural representations that shows how particular discourses of animality, monstrosity and disability enabled the human species to define itself against its other, the freak/monster, the animal and alternative body-forms" (29).

14 Speculative fiction, such as science fiction and fantasy, allows for the literal representation of the others, the monster, the non-human through its depiction of alternative realities. By producing "a productive rupture with established truths and knowledges", speculative fiction "brings to light the societal and ideological structures that ground the reality one knows" (Hellstrand 1). Having the status of "[l]ow cultural genres", speculative fictions are "free of grandiose pretensions . . . and thus end up being a more accurate and honest depiction of contemporary culture than other, more self-consciously 'representational' genres" (Braidotti, "All Too Human" 203). It gives its readers a ground on which a realisation of normative and discursive constructs such as the human and its others can occur, which can then be discussed, deconstructed and criticised.

15 Herbrechter and Callus term this critical reading of popular culture in order to understand that text's assumptions of the human and its others a "posthumanist reading". They describe this method as follows: "to read 'texts' . . . through the way they set up a catalogue of assumptions and values about 'what it means to be human'" by analysing

"oppositions between the human and the non-human at work in a text". To achieve this, the analysis "critically evaluates the contrivances that the text is willing to accept or even promote in order to protect the integrity of the distinction and reduce contamination to a minimum" so that the "posthumanist reading spells out the anxieties and repressed [sic] that inform the text's desire" (*Posthumanist Reading*, n.p.).

The Human

16 In their discussion of the human, *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* use the disruption between two narratological levels[1] in order to demonstrate the inhumanity of othering. Both primary works present a world in which at least one of the protagonists is othered by the system in power. On the intradiegetic level, these protagonists are seen by their culture as inhuman or monstrous. The authors of the primary works, however, treat and present these characters as human on the extradiegetic level of narration. Through this disruption the authors take a political stance, arguing against the oppression of minority groups such as the ones to which their characters belong. In an allegorical fashion, this stance can be extended to real marginalised groups, such as women, people of colour and queer people in contemporary Western culture.

17 Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* is set in a kingdom called Orïsha. Within its fantasy world, the novel presents a world with an aristocratic ruling class headed by a royal family, which serves as the regiment in power to the working class. This way, the novel's structure sets up a world with a hegemonial system in power, personified in the king of Orïsha.

18 In Orïsha, some people are in possession of inherited special abilities of various manifestations, such as controlling different elements, clairvoyance or the creation of illnesses. These people are called *divîner* upon birth and gain control of their abilities through adolescence. Adults with awakened abilities are referred to as *maji*, while people without any abilities are called *kosidán*. The two groups of people, *kosidán* and *divîner/maji*, perceive each other as other, aided by differences in outer appearance: *divîner* and *maji* notably have white hair. The novel sets up a way in which the *divîner* and *maji* can be oppressed despite their superior powers: *Maji* lose their powers through king Saran, who manages to break their

[1] In order to carry out the analysis of differences between narratological levels, Gérard Genette's terms will be used in the simplified version set forth by Monika Fludernik. Thus, the term intradiegetic will be used to refer to the story level of the narration, meaning the narrational level of the fictional world of the portrayed characters (Fludernik 157). The term extradiegetic, meanwhile, refers to the narrational level, meaning the level where "[t]he authorial narrator is located" (Fludernik 157); in other words, the real world.

link with the gods and subsequently attempts a genocide of them. The remaining *divîner* and their families are victims of systematic marginalisation and oppression through various means.

19 Through their position of power, the ruling *kosidán* are able to determine the discourse on the *maji*, excluding them from their construction of humanity by creating a discourse of otherness and monstrousness. The *maji* are conceptualised by the *kosidán* both as inferior ("She thinks because I'm a *divîner*, I'm beneath her" (4)) and as monster with terrifying abilities ("Magic took hold inside my imagination, a monster without a face" (43)). This paradox can be solved when closely examining the two conceptualisations: special abilities, or magic, are perceived as terrible. *Divîner* and *maji* themselves, however, are defined by the discourse which describes them as monstrous for inhabiting those powers. Having been othered because of their abilities before, the lack of abilities following the raid allows the system in power to define them as sub-human: "Fear turned into hate. Hate transformed into violence" (15). This culminates in the exploitation of the *maji* in the "kingdom's labor force" (28), where the *divîner* are "[f]orced to work until our bodies break" (28), which prompts the critic Kathleen Murphey to compare them to "slaves or enslaved people to the k'osidan [sic]" (112-113).

20 Central to the justification of this oppression is the homogenisation of the *divîner* and *maji* through the discourse created by the *kosidán*. Typical to the process of othering, certain characteristics are allocated to *maji* and *divîner*, not allowing them any individuality in the discourse. This homogenisation finds one expression in the description of *divîner* and *maji* through a single derogative term: "Maggot" (9). Mirroring derogative slurs used to marginalise both people of colour and queer men in Western cultures, the term "Maggot" strips *divîner* and *maji* of their humanity, simultaneously excluding them from the category human and classifying them as inferior through the animal connotation.

21 However, the novel depicts *divîner* and *maji* as human despite their intradiegetic status as other. This becomes apparent through an analysis informed by Krumer-Nevo and Sidi's work on the mechanisms of othering, who describe four mechanisms in texts that lead to othering: Objectification, Decontextualization, Dehistorization and Deauthorization (300). The *divîner* and *maji* in the novel are mainly represented through a teenage girl named Zélie, who is able to gain her powers during the novel. In a move that in accordance with Krumer-Nevo and Sidi's Objectification (300) can be called Subjectification, Adeyemi uses the focalisation on somebody who is part of the oppressed group in order to show "their individual complexity" (Krumer-Nevo and Sidi 300). Describing Zélie's thoughts and using

her as a focal point additionally puts her actions into her personal and historical context (as a counterpart to Krumer-Nevo and Sidi's Decontextualisation and Dehistorization). Instead of what Krumer-Nevo and Sidi describe as the "detachment from the personal individual history", Zélie's depiction posits her as a self and not an other to the reader. Demonstrating her complexities makes it possible for the reader to relate to her – and consequently all *divîner* and *maji* – thus to perceive her as belonging to the same category as the reader, which is to say, human.

22 The novel's description of Zélie (and *maji* in general) as human is reiterated several times. Firstly, she is specifically described in terms of her humanness by another character (Inan) after she is tortured: "All I see is the scared and broken girl. . . . The human behind the maji" (286). Witnessing her pain, Inan manages to see through the naturalised discourse that othered Zélie as monster and instead feels empathy. Zélie here then becomes specifically human because Inan categorises himself as human through the naturalised and unnamed discourses created by the *kosidán*. Secondly, there is the character Lekan who explains why the difference between *kosidán* and *maji* is a superficial one: "We do not make that distinction. Everything is possible when it comes to the gods" (157). Humanity here is dependent on the attribute of being a creation of the gods: "Sky Mother loves all her children" (159). Finally, when Zélie at the end of the novel reconnects with the gods, she describes the feeling as including both *maji* and *kosidán*: "Magic shatters through every heart, every soul, every being. It connects us all, threading through the shell of humanity" (518), which ends in the ultimate titular revelation: "We are all children of blood and bone" (519).

23 The question of who is a human in the novel can then be rephrased: Who is meant by the "we" of "We are all children of blood and bone"? As has been shown, the novel argues to include both *kosidán* and *maji* in this definition of humanity, and that all humans are created by Sky Mother. The latter one is the defining characteristic given, but does not delineate the categories of human and non-human clearly, because being a 'child of Sky Mother' is not a single, measurable distinction. Instead, this definition process ends in a cycle in which all humans are created by god and because they are created by god, they are humans. Ultimately, the novel relies on the naturalised discourse created by humanism which assumes that there is an obvious and ontologically hygienic entity known as the human.

24 The novel argues to read both the *kosidán* and the *divîner/maji* as human as it is vaguely conceptualised by humanism through the expulsion of the non-human other. However, while *kosidán* fit the humanist concept of the human instinctively, the *divîner* and *maji* have decidedly non-human characteristics: they have abilities that could, tellingly, be

describes as superhuman; they have the biological distinction of the mystical substance *ashé* in their blood (77); they are negatively affected by the material *majacite*, which harms only *maji* and *divîner* on contact (10). Yet the discursive category of the human is decidedly expanded to include the *maji*.

25 The reason for this inclusion of the *maji* in the category human lies in their allegorical power. Regardless of their abilities, Adeyemi builds the novel's world in a way in which *divîner* and *maji* function as an allegory for oppressed groups like women and people of colour. By arguing in favour of the *maji*'s humanity, the novel thus demonstrates the inhumanity and cruelty of oppression and marginalisation resulting from othering. The novel's political power therefore builds on the realisation that the *maji* are indeed human. By staying within the humanist discourse which builds on a not further defined human construct, the novel therefore demonstrates in an allegorical fashion the inhumanity of othering minority groups through a hegemonial system in power.

26 N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* is set on a single continent called *The Stillness*. This envisioned future world is regularly exposed to apocalyptic events called *Seasons*, which are rooted in strong seismic activities and lead to periods in which large parts of humanity die because of poisonous environments or resulting famine. The changed environment leads to evolutionary change in the human, in the form of a new organ on the backside of the skull called the s*essapinae*, which allows humans to feel (or *sess*) seismic activities.

27 The novel presents a disruption between the intradiegetic and the extradiegetic level of narration concerning the humanness of certain characters belonging to an oppressed group of people with special abilities. In the Stillness, some people have the ability to manipulate seismic power (*orogeny*) in order to, among other things, prompt or prevent earthquakes through more complex sessapinae (141). These so-called *orogenes* are feared ("people like these fear people like you, because you're beyond sense and preparation", 56), perceived as monstrous ("monsters that barely qualify as humans", 124) and hated by the society, which mainly consists of the non-powerful *stills* (63). Similar to *Children of Blood and Bone* addressed above, the book thus sets up a system with two distinct groups, the gifted one being the one dehumanised and oppressed.

28 *The Fifth Season* focuses on the discrimination of *orogenes* by *stills* in everyday life and especially on the specific institution which systematically oppresses the *orogenes* called the *Fulcrum*. Lead by the *Guardians*, the Fulcrum functions as the control institution of the *orogenes*. There, *orogenes* are forcefully taught to control their powers from a young age and subsequently used as adults in order to fulfil contract jobs given to the Fulcrum. This

regulation and oppression is possible because the *Guardians* have the unique ability to negate the *orogenes*' power (97). The systematic oppression is thus made possible despite the special abilities of the oppressed because the oppressors have the power to take those abilities away.

29 Young children, who might display their powers involuntarily, are othered by *stills* to such an extent that it triggers "the kind of hate that can make a man kill his own son" (59), as elucidated by the death of the child Uche through the hands of his father. As this shows, the *orogenes* are othered to such an extent that they are completely dehumanised and conceptualised as monsters whose murder can easily be justified.

30 Most *orogenes* become part of the Fulcrum, where they are supervised and transformed into "a weapon meant to move mountains" (77). Under the threat of being killed, *orogenes* of the Fulcrum do not have the freedom to do as they like: "orogenes have no right to say no" (99). Instead, they are moulded into dehumanised tools for the wishes of their oppressive system in power. As part of this regulation, their behaviours are strongly policed: "Fulcrum orogenes must never show anger because it makes the stills nervous" (63). Those *orogenes* who are not trained by the Fulcrum fall into one of two categories: either, they have not been 'discovered' or managed to flee from the Fulcrum and are subsequently forced to hide their abilities, because society does not allow for them to participate. Or, in a graphic culmination of dehumanisation, some orogene children are used as *node maintainers*. This means that they are continuously sedated, while their abilities are heightened through machines, "reduc[ing] a child to nothing but that [orogenic] instinct" (141), in order to constantly *sess* the environment and stop any earthquakes that occur in order to protect the *stills*.

31 Because of this control by the *Guardians* and lack of freedom, Jessica Hurley describes the *orogenes*' situation as being "held and bred by the ruling society as a feared and hated slave class" (468), while Liam Kiehne describes them as "a caste of perfectly compliant servants" (13). Several orogenic characters in the novel also use the term 'slave' to describe their situation: "His fellow slaves" (6), "Take him, enslave him, turn his body into a tool and his mind into a weapon and his life into a travesty of freedom" (411). Similarly, Murphey compares the *orogenes*' oppression with that of slaves in US-American history. She links this to the dehumanising conceptualisation that takes place through derogatory language (109). *Orogenes* are victims to the slur *rogga*. The connection between insults and dehumanisation becomes even clearer through the phonetic similarity of 'rogga' to slurs used against people of colour and queer man in Western culture, similar to *Children of Blood and Bone*'s 'maggot'.

32 The intradiegetic world of *The Fifth Season* openly defines *orogenes* as non-human:

"officially speaking, you're not human, either. . . . [according to the] Declaration on the rights of the orogenically afflicted" (234). This type of 'official' definition can only be achieved through a governmental position of power. It then works as an example of an oppressive hegemonial system in power that shapes the public discourse, giving the othering processes which treat *orogenes* as non-human legal legitimacy. This full dehumanisation is then reiterated in society: "What people like Syenite and Alabaster really are. Not people at all" (144), "Nobody gives a damn whether a couple of *orogenes* get hurt" (311).

33 The focus of the next part will be on the ways the novel argues for the humanity of those people on an extradiegetic level, despite their intradiegetic dehumanisation. This humanisation is achieved in part through the choice of protagonists. The novel is mostly written with the focalisation on Damaya, Syenite and Essun, who, as is revealed later in the novel, are all the same *orogene* in different stages of her life. Similar to *Children of Blood and Bone*'s Zélie, this focalisation on an oppressed character works to argue in favour of that character's humanity through subjectification and contextualisation. Giving her point of view, the novel allows the reader to take part in her decision processes, thus putting her in the position of subject with a context and an history. Perceiving her as self, the reader categorises Essun, and subsequently all *orogenes*, as human.

34 Additionally, the intradiegetic society's conceptualisation of *orogenes* as non-human is directly opposed by certain characters in the novel. Alabaster, who works as a guidance to Essun and the reader by being the most knowledgeable character who shares information, objects to Essun's claim that "We [orogenes] aren't human" (354) vehemently: "Yes. We. Are. . . . Just a lie they tell themselves so they don't have to feel bad about how they treat us" (354). Essun, who at this point represents the unenlightened victim and believer of the naturalised discourse which defines herself as non-human, is opposed by Alabaster, who has realised the discursive nature, and thus the non-necessity, of the construct which treats them as non-human and uses this to legitimise their oppression.

35 The difference between the perception of *orogenes* by the intradiegetic society as non-human and the opposing mechanisms of the novel functions to create a political message, demonstrating the cruelty of othering. However, to do so Jemisin uses humanism's non-definition of the human to argue for the inclusion of *orogenes* in the category, because the analysis does not reveal any specific features that Jemisin implies to be inherent to humanity. What can be examined however, are the features Jemisin tolerates for her characters to inhabit without expelling them from the category of the human. Mainly, this difference consists of the additional organ of the sessapinae, which is present in both *stills* and *orogenes*, and the

consequences of its existence. What must be noted here is that the sessapinae is described as a new organ developed through evolution (Jemisin, "The Big Idea" n.p.). This demonstrates the cultural-specific nature of discourses (and thus the human) and the novel's awareness of this, since humanity and normality in the novel are not similar to the archetype of the human in the extradiegetic humanist tradition. In arguing for the extension of the construct 'human' to include *orogenes*, and in presenting a human race that is biologically changed compared to the real world, the novel thus demonstrates the discursive nature of constructs. However, it does take a certain (humanist) understanding of the human as granted.

The Others

36 Having examined the characters presented as 'obviously'[2] human on an extradiegetic level of narration in the previous part of the analysis, this following part will focus on the others of *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season*. The beings and entities that will be discussed in the following part of the analysis are treated by their texts as being categorically assumed not to be human (generally speaking: nature/environment and gods).

37 *Children of Blood and Bone* promotes a divide between nature and culture, apparent in the assumed human-animal and human-environment distinctions. As such, the novel treats animals and the environment as unquestioned others to its conception of the human. One use of non-human animals in Orïsha is as livestock, such as fish (23). The only other type of reoccurring non-human animals is a group of exaggerated fictions of big cats. These function as pets, such as Zélie's lionaire (26), and/or as means of transportation, such as the soldier's panthenaires (63). As such, the novel's animals are subordinate to the human. The novel does not give specific reasons why this distinction is made. Instead, it uses the traditional differentiation made by humanism between the human and animals and conceptualises both accordingly. The only instance which seems to favour the distinction is made when Zélie describes her experience of connecting with the gods: "Magic shatters through every heart, every soul, every being. It connects us all, threading through the shell of humanity" (518). Here, the novel explicitly names three traits inherent to humanity. While "heart" and "being" can be reasoned to include non-human animals, the undefined "soul" seems to be the marker of difference (518). The novel thus argues in favour of an undefined, but unique human essence and differentiates between humans and non-human animals based on this.

[2] Here, the term 'obvious' is used in the meaning of traditional humanist thinking. While the paper has established that there is nothing essential about social constructs such as the human, the discussed novels do use humanism's naturalised and as such obvious category of the human.

38 Additionally, the rhetoric of the presented world is built on a hierarchical understanding of the human-animal situation. Instead of questioning and problematising the treatment of animals, the inhumanity of the *divîner*'s situation is highlighted by a comparison with animals: "[They] are transported like cattle" (28). Likewise, it is said that the king "thinks the maji are the animals" (437). The term 'animals' is used here to describe unacceptable and thus in-'humane' behaviour, as is "ants" (185) to describe a lack of power. This rhetoric is most notably in the slur "maggot" (6). Similarly, the human-environment distinction is not problematised by the novel. Simply perceived as 'nature', it is that upon which 'culture' is enacted, for example in the form of agriculture. The environment is neither described as an active participant, nor constructed as an entity with consciousness. The novel thus conceptualises the environment as distinctly different from the self-conscious, moving human.

39 The third distinctly othered category in *Children of Blood and Bone* is that of the gods. The gods are both conceptualised as categorically different from the human and yet anthropomorphised through various means, such as bodily features ("an elderly woman" (142), "Oya's feet" (521)). Most notably, however, the anthropomorphism is achieved through the projection of human abilities onto the gods. Thus, the gods are able to love (159), to be selective (161), and to want certain things and to plan: "They always have a plan" (361), "they want us to win" (492). The gods are therefore constructed with the ability to self-consciously interact with other beings, to feel emotions and to have motivations, which humanism usually characterises as uniquely human qualities.

40 Yet, the gods form their own category of beings with specific traits, which can also be used to delineate the conception of the human, because they are specifically non-human. These traits include undefined abilities, for example to create life (159). Moreover, gods are not in possession of a physical body, and do not seem to be physically restrained or changing, unlike the (ageing) human. While anthropomorphised concerning their appearance and behaviour, the gods are therefore delineated as a separate category from the human through their enhanced abilities and lack of a physical body.

41 *The Fifth Season* promotes a humanist hierarchy between humans and animals. Besides these two, there are no 'obvious' others in the novel. The novel treats animals as distinctly different from the human. Animals function primarily as food for humans, as is apparent in the existence of butchers (15). Besides this, animals appear in the wild: One character is threatened by a wild *kirkhusa* (187) and later describes how "[g]reat monsters of the deep have risen to swim along" (373). The novel does not problematise the human-animal

distinction through the blurring of boundaries, instead relying on an understanding of the human and the animal as established by humanist thought. That this conceptualisation and relationship is built on a hierarchy is apparent in the rhetoric of the characters: "He's been treating her like an animal" (168), "Meovites regard [them] as something like wild animals that have decided to scavenge off human habitations" (420). Here, the animals are both 'obviously' inferior to the human and worthy of cruel behaviour because of their status as an animal. This conceptualisation is only questioned because a human is treated similarly. Thus, the rhetoric and the behaviour towards animals reveal that the novel treats animals in the same way humanism does, as a delineated category separate from the human and as inferior. However, this conceptualisation of the animal does not clearly explain which characteristics form the human-animal distinction, but instead relies on the naturalised discourse, which treats them as such.

42 The human-environment distinction in *The Fifth Season* is more complex because of two competing narratives: on the one hand, the physic land of the Stillness appears as an unconscious place. On the other hand, the myth of *Father Earth* treats the planet similar to a god: self-conscious, motivated and planning; an active agent in the story with some human traits, but distinctly categorised as not-human by means of other, non-human traits. The physical space the characters move in – the traditional environment – is conceptualised as an absolute other to humans and animals. This is achieved through the lack of characteristics usually perceived as inherent to animals, such as movement, or inherent to humans, such as self-consciousness. Interestingly, the novel nonetheless uses anthropomorphising language to describe it: "this wound will scab over quickly in geological terms" (7), or "the world will return to its old self" (8). Here, the environment is described using medical terms, such as "wound", and in terms of a "self" of the earth. There are two ways to think about this: either, the anthropocentric human tends to project its values and characteristics onto its others because the human can understand the non-human through the process of treating it as if that other had some human qualities. Thus, the environment is constructed in the vein of humanist thought as a distinct other because of its lack of certain qualities, regardless of the rhetoric used to describe it. Alternatively, Jemisin consciously uses anthropomorphising language to establish the earth as an active participant in the story, namely *Father Earth*.

43 *Father Earth* is intradiegetically perceived as an active, self-conscious agent capable of motivation, feelings and planning. While he is presented as a myth to the reader, several characters of different groups treat him as real and accordingly attribute anthropomorphising traits to him. These traits include planning and thinking: "He used the Seasons to shape us out

of animals" (115), having feelings: "Father Earth is right to despite you" (232), and having family relations: "[orogenes] destroyed his only child" (380). Ultimately, he is perceived as a god: "maybe there really are gods other than Father Earth" (401).

44 *Father Earth*'s conceptualisation as other is achieved through several key characteristics, which simultaneously reveal something about the concept of the human in the novel. The categorisation of him as other hinges on these non-human features, most notably the radical difference in physiology/biology. *Father Earth*'s physiology is not described in anthropomorphising terms. Instead, it is assumed that the entire planet Earth is self-conscious. This radical distinction simultaneously reveals and reinforces the specific corporeality that is central to the understanding of the human both in the novel and in humanist thought: the conceptualisation of the human includes a distinctly human body, without specific definition. Accordingly, *Father Earth* is immediately excluded from the category of the human.

45 Animals and the environment are conceptualised by *The Fifth Season* as 'obvious' others to the human. In the case of the animals, the naturalised discourse leads to a rhetoric, which demonstrates a hierarchical understanding of the human-animal relationship. In the case of the environment, the planet itself is presented as distinctly different from the human through its lack of a consciousness. However, through the myth of *Father Earth* it is intradiegetically assumed that the planet does have a consciousness as typically associated with humans. The environment/*Father Earth* is nonetheless conceptualised as distinctly different through its difference in corporeality. This reveals that the novels' understanding of the human hinges on an understanding of certain bodies as human bodies.

The Boundary Creatures

46 The following part of the analysis will focus on beings that seem to exist on the boundary between the 'obvious human' and the 'obvious other'. Borrowing from Graham, the "boundary creatures" (14) discussed here are inhabiting some characteristics or features usually used to define the human (for example rationality or self-determination), but for different reasons appear to fall outside of the category of the human. While previously discussed entities do show some human traits while being 'obviously' non-human, the beings discussed here are more easily mistaken for humans, thus blurring the boundaries between human and other more dramatically. Most notably, the entities appear physically similar to humans.

47 Having shown in the first part of the analysis that protagonists with superhuman abilities can still be portrayed and perceived as human, regardless of their intradiegetic non-

human status, the task of this part of the analysis will be to examine whether a similar process is occurring with these boundary beings. It will therefore be necessary to establish whether the texts argue simply for an extension of the category human, whether they are treated as 'obvious' others by their texts, or whether these beings truly blur the boundary between the human and its others. If this is the case, it could be argued that the text breaks with the ontological hygiene established by humanism and anthropocentrism.

48 In *Children of Blood and Bone*, the *sêntaros* are a group of people with a unique connection to the gods, and special abilities. They are represented and their story is told exclusively by Lekan (157). Like the *maji*, he possesses several similar traits to the 'obviously human' *kosidán*, but also several unique characteristics. Firstly, his human/*kosidán* features include their outer appearance; Lekan is described as "a middle-aged man" with tattoos (153). The *sêntaros* share a similar body structure with *kosidán* and *maji*, and as part of this conceptualise their bodies within the binary construct of sex and gender which is the norm in humanist thought: "[o]nly a woman can become our mamaláwo" (165). They age, have vulnerable bodies, and can die (162, 183).

49 Secondly, the *sêntaros* are presented as sharing psychological similarities with humans, such as having a self-conscious mind, free will and feelings. Lekan emotionally remembers his childhood (183), and the feeling of how "his soul rips, again and again" (184) when he discovered dead *sêntaros*. The *sêntaros* therefore share more features with the *kosidán* and *maji* than animals and the environment, who lack the psyche that is implied to be unique to the human, and more than the gods, who lack a physical body.

50 Yet, the *sêntaros* are also described as distinctly different from *kosidán* and *maji*. Firstly, *sêntaros* have a unique connection to the gods. Thus, they are tasked with "protect[ing] the god's will on this earth" and "with connecting Sky Mother's spirit to the maji" (161). The leader of the *sêntaros* "seal[s] the spiritual connection of the gods into the sêntaros' blood" (162), thereby binding the gods to the world and giving the *maji* their abilities. Since the *maji* also have a different connection to the gods than the *kosidán*, this difference, however, is one of degree rather than one completely clearly delineating the line between human and *sêntaros*. Secondly, *sêntaros* are in possession of special abilities beyond the powers of the *maji*. Examples of this are Lekan's ability to let things "vanish" (155), to "amend" (166) the relationship between Zélie and Sky Mother through a ritual, and the ability to let his tattoos leave his skin and enter walls in order to control mechanisms within his temple (177). He also is able to sense Zélie's magic and her specific kind of powers (157), and can safely use blood magic, unlike *maji* (169). However, the possession of special

abilities beyond the *kosidán* is again one of degree compared to the *maji*, rather than a unique characteristic. Thirdly, the rhetoric of the characters, both of Lekan and of those who are not *sêntaros*, conceptualise *sêntaros* as distinct from other groups. Thus, Zélie is honoured to meet a *sêntaro* (156). Lekan repeatedly refers to the *sêntaros* as "my people" (153, 161, 162), and states that "sêntaros are not like maji" (165). Yet, this rhetoric of a self and others does not automatically mean that *sêntaros* are not human; Zélie uses similar language when talking about *kosidán* and *maji*: "In *their* eyes *we*'re still maggots" (emphasis added, 10). Lastly, Lekan implies some biological differences: "Your [*maji*'s] connection to the gods is cemented in your blood" (165). However, the presence of *ashé* in the *maji's* blood also works as a biological marker that differentiates between *maji* and *kosidán* (77). The novel therefore does not conceptualise humanity as hinging on exact biological similarity.

51 The *sêntaros* are therefore presented as different from the previously discussed entities through their relationship to the gods, their special abilities and their biology. This difference is consolidated through a rhetoric of self and other. However, all of these markers are also to a different degree present in the distinction of the *maji* from the *kosidán*. Yet, as has been established previously, the *maji* are still conceptualised to be human. Paralleling this conclusion, the *sêntaros* also fall in the category of the human, therefore extending the construct to include the *sêntaros* and their enhanced abilities and connection to the gods. What seems to underlie the novel's understanding of humanness are then the features that have been pointed out as similarities between *kosidán, maji* and *sêntaros*: a physical body with a certain physiology, self-consciousness and feelings.

52 *The Fifth Season* presents two groups of beings that arguably fall neither in the category of the human, be it through a naturalised discourse (like the *stills*) or through subjectification by the protagonists being part of the groups (like the *orogenes*), nor in the category of the 'obvious others' (like animals, the environment or *Father Earth*).

53 The first are the *Guardians*, which are presented as having several characteristics that distinctly differentiate them. Firstly, they possess the special ability to stop *orogenes* from wielding their powers. Secondly, the novel describes how *Guardians* are recognised by both *stills* and *orogenes* through instinct: "There's just something different about them [*Guardians*], and everyone notices" (257). Thirdly, they do not appear to age ("He never changes" (439)). Lastly, the *Guardians* posit themselves as different from other beings: "We . . . are … different" (328).

54 However, the novel explains the origins of the *Guardians* and thus the reason for their distinct features. *Guardians* are born as the children of *orogenes*, who at a young age get an

"an implant . . . [i]nto the brain" (288) in order "to make us what we are" (328). The otherness of the *Guardians* therefore hinges on a technological modification. *Guardians* are distinctly othered in their behaviour and abilities because of the implant, which arguably moves them into the realm of cyborgs. *Guardians* appear to be on the border between human and other because of their abilities and how they are perceived, which leads to them being perceived as monstrous in the novel. Their otherness can be traced back to the technological modifications made to their bodies as children, and thus one way is given to delineate the category of *Guardians* against the category of the human. While the question of technologically advanced humans is an ongoing debate within posthumanism, *Guardians* can for all intends and purposes here be considered non-human. In this line of reasoning, the human is therefore defined by not having their behaviour or abilities changed through technological means.

55 The second group of beings to be discussed here are the *stone eaters*. These beings appear to possess some human characteristics, such as a self-consciousness, the ability to think and feel, and free will. However, *stone eaters* differ from *stills* and *orogenes* decidedly in other features. Firstly, *stone eaters* possess a unique biology and physiology, as they appear to consist of stone-like substances: "her skin is white porcelain; that is not a metaphor" (5). They appear to be able to determine their appearance at free will ("She has simply shaped a portion of her stiff substance" (5)) and subsequently do not conceptualise their bodies within the binary system of sex and gender inherent to humanist thought ("Her emulation of human gender is only superficial" (5)). Based on this radically different biology, the *stone eaters*' speech and movement is different from humans ("[her voice] does not shiver the air the way a human voice would" (6), "[they] pass through solid stone" (433)). Additionally, they do not appear to age (397), and eat rocks for a not further explained reason: "Crystalline structures are an efficient storage medium. . . . This [his rocks] is me" (396). This consolidates the position that *stone eaters* are biologically radically different from *orogenes* and *stills*. Secondly, *stone eaters* are in possession of special abilities unlike the ones displayed by *orogenes*, as when Hoa turns an animal into stone when in direct physical contact with it (187). Another *stone eater* takes Alabaster with it "through solid stone by making him [Alabaster] more stonelike" (433). *Stone eaters* therefore seem to be able to change other beings' configuration of matter with or without harming them permanently. Thirdly, they are openly conceptualised as non-human, being described as "somehow altogether different", "mythical creatures" (271) and "unnatural" (281). This is also apparent in the characters' rhetoric, describing *stone eaters* as "your kind" (6), but simultaneously the *stone eater* Hoa uses similar language when talking about himself and Essun: "[i]t is not the relationship with

her kind that *we* normally seek" (443). This reveals a dynamic in which both groups, humans and *stone eaters*, conceptualise each other as different from their own group.

56 Ultimately, the *stone eaters* are therefore portrayed as radically different from the human based on their abilities and biology. This again strengthens the previously argued position that the novel conceptualises its notion of humanity through a specific understanding of human biology and physiology, by which beings such as *stone eaters* and entities such as *Father Earth* are excluded from the definition of the human. However, the novel also repeatedly points to a conceptualisation of the human and the *stone eaters* which does not hinge on a clear hierarchy, but instead describes a state of living side-by-side in which each group has its own right of existence: "there are more people in this world than just humankind" (151), "[h]e [Hoa] is . . . from a whole race of people" (397). The novel here conceptualises this state of both groups existing parallel to the other by speaking about *people* when talking about both humans and what the novel terms "Sentient Non-Humans" (83).

57 Thus, *The Fifth Season* breaks with anthropocentrism in its treatment of the non-human *stone eaters* and *Guardians* as equals to humans. While the novel arguably treats both *stills* and *orogenes* as humans, it openly discusses the human as just one centre of interest among others. This is achieved by using a terminology that conceptualises both humans and non-humans as *people*, and thus opens a new category of beings whose sole named characteristic is *sentience*. This category includes both humans and *stone eaters*, while it excludes other animals. While the novel therefore argues for the existence of a subject called the human, it does break with the assumption that this subject cannot be equalled by an other without incorporating that other within its concept of the human. The novel therefore does not completely challenge humanist thought, but argues against an anthropocentric thinking.

Conclusion

58 *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* both conceptualise a human subject similarly to humanism by treating some characteristics as inherent and/or unique to the human and subsequently excluding beings as others that do not fit into this discursive definition of the human. Both novels demonstrate how the exclusionary definition process of other beings can lead to the othering and subsequent oppression of minority groups. This is achieved by presenting worlds in which the discourse on the human excludes a group of people with special abilities, who are subsequently oppressed by a system in power. By nonetheless arguing in favour of these characters' humanity, the novels demonstrate the inhumanity of the

hegemonial system that has the power to define beings perceived as inferior as other.

59 In their treatment of others, both novels stay within the framework of humanism and its belief in a human essence, by illustrating characteristics through which the otherness of those perceived as non-human is constructed. However, *The Fifth Season* manages partly to break with anthropocentrism by de-centring the human from its allocated place of uniqueness. This is achieved by presenting other sentient beings and subsequently conceptualising the human as only a sub-group of the wider group of *people*.

60 Future academic works could discuss a variety of associated findings and questions in *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season*, such as the way *The Fifth Season* comments on the construction of naturalised discourses through openly exploring it via *stonelore*. Alternatively, *The Fifth Season*'s exploration of intersectionality and questioning of social constructs besides that of the human, such as monogamy ("So you have decided to share?" 356), heterosexual relationships ("He seems to want Alabaster, too" 351), and transsexuality ("a child who is born a boy to be a girl" 391) could be analysed, as well as a posthumanist reading of the other novels in the respective series'. Another possible research topic examining both novels could focus on how they question the constructed nature of history: "Something's missing from the history" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 317), "This is our story. Our history. A truth the king tried to bury with the dead" (Adeyemi, *Children of Blood and Bone* 14). Thus, both *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* demonstrate how *history* is a discursive construct, set by the same rules of hegemonial power which is able to define certain beings into otherness and thus justify their oppression, as has been discussed in this paper.

61 Ultimately, *Children of Blood and Bone* and *The Fifth Season* actively engage with questions of humanness and otherness while managing to demonstrate the cruelty and inhumanity of a system that sees some people as inherently inferior to others. They are therefore both highly relevant in a political climate which still questions the humanity of certain people. *The Fifth Season* entertains the idea of overcoming the inequality of a system that dehumanises people by exploring the ambiguity of the phrase 'the end of the world' and taking it literally. As Jemisin says it: "the end of the world is happening even as we speak. The question becomes whether it's the kind of world that needs to go" (Hurley 477). Meanwhile, *Children of Blood and Bone* discusses the need to revolutionise and stand up to that inequality. As Adeyemi puts it in her Author's Note: "we have the power to change the evils in our world. We've been knocked down for far too long. Now let's rise" (527).

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