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About

Gender forum is an online, peer reviewed academic journal dedicated to the discussion of gender issues. As an electronic journal, *gender forum* offers a free-of-charge platform for the discussion of gender-related topics in the fields of literary and cultural production, media and the arts as well as politics, the natural sciences, medicine, the law, religion and philosophy. Inaugurated by Prof. Dr. Beate Neumeier in 2002, the quarterly issues of the journal have focused on a multitude of questions from different theoretical perspectives of feminist criticism, queer theory, and masculinity studies. *gender forum* also includes reviews and occasionally interviews, fictional pieces and poetry with a gender studies angle.

Opinions expressed in articles published in *gender forum* are those of individual authors and not necessarily endorsed by the editors of *gender forum*.

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Target articles should conform to current MLA Style (8th edition) and should be between 5,000 and 8,000 words in length. Please make sure to number your paragraphs and include a bio-blurb and an abstract of roughly 300 words. Files should be sent as email attachments in Word format. Please send your manuscripts to gender-forum@uni-koeln.de.

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Article Publishing

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Editorial

1 For the seventh time this special issue of *gender forum* provides a platform for early career researchers in the field. The articles selected for the 2019 ECR issue focus on hegemonic systems of power, sex positivity and queerness, as well as notions of gendered identity.

2 Marvin John Walter's posthumanist reading of Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* aims at deconstructing the naturalised discourses by which hegemonic systems of power define the human and its others. Drawing on Herbrechter and Callus, Walter foregrounds the discursive strategies employed in the novels, to counter oppressive methods of othering and their limits within a humanist framework. According to Walter's analysis both novels fundamentally stay within this frame, while *The Fifth Season* at least to a certain extent successfully de-centers the human from its allocated exceptional position.

3 Leah E. Wilson's article "Performing Queer Time: Disrupting Heteronormativity with Representations of Working-Class Sexual Minorities in Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000)" argues that the novel advocates sex positivity and queer ways of being to resist heteronormative life markers and capital accumulation fuelling a hyper-gentrification, which displaces queer communities and people of color from their neighborhoods. Drawing on Jack Halberstam's notion of 'queer temporality' Wilson demonstrates how Tea constructs queer spaces occupied by sexual minorities who, removed from financial wealth and inheritance, inhabit a temporality that insists on the present moment. In this sense Tea's *Valencia* is read as a text disrupting the idealization of access to heteronormative institutions, arguing for a transformational politics that critiques capitalist power structures.

4 Jana Tubbesing looks into "'Adult Games' – Gender Subversion in Miranda July's *The First Bad Man* (2015)" analysing the deconstruction of stable gendered identities in the novel by performance artist Miranda July. Drawing on Judith Butler's notion of performative acts Tubbesing investigates the adult games, in which the main characters Clee and Cheryl are engaged throughout the novel.

5 Two reviews on current web series complete this Early Career Researchers' issue 2019. Laken Brooks reviews *Brown Girls* (2017), created by Fatimah Asghar and Sam Bally, an Emmy nominated series about the life of two friends in Chicago. Kanak Yadav looks into the documentary style series, *Berliner Farben* (2017-2018), created by Poliana Baumgarten. which addresses LGBTQ+ issues in the context of the German capital.

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 represseds [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 levels¹ 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 Orisha. 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 Orisha.

18 In Orisha, 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 monstrosity. 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, Dehistoricization 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 *sessapinae*, 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 men 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 despise 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 intents 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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Performing Queer Time: Disrupting Heteronormativity with Representations of Working-Class Sexual Minorities in Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000)

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Abstract:

This article argues that Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000) advocates for sex-positivity and queer ways of being to resist heteronormative life markers and capital accumulation that fuel hypergentrification which, in turn, displaces queer communities and people of color (and those at the intersection of these identities) from their neighborhoods. In the first section, I posit that Tea, through her documentation of working-class sexual minorities in the 1990s San Francisco Mission District, uses the feminist tradition of memoir writing to form social and political community. I then utilize Jack Halberstam's notion of 'queer temporality' to demonstrate how Tea constructs queer spaces occupied by sexual minorities who, removed from financial wealth and inheritance, inhabit a temporality that insists on the present moment. Employing queer time, Tea's work encourages sexual minorities to imagine alternate life possibilities that subvert heteronormative institutions. To underline the significance of queer spaces, I conclude this paper by interrogating Tea's inclusion of an interlude outside of the Mission District when Michelle (the narrator) and her lover, Iris, visit Iris's Georgia family. Examining heteronormativity's limits and highlighting the importance of spaces in which queer sexual minorities can perform and imagine lives outside of heteropatriarchy, I offer Tea's *Valencia* as a text that disrupts the idealization of access to heteronormative institutions and the rise of homonormativity to push for a transformational politics that critiques capitalist power structures.

1 Set in mid-1990s San Francisco, Michelle Tea's *Valencia* (2000) catalogues her escapades as a young, 20-something 'sexual migrant' in which she participates in a variety of sexual behaviors: prostitution, casual sex with numbers of women, group sex, S/M, and making pornography (Tea 51-56, 179-184, 16-19). Writing in the time and space of the mid-90s' Mission District, Tea's memoir is emblematic of the sex-positive, third-wave feminist movement that seeks to revitalize the discussion of sexuality within politics and create a more expansive feminist movement that values the political power of women's erotic and sexual pleasure.¹ This reinvigoration in the 90s was particularly crucial as the ramifications of previous feminist generations' discussions of sex, as bell hooks explains, silenced many sex-radicals who were "pushed into the background by the puritanical violence of antisex conservative gender rights

¹ See Merri Lisa Johnson and Nan Bamer-Maglin and Donna Perry (Johnson 4-7; Bamer-Maglin and Perry xvi).

propaganda” led by privileged white feminists such as Catherine MacKinnon (hooks 93-94). Tea, a queer working-class writer, is part of this ongoing revival and is the “most prolific writer of her generation” (Wlodarczyk 144).² Her second memoir, *Valencia*, documents the raucous dyke scene of the Mission District and was a popular, impactful text that, even decades later, resonates with punk-queer subculture and serves as nostalgia for a community that, through hypergentrification, no longer exists (Clarke and Topiary Landberg 171). Although Tea is a productive writer with a dedicated following, only three scholars, Justyna Wlodarczyk, Guy Davidson, and Geneva M. Gano have written specifically about *Valencia*. Whereas Wlodarczyk and Davidson focus largely on the nostalgia and subcultural capital present within the text (Wlodarczyk 145-150; Davidson 122-124), Gano’s article, published in 2017, argues that Tea’s work is a neoconfessional that, through its absence of race and singular focus on the self, participates in the gentrification and erasure of the working-class Latino neighborhoods of the Mission District (363). While I agree with Gano’s criticism of Tea’s portrayal of her characters and community, her article, in its analysis of Tea’s memoir as removed from the larger socio-political context, minimizes Tea’s involvement in the sex-positive scene of the Mission District and her participation in the feminist tradition of utilizing memoir to form social and political communities.

2 As scholar Su-Lin Yu states in her work on third-wave feminist narratives, “third-wave stories are not solely about the individual but are connected to longer traditions of feminist theorizing and practice” (875). Tea’s social group constitutes a collective who, because they are outside heteronormative communities and families, “end up competing with other low-income groups for the limited supply of cheap and moderate housing” which produces racism, homophobia, and violence between traditionally working-class communities of color and the (often) white LGBTQ sexual migrants (Rubin 160, 162). Considering this, I argue that Tea’s depiction of her community and sexual endeavors insists on a political context that critiques white, middle-class heteronormative patriarchy which, as radical feminists of color such as Cherrie Moraga and Audre Lorde note, is a violence that threatens and displaces both working-class people of color and LGBTQ sexual minorities.³

² Furthermore, Tea has published five memoirs, numerous novels, a tarot reading guidebook, produced a film version of *Valencia*, and is a spoken-word poet who started the traveling sex-positive performance group, Sister Spit (“About Michelle Tea” n.p.).

³ See in particular Moraga’s essay, “La Guera” (29-33), as well as her preface to *This Bridge Called My Back* (xiii-xix) and Lorde’s “The Master’s Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master’s House” (98-101).

3 *Valencia* disrupts narratives surrounding gender and sexuality to construct a sex-positive feminist manifesto that illustrates queer working-class women's sexualities to reveal middle-class heteronormativity, with its investment in marriage, reproductivity, and inheritance, as harmful and limiting. Using a fast-paced style, incorporating sexually-diverse working-class characters, and documenting her cycle of love, sex, and rejection, Tea's memoir deploys what Jack Halberstam calls "queer time" (2-4). Through this temporality she exposes the production and artificiality of heteronormativity.

4 I first explore Tea's memoir as a performative political act that builds her queer, sex-radical community in San Francisco's Mission District. Next, I interrogate Tea's representation of her fast-paced, unpredictable life as well as the working-class sexual minorities she encounters that composes queer time, which, as Halberstam explains, "creates a new emphasis on the here, the present, the now, and . . . squeezes new possibilities out of the time at hand" (2). Lastly, I examine Tea's rendering of patriarchal, middle-class heteronormativity as a force that impedes her sexual development and personal identity to demonstrate the significance of spaces, like the 90s' Mission District, for sexual minorities. With the erasure of these spaces through hypergentrification that impacts working-class people of color and the LGBTQ community, we see the necessitation of what Cathy Cohen terms a queer "transformational politics" that critiques dominant norms that harm all marginalized people (419-420). Underscoring the need for transformational politics, I conclude that *Valencia* serves as a text that disrupts heteronormativity and also cautions against the contemporary push for homonormativity, what Lisa Duggan explains as "a politics that does not contest dominant heteronormative assumptions and institutions, but upholds and sustains them" for LGBTQ people (50).

Performing Sex, Writing Community

5 Tea's memoir writing is largely influenced by her experiences as a regular performer and organizer of spoken-word poetry events in the mid-90s Mission District and her work centers her sexual experiences. Tea describes her writing process as "just slamming a bunch of messy, crazy, fast life into my notebook" and Davidson explains that Tea's involvement in poetry events "is inextricably linked to her work as a writer" (Tea 8; Davidson 127). The spoken-word genre depends upon speed and reflects Tea's experiences as a queer working-class person, and her

transition to memoir writing embodies this performative legacy and informs her work. As she details in the introduction of the 2008 version of *Valencia*, she produces in a manic state and when she felt this mania subsiding as a poet, she began writing longer pieces to revive this energy: “I could write about my own life as if I were creating a character in a novel, letting my mind capture all the details it craved to capture, not giving a shit about how I or anyone else looked” (7). Inherent to Tea’s writing and performing are her candid musings on romantic relationships, sexual encounters, and drug-and-alcohol binges, with nearly every chapter opening with discussion of a romantic interest and featuring a sexual encounter (Gano 362). Tea acquaints the reader with her provocative style immediately, opening with the scene of Michelle seducing Petra, an older butch lesbian, by drunkenly slamming into her in a mosh-pit and engaging in the S/M activities of knife-play and fisting for the first time three pages later (11-15). When Petra asks what she prefers sexually, she says, “Oh god, how the fuck do I know? I had no more reference points for sex. Petra had destroyed them. I had never had sex before. Not if this was sex” (16). Beginning her work with a quickly consummated relationship that shatters Michelle’s preconceived notions of sex and acceptable sexual practices, Tea crafts a memoir that grips readers and challenges their perceptions of suitable sexuality.

6 Tea’s use of self-writing to challenge acceptable sexual practices serves a sex-positive political purpose. Gano argues that *Valencia* is a neoconfessional that “emphasizes the protagonist’s success in overcoming personal hardship while minimizing a broader historical and social contextualization of individual struggle,” however, although Tea fails to acknowledge the displacement of working-class people of color by predominately white working-class sexual migrants, Tea’s work is hardly removed from social or political context (363).⁴ Third-wave feminism of the 90s, as Merri Lisa Johnson, Nan Bamer-Maglin, and Donna Perry note, sought to engage discussion of sexual pleasure and freedom with politics (Johnson 4-7; Bamer-Maglin and Perry xvi). The revitalization of sex-positive feminist discussions during this period was a

⁴ It is also important to note that gentrification of the Mission started before Tea’s documentation in *Valencia*, beginning in the 1980s and accelerating rapidly in the dotcom boom of the 90s and 2000s (Zuk and Chapple 25-27). While Tea, as she acknowledges in the article, “San Francisco Has an Evil Twin” (2013), participates in the displacement of the Latino communities with her move to the Mission, the hypergentrification process was well underway and the Mission already had a substantial queer community that lived and worked among working-class families of color. This is not to assume that these populations were two distinct groups: it is vital to acknowledge that there are people at the intersection of these identities in these communities. With this article, I emphasize that, rather than criticizing Tea’s participation in gentrification, it is more transformative to critique how heteronormative capitalism fuels hypergentrification that displaces working-class people of color and sexual minorities and examine life possibilities, presented in *Valencia*, that resist these norms to imagine other ways of being.

particularly dangerous task, especially considering the ramifications of the feminist Sex Wars that began in the early 80s in which “pro-sex” feminists, such as Dorothy Allison and Patrick Califia, who defended S/M practices and pornography were consequently attacked by “anti-sex” feminists (Allison 107-109; Califia 14-17).⁵ Additionally, hooks also points out that “patriarchal-dominated mass media” will quickly distort radical feminist discussions of sexuality to produce man-hating, anti-sex narratives about feminists, demonstrating the continued risk women face when discussing sexuality in their own terms (86-87, 93). Moreover, sexual minorities continue to be targeted in 1990s San Francisco. As Jill Nagle explains, even looking like a “whore” could result in real consequences, like imprisonment, as the city, in a 1996 law, gave “police officers the power to arrest someone for *appearing to intend* to exchange sex for money” (5, italics in original). Tea’s work details her experiences performing S/M activities, participating in the production of pornography, and engaging in sex work to display the sex radical scene of the Mission that was populated by sexual minorities. While sexual minorities could form a community and have more safety in the space of San Francisco than society-at-large, they were still at risk for discrimination and violence from (anti-pornography/anti-sex) feminists, mass media, and the legal and criminal justice systems. Documenting these experiences, Tea commits a political act and forms a space for a sex-positive, queer community.

7 Writing about her exploits in the Mission, Tea provides a landscape of sexual freedom and possibility that unveils how integral sex is for her as a queer young woman and centers the significance of community for sexual minorities. Third-wave feminists’ personal narratives, as Yu notes, build from the second-wave tradition of sharing personal stories to generate political change, but these narratives further embrace multivocality and work against a notion of a universal, unified feminist experience to theorize new possibilities that represent more diverse women (877, 881-884). Tea’s Michelle makes the pursuit of love and sex essential to her identity and accentuates that she “was an artist, a lover, a lover of women, a warrior really” to explain why staying in bed with a new lover was more important than going to work (56). She has over a dozen affairs with girls and Tea moves through these relationships quickly, both in a sexual sense and also in the way

⁵ The 1982 “Towards a Politics of Sexuality” Scholar and Feminist IX Conference at Barnard College unleashed a debate, known as the Sex Wars, between anti-censorship feminists and anti-pornography feminists, or pro-sex and anti-sex feminists, respectively (“Pro-sex Feminism” 259). The term pro-sex refers “to a segment of the women’s movement that defends pornography, sex work, sadomasochism, and butch/femme roles, but it also recuperates heterosexuality, intercourse, marriage, and sex toys from separatist feminist ideals” (260).

she compounds the affairs into an endless “blur[sic] so that Petra merges into Gwynn, Liz, Edie, Willa, Iris, Joey, Scrumptious/Stella, Fate, Cecilia, and others who remain nameless” (Gano 370). Fashioning a space where she can explore and perform her sexuality, Tea establishes the significance of sex in women’s lives, and furthermore, the importance of sexual freedom and possibility and how they shape identities. When women freely experiment with their sexuality and can celebrate their desire, as sex-positive feminists such as Carol Queen remark, they experience empowerment and new possibilities for sex and life which challenge heteronormative conceptions of acceptable sexuality (176).

8 Utilizing performance and memoir, sex-positive feminists encourage community formation. Tea participates in the feminist tradition of using personal narratives to develop feminist communities and challenges capitalist conceptions of personal success (Siegel 51; Yu 875-877). Importantly, Tea’s text serves as a sexual performance piece like those of Annie Sprinkle who writes, “If I performed who I wanted to become, I would become it. I could also help shape the future of the world” (169). Centering her varied sexual relationships and writing in a fast-paced style that is reminiscent of her slam poetry performances, Tea’s memoir adopts a performative aspect that encourages new sexual and life possibilities. Through performance, feminist writers and artists cultivate community that supports more self-understanding, and also permits them to reimagine and expand their individual and communal futures, an act that Michael Warner describes as essential for queer politics in confronting heteronormative institutions (8). In this memoir, Tea creates sexual possibilities and ways of being for herself and her community, and so renders empowering what mainstream, heteropatriarchal society classifies as sexually deviant. Sexually empowered, Tea and her community forge opportunities outside of heteronormative, capitalist institutions that perpetuate hypergentrification.

Constructing Queer Time, Imagining Community Possibilities

9 Through her depictions of hurrying through relationships, jobs, and social circles, Tea employs a temporality Halberstam refers to as “queer time” to express her sexual self and forms a community that thrives in a queer temporality (2). Queer time, as Halberstam explains, “is . . . about the potentiality of a life unscripted by the conventions of family, inheritance, and child rearing,” because “queer subcultures produce alternative temporalities by allowing their participants to believe that their futures can be imagined according to logics that lie outside of

those paradigmatic markers of life experience” (2). With its disregard for heteronormative “life markers,” queer temporality inspires people to build subcultural communities that offer possibilities outside of heteropatriarchal expectations. Gano argues that Michelle’s lovers “enter and exit so quickly that they leave little lasting impact on the story” in a way that highlights Tea’s personal narrative at the expense of acknowledging historical and social context (371). While Tea does introduce Michelle’s lovers in quick succession, I assert that, with the swift pace of Michelle’s sexual trysts, the author dislodges readers from ingrained heteronormative expectations of linear “repro-narrativity,” in which an individual matures, settles down, and establishes a committed relationship that will eventually lead to reproduction and inheritance (Warner 7). Through the flurry of these relationships, Tea crafts a queer way of being for her readers, establishing a temporarily that shows readers that what mainstream society and some feminists consider sexually deviant behavior is only sexually different behavior. Exposing the formation of socially acceptable sexuality, Tea ultimately challenges middle-class, patriarchal heteronormative institutions, such as marriage and the nuclear family, and, moreover, critiques the preeminence of capital accumulation and inheritance that heteronormativity maintains through reproduction and which negatively impacts both poor queer people and working-class people of color.

10 Michelle’s lovers are sexually diverse, but each character is either working-class or else removed from their family’s wealth and inheritance, illustrating that Tea’s sexual migrant community shares economically precarious positions that inform their sense of queer temporality. Tea, as Wlodarczyk observes, is a working-class writer who prefers relationships with working-class women, and Tea’s Michelle is often quitting jobs, failing to appear, and abusing the few privileges she has as a low-tier employee, such as when she hosts late-night zine-making parties at the Industrial Workers of the World office she briefly works at, exhibiting her disregard for participating within an economy that values stability and inheritance, even when employed at an anarchist union group (Wlodarczyk 144; Tea 61-63). In *Valencia*, each of Michelle’s girlfriends occupies an expendable economic position, such as bartender, sex worker, waitress, and bicycle messenger (79, 80, 91). Notably, they share traumatic pasts that stress their separation from family, community, and wealth:

Laurel had smoked crack and had been a speed freak plus had grown up poor in Maine picking potatoes with a crazy mother . . . Willa had been institutionalized and had parents she called ‘educated poor’. . . Iris was from the South, where she was persecuted in high

school and put on Prozac . . . Suzanne . . . had been a heroin addict . . . I of course had been a prostitute . . . and [had] a peeping Tom stepfather. (83-84)

Through her portrayal of her friends and lovers' pre-San Francisco pasts, Tea features what she calls their 'defining' stories that accentuate the violence and trauma they, as queer women, experienced in their heteropatriarchal families. In their communities, where privileged sexuality is "heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial," these women were classified as outcasts and deviant, and faced consequences, such as institutionalization, or endured their misfit status by taking addictive drugs (Rubin 152).

11 Without the benefits of family support, the characters are put in economically tenuous positions, and, in the case of Michelle, find additional (sexually) marginalizing avenues to address their instability and poverty, like sex work. Rubin writes that in metropolitan areas with large groups of sexual migrants, like San Francisco, sexual minorities continue to be economically vulnerable as "[t]hey face intense competition for choice positions. The influx of sexual migrants provides a pool of cheap and exploitable labor" (160). As large populations of people who are removed from their family's support and have faced other obstacles, like poverty, drug addiction, and institutionalization, sexual migrants are often only able to find employment in low-paying positions in which they are easily replaceable. Additionally, Halberstam contends that people who live precarious, fast-paced lives that do not depend on "reprotime" or familial time live "on the edges of logics of labor, and production. By doing so, they also often live outside the logic of capital accumulation" (10). Their exploitable employment and poverty necessitate a queer temporality in which they form new communities and life possibilities in place of their heteronormative families.

12 Cast off from their birth families and living with financial uncertainty, Tea's sexual migrant community displays how lack of steady employment fosters queer temporality through the formation of queer kin groups that replace familial institutions. Rubin explains that queer sexual migration "creates concentrated pools of potential partners, friends, and associates. It enables individuals to create adult, kin-like networks in which to live" (161-162). In the 1990s Mission District, Tea and her friends and lovers easily form alliances and connections, and this broadens their sense of queer temporality as they enjoy a space and community that collectively appreciates sexual diversity, understands its group's poverty, and rejects heteronormative life markers. Sharing their pasts, they form their own queer kin group, which Tea underlines as they all go home together

to eat and sleep after a night of partying (84). Tea's observation that, after this night, when she wakes up with her girlfriend, she feels "normal," illuminates the sense of community and stability Michelle receives from her social group that mainstream, heteronormative U.S. society would deem unstable and precarious (84).

13 While Tea's work does not glorify the group's poverty or trauma, it does accentuate the freedom within their community that comes from their untethered lives. Moreover, Tea stresses that her consumption of alcohol and drugs, ranging from coffee, marijuana, mushrooms, and crystal meth, fuels her sexual adventures and relationships within her community, further forming a queer temporality that resists stability. For example, after Michelle breaks up with Iris, she decides to take speed, which, as Halberstam contends, in the works of queer postmodern writers, "becomes the motor of an alternative history as their queer heroes rewrite completely narratives of female rebellion" (5). Considering her speed intake, Michelle states that, "People are terrified of the thought of me on speed, but the truth is it makes me feel strangely calm, like I've bundled the whole world up to nurse at my breast, grand and serene, all my daily manic energy concentrated into a fine point that sits in my belly and I am god" (Tea 211-212). In her speed-induced rebellion, Michelle emphasizes the sense of power it gives her within her world, enabling her to possess a kind of Lordian erotic self-knowledge that allows her imagination to move past patriarchal constraints (Lorde 54-55). After Michelle ends her relationship with Iris, which is her longest relationship (although not monogamous) in the text, by going on a speed-fueled party and sex spree, she begins an affair with a new lover, Scrumptious/Stella, and underscores the sense of possibility the crystal meth gives her, as she asks, "What would the night give us?" (Tea 214). With use of the drug, Michelle's night is limitless, as she moves from parties to clubs, engaging in sex, including threesomes, with Scrumptious/Stella and challenging bouncers at "classist" gay male clubs who privilege wealthy gay men over poor queer women (214-219). The effects of the drug last well into the next day as they attend the Dykes on Bicycles event and participate in other parties. Michelle refers to the adventure and affair with Stella, which extends several days before Stella returns to Canada, as one "endless day," disrupting notions of middle-class, heteronormative time that are deeply rooted in family and financial futurity (226-229).

14 Unsettling linear heteronormative ideals of monogamous, “charmed” sexuality,⁶ familial stability, and child rearing, Tea generates a temporality in which a queer, sexual minority community can thrive. By illustrating one limitless day, Tea challenges what Lee Edelman calls “reproductive futurism,” which he defines as “terms that impose an ideological limit on political discourse as such, preserving in the process the absolute privilege of heteronormativity by rendering unthinkable, by casting outside the political domain, the possibility of a queer resistance to this organizing principle of communal relations” (3). Using speed, both the drug and the pace in which she moves her narrative, Tea rejects a temporality that confines lives to heteronormative ideals and constructs a new space in which queer sexual minorities can form relationships and kinships that accept and nurture their queer (sex)lives and imagine opportunities for alternative futures. This is especially vital in challenging heteronormative ideals because, as Warner explains, heteronormative society indoctrinates individuals with reproductivity which interweaves “heterosexuality, biological reproduction, cultural reproduction, and personal identity” (9). Revealing that her community enjoys sexuality and participates in cultural production, such as poetry readings, pornography-making, and memoir-writing, outside of mainstream culture, Tea offers other possibilities for living and thriving outside of standards that depend on linear reproductivity. Rejecting heteronormative temporality, Tea paints her memoir as a continuing blur of days, events, lovers, and friends; in effect, *Valencia* is full of the present moment that contains almost infinite-seeming romantic and life possibilities. To contrast the infinite opportunities of her queer world with the expectations of patriarchal heteronormativity, Tea shows the reader that, when forced out of this space, time for queer sexual minorities practically stops, as does their sexual agency and individual growth.

Exposing Heteronormativity’s Limits: Queer Time for Community Survival

⁶ In Rubin’s “Thinking Sex” she presents her diagram of sexuality she calls the “Charmed Circle” in which “charmed” sexuality that “is ‘good’, ‘normal,’ and ‘natural’”, should ideally be heterosexual, marital, monogamous, reproductive, and non-commercial. It should be coupled, relational, within the same generation, and occur at home. It should not involve pornography, fetish objects, sex toys of any sort, or roles other than male and female. Any sex that violates these rules is ‘bad’, ‘abnormal,’ or ‘unnatural’” (152).

15 Although most of *Valencia* takes place within the raucous Mission District, the text includes an interlude halfway through the memoir in which Michelle accompanies Iris to her small hometown in the mountains of Georgia for the wedding of Iris's sister. This section breaks from the bombardment of parties, sexual trysts, and string of jobs to feature how heteropatriarchy entraps queer sexual minorities like Tea. The way in which the queer space of the Mission District provides Michelle and her lovers with limitless possibilities and abilities to thrive is sharply contrasted with the heteronormatively confining community of rural Georgia. At the beginning of their trip Michelle describes this episode as a form of social experiment, "For me it was an anthropological study and also kind of zany . . . I hadn't been inside a family for years and I'd forgotten how inherently dysfunctional it was" (Tea 112). Michelle's concept of her trip indicates that for queer sexual minorities, the heteronormative, nuclear family feels unstable and unnatural. Tea develops this through Michelle's reflections on Iris's heterosexual family and the southern community members. Readers see this in particular with the anxiety Iris's sister, the demanding, overwrought bride causes when she demands Iris wear a bridesmaid dress the "color of crusty menstrual blood" and that Michelle must get rid of her lime green hair and wear a Laura Ashley dress (127-128). Additionally, Tea depicts Iris's jealous rage over her sister having an expensive reception and receiving triples of household items as wedding gifts as Iris will never have a wedding that her family would celebrate (114, 127-128). Notably, in her observations of the town, Michelle discovers that the quaint city, in which Michelle and Iris are "starved for gay people," is a corrupt, dysfunctional place where fathers are alcoholics and the sheriff employs teenage boys to deal cocaine (Tea 124, 127-128). Including her anthropological study of a town and family that mainstream society would consider ideal and stable, with its investment in futurity and inheritance, as signified by the preparation of the wedding of Iris's sister, Tea makes visible the artificial nature of heteronormativity and denotes the way heteronormative institutions ensnare not just queer people, but heterosexual people as well.

16 Critical observations of heteronormativity are heightened by Tea's emphasis on the stagnation of her life, particularly her sexual life, in the several weeks the characters spend in Georgia with Iris's family. From the moment they arrive in town, Tea writes that Georgia makes them physically ill and they experience intense lethargy (112). She explains that, "the mysterious chronic fatigue had us both on perma-lounge. Me and Iris had thought it would be fun to have sex there, in the house where she grew up, Mom sleeping lightly at the end of the hall . . . but really

we were exhausted” (113). Tea’s descriptions of Michelle and Iris’s stupor and lack of sexual libido displays the way the heteronormative home impedes their usual lives—no longer able to attend strings of parties and queer activist events, the women are trapped within the physical home, where upholders of the nuclear family lurk, and their activity, including sexual intercourse, stops. Importantly, Tea highlights that, at the house, they could not have the kind of sex they prefer, which keeps them from having sex at all, as the one time they tried, they realized that, “we couldn’t smack each other or play around with the recycled bicycle tire whip because it could wake Mom. We tried it once and it traumatized poor Daisy [the dog] . . . Depressed that our sexual violence disturbed the dog, we resumed our slug-like positions in front of the television” (114). In this way, Tea starkly contrasts the Georgia visit with Michelle’s fast-paced San Francisco escapades, establishing that places in which they cannot express their sexualities impede the flourishing of queer personal identities.

17 During their stagnated time in Georgia, as the endless possibilities available in the Mission remain out of reach, Michelle’s sense of self deteriorates which exemplifies the damage queer people suffer when they are forced to participate in heteronormative families and communities. Not being able to fully partake in valued cultural institutions in a place where queer identities and sexualities are underrepresented and stifled actually impacts Michelle’s individuality. Discussing reprosexuality, Warner explains that it

involves more than reproducing, more even than compulsory heterosexuality: it involves a relation to self that finds its proper temporality and fulfillment in generational transmission. Queers often find themselves in transgression not simply of a commandment to be fruitful and multiply, but more insidiously of the self-relation that goes with it. (9)

Since Michelle finds the heteronormative family and its ideals of marriage, reproduction, and inheritance unappealing, and besides, as a queer sexual minority, unavailable to her, she cannot comfortably occupy a heteronormative temporality. Because she cannot participate in the world of nuclear family-making, Michelle has no viable role within the family unit and is unable to cultivate an identity that would exist and be respected within the heteronormative family and community.

18 Tea conveys her diminishing self by underscoring that the longer they stay in Georgia, the more removed they become from their community, activities, and sexualities. She writes that

Earlier I’d been sad that we couldn’t drive down to Athens to see L7 because it would interfere with the wedding. Now I didn’t care. Of course we couldn’t leave, of course we would remain here, in this town, Chickamauga, Georgia, forever . . . never having sex

because the television had sucked up our libidos like it did little Carol Ann in *Poltergeist*. (122-123)

In this passage, Tea exposes how the more Michelle feels that she is part of the town and family, the more resigned she becomes to being essentially meaningless. Her willingness to give up seeing L7, a radical feminist punk rock band that was associated with the riot grrrl music scene,⁷ exemplifies the ways in which Michelle's options for forming community and living her typical life is confined (Grant n.p.). Thus, she and Iris are resigned to the death of their sex lives as they are removed from opportunities to exhibit their desires and form communities with people like them. Stressing the lethargic, slowing of time by the removal of Tea's discussions of queer sexual exploits, Tea connects sexual possibilities and freedom with the fast-paced, queer temporality that she experiences in San Francisco and reveals that the middle-class heteronormative family unit's reproduction of family and inheritance is a limiting ideal.

19 Unveiling the way heteronormative institutions confine sexual minorities, I offer that *Valencia* is a cautionary tale against the idealization of homonormativity for contemporary readers. With the 2015 legalization of same-sex marriage in the United States, queer sexual minorities are encouraged to participate in institutions that celebrate family and financial futurity ("US Supreme Court" n.p.). However, underlining the disintegration of Michelle and Iris's (sex)lives within the constraints of the middle-class home and family, Tea demonstrates that this glorified normative environment hinders queer personal identities and reminds readers that these spaces limit imaginative possibilities. Furthermore, the access to institutions, such as marriage, and its investment in wealth accumulation and inheritance are also restraining ideals that perpetuate the erasure of communities where sexual minorities can survive and thrive (Duggan 50). The political,

⁷ The riot grrrl movement used music and zines to advocate for feminism and address racism and sexism within the punk scene of the early 1990s (Schilt 6). Notably, riot grrrl bands, such as L7, drew from personal experiences and incorporated topics such as sexual assault and eating disorders into their music that were often ignored by mainstream media (7-8).

social, and economic positions queer sexual minorities experience in Tea's *Valencia*, such as poverty, exclusion, and threats of violence, do not disappear when LGBTQ people gain access to heteronormative institutions that promote capital accumulation—they are only displaced onto other minoritized communities. As Dean Spade and Craig Willse explain, “[f]reedom and equality are not achieved when a practice crosses over to being acceptable. Instead, such shifts strengthen the line between what is considered good, healthy, and normal and what remains bad, unhealthy, stigmatized, and criminalized” (3). Tea's narrative represents people whose lives continue to be stigmatized, and even if they could access institutions and wealth, the marginalization they experience would merely be passed on to the most vulnerable, such as transgender people, people of color, and poor people (and especially those at the intersections of these identities). In the way that gentrification displaces the most marginalized, so does sexual normalization, and thus reading *Valencia* as a political, sex-positive work exemplifies the need for queer communities that continue to celebrate sexuality and search for continuous possibility.

Conclusion

20 Through her fast-paced memoir that chronicles a year of sexual and romantic exploration, Tea's *Valencia* confronts middle-class, white heteropatriarchal ideals that work as a violence against people who do not conform to its standards of heteronormative relationships, families, reproduction, and inheritance. The need for narratives like Tea's is especially vital in presenting queer life possibilities that challenge hetero- and homonormativity as LGBTQ politics succumb to the neoliberal impulse for homonormative movements that focus on access to institutions, such as marriage, that perpetuate capitalist ideals that marginalize sexual minorities and working-class

people of color.⁸ Thus, sex-positive memoirs like Tea's can be utilized to imagine possibilities that resist heteronormative and homonormative lifestyles that celebrate capitalist wealth accumulation and resulting hypergentrification. Moreover, they are imperative in imagining a transformative queer politics that "does not search for opportunities to integrate into dominant institutions and normative social relationships, but instead pursues a political agenda that seeks to change values, definitions, and laws which make these institutions and relationships oppressive" (Cohen 424).

21 Crafting a queer temporality in her memoir that depicts the queer time she and her fellow sexual minorities inhabit, Tea echoes sex-positive feminists who use personal writings to imagine new selves, communities, and futures that challenge mainstream social and economic values. Reflecting on *Valencia* in her 2008 introduction, Tea explains that "I found that in the process of transforming my world, my life, my self into literature, my world, life, and self became elevated, and seemed to occupy a space it hadn't previously" (8). In the queer temporality that Tea creates through memoir, she puts forth possibilities for queer lives, ultimately exhibiting alternative ways of forming communities that celebrate difference and alternate ways of being that can transform capitalist, heteropatriarchal society and its celebration of wealth accumulation and financial progression that feed gentrification and destroy vulnerable neighborhoods. Emphasizing the importance of sexual, personal, and community possibility, Tea's narrative, an artifact of a community that no longer exists, illustrates to present day readers the necessity of resisting hetero- and homo- normalization and constructing paths for alternative lives and communities.

⁸ For discussion on how neoliberalism has sought to depoliticize queer movements through "equality politics," particularly since 9/11, see Lisa Duggan (45-55); Martin F. Manalansan IV (141-153); Dean Spade (80-85); and Michael Warner (*The Trouble with Normal* 39).

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'Adult Games' - Gender Subversion in Miranda July's

The First Bad Man

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Abstract:

This paper investigates points of contact between postmodernist / poststructuralist and feminist currents by analysing the deconstruction of stable gendered identities and the depiction of both femininity and masculinity in the performance artist Miranda July's novel *The first bad man* (2015). Although there has been doubt about a productive interplay of postmodernism and feminism, it can be shown that the playfulness inherent in postmodern discourses might support feminism's political agenda, namely by opening up the category of 'woman' to include participants who had been excluded from the framework of feminist identity politics before. The subversion of gender categories is achieved through performative acts (as described in Judith Butler's *Gender Trouble*), namely the simulations or 'adult games' that the main characters Clee and Cheryl employ (for example re-enactments of old self-defence video tapes), and through the repeated parody of gendered norms inherent in the novel. While the heterosexual matrix is thus foregrounded, different forms of sexuality are played out against each other and the notion of a natural gender, as well as a specifically female sexuality, is called into question. Queer studies – with Judith Butler as their representative – provide a useful focus for the post-feminist agenda applied here (post-feminist not in the sense of a backlash, but as a new and productive approach to feminism and its objectives), and Linda Hutcheon's ideas about a form of complicitous critique further exemplify the link to postmodernist theory. That subversion and destabilisation can only occur within their respective frameworks and that every deconstruction involves contradictoriness is made explicit throughout the paper and a possible escape from binary logic is proposed. The aim is to explore in how far postmodernism and feminism share certain objectives and, through their subversion of fixed identities and meanings, can create a productive intersection.

1 Miranda July, filmmaker, artist and author, frequently evades established categories and preconceptions, as in her strategy to promote her first novel, *The first bad man*: She created a website where items, seemingly taken from the intradiegetic level of the story, were sold, thereby “attempting to blur the line between fiction and reality, a boundary that she's constantly puncturing through her performance art and writing” (Alter 2015, n. p.). Arguably, the transgressive aspects of July's work place her in a framework of postmodernist currents, one that will be labelled 'postfeminist' in what follows. This term is used not to describe a “conservative backlash” against feminism or an era in which feminism seems to have run its course, but rather to explore the “shift in the understanding and construction of identity and gender categories” that relates feminism to a postmodern discourse (Genz & Brabon 1).

2 Although an alliance of feminism and postmodernism has effected optimistic responses, praising “feminist engagement with deconstructive critiques of modernist

paradigms and of their reliance upon grand narratives, universalizing categories, truth claims, and human conceptualizations of the subject” (Budgeon 26), other voices “contend that the incorporation of post-modernist and post-structuralist principles seriously detracts feminism from its proper aims and objectives” (28-29). Where postmodernism is seen to be politically disinterested and mainly philosophical in its reasoning, feminism relies on and asks for political action and subjective agency. However, as neither postmodernism nor feminism are encompassed by a single theory but include many, sometimes contradictory definitions, some of these will be used for critical analysis and tested in terms of their compatibility. Especially the emergence of queer theory is of interest here, as it “takes up the postmodern/poststructuralist concern with breaking down essentialist notions of gender and sexual identity and replacing them with contingent and multiple identities” (Genz 125). Taking as its starting point Judith Butler’s theory of performative gender and Linda Hutcheon’s ideas about complicitous critique, this paper aims to show how gender categories are opened up, subverted and deconstructed¹ in July’s novel *The First Bad Man*.

3 The intention behind such an analysis is to demonstrate the possibility of a productive relationship between postmodern and feminist concerns. Such an approach will prove that the playfulness inherent in “postmodern parodic modes of installing and then subverting conventions” (Hutcheon 151) does not necessarily undermine a feminist political agenda – rather it encourages a re-thinking of the feminist subject and the inclusion and exclusion of participants in and from this agenda based on their apparent gender as perceived by others. This paper will thus first give a brief overview of different perspectives on the interplay of postmodernism and feminism. Secondly, Judith Butler’s gender performativity will be explained and thirdly, Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique and her ideas about a feminist postmodernist parody will be summarised. Subsequently, scenes from *The First Bad Man* will be analysed and related to the theories presented before. The focus here will be on the relationship between the protagonists Cheryl and Clee, specifically on instances of simulation, gender performance and parody as postmodern strategies of subversion. The

¹ The term ‘deconstruction’ was first proposed and demonstrated by Jacques Derrida in one of his many influential works, *Limited Inc*: “Deconstruction cannot be restricted or immediately pass to a neutralization: it must, through a double gesture, a double science, a double writing-put into practice a *reversal* of the classical opposition and a general *displacement* of the system” (Derrida 21). In *Understanding Poststructuralism*, Williams claims “[d]econstruction draws out a metaphysical background and its unquestioned role within the power of statements that depend upon it” (emphasis in original; 29). It can therefore be understood as undermining claims to absolute truth or fixed meanings by “find[ing] circular arguments and point[ing] out contradictions” (29). The term deconstruction has since been used in a variety of ways, for example by feminist theorists, whose usage of it will be considered in the following.

potential inherent in a conglomeration of postmodernism and feminism will then be re-emphasised in the conclusion.

4 As neither postmodernism nor feminism comprise a single theory or set of beliefs, the following overview will single out such ideas and concepts in both sets of theories that constitute a link between postmodernism and feminism and thus work to create a postmodern feminism or a postfeminism. Especially this latter term, often (mis-) understood to denounce feminism and its roots, “is now understood as a useful conceptual frame of reference encompassing the intersection of feminism with a number of other anti-foundationalist movements including postmodernism, post-structuralism and post-colonialism” (Brooks 1). The ‘post’-prefix, for Brooks, does not imply an outright rejection, but “a process of ongoing transformation and change” (1). Likewise, Linda Hutcheon contends that postmodernism is both deeply “self-conscious” and “self-contradictory”, as well as indebted to “duplicity” (1) – one of the key aspects of the postmodern discourse is that it does not simply take up an anti-modernist or anti-traditional stance and proclaim a new ideal. It aims to question and to subvert not only modernist standpoints, but also itself, a constant work in progress. However, postmodernism’s main concern, according to Hutcheon, “is to de-naturalize some of the dominant features of our way of life”, showing that many concepts we take to be “‘natural’ ... are in fact ‘cultural’” (2). Postmodernism also includes an “awareness of the existence and power of systems of representation which do not *reflect* society so much as *grant* meaning and value within a particular society” (8). The assumption here is that it is not so much a graspable reality that is represented, but representation which shapes what we conceive to be reality. This is especially important from a feminist perspective that aims to challenge modes of representing women, precisely to re-shape a female reality.

5 Patricia Waugh tries to sum up the philosophical shift from modernism to postmodernism by opposing a modernist “epistemic subject characterized in terms of historical experience, interiority, and consciousness” and a postmodernist “‘decentred’ subject identified through the public, impersonal signifying practices of other similarly ‘decentred’ subjects” (7). This notion of “postmodernism’s deconstruction of the subject category is reinforced by anti-essentialist feminists for whom ‘woman’ as a monolithic term is unable to address the complexity of gender in relation to other aspects of identity” (Genz & Brabon 28). The female subject in a postmodern framework does not possess inherent, natural qualities that are shared by women regardless of their backgrounds, race, class or

sexual orientation – on the contrary, culture, surroundings and ‘discourse’² are seen to be decisive for subject formation. This rejection of “an essential female self” (28) broadens the spectrum of feminism to include voices that might otherwise have been excluded – namely the “multivalent, inharmonious and conflicting voices of contemporary women” (30). A focus on diversity and contradiction within the category of ‘women’ allows for a more nuanced depiction of women’s struggles instead of enforcing a singular female perspective.

6 Difficulties that arise from a post(modern)-feminism include the complexity “of the contemporary gender order, in which feminism cannot be reduced to a singular set of affects or restricted to any particular site of operation” (Budgeon 29). If feminism has developed an intrinsic uncertainty about its aims and objectives, about subjective agency and the (non-) fixity of gender categories, the common goal assumed in earlier feminisms – to overthrow patriarchy and free women from oppression – can no longer be uncontested. Instead, new ways of imagining the future of gender relations need to be evaluated. In what follows, Judith Butler’s approach to a postmodern feminism and especially her ideas on the performativity of gender will be related to show how political agency and the fluidity of gender categories can be combined.

Judith Butler’s Gender Performativity

7 When Genz and Brabon argue that queer theory’s and feminist theory’s most powerful intersection lies in the work of Judith Butler, this explicit focus suggests that there are rifts between the two fields of study, just like between feminism and postmodernism (124). Thus, queer theorists seek to deconstruct notions of stable identity and especially gendered identity, thereby attacking the “heterosexual and heterosexist norm” (124). An attack on or questioning of heterosexuality as a construct is seen to be lacking in many works of feminism that implicitly support “binary configurations of the subject” embedded in a heterosexual framework (124). Judith Butler, in her 1999 preface to *Gender Trouble*, explains that there are “exclusionary gender norms within feminism, often with homophobic consequences” (viii), making it her project to contest the assumption of a natural gender as such.

8 Taking a step back, Butler contests the idea that “the category of woman maintain[s] a meaning separate from the conditions of oppression against which it has been formulated”

² The term ‘discourse’ refers to Foucault’s understanding of it. Brooks claims, “Foucault’s use of the concept of discourse . . . enables us to understand how what is said has its own social and historical context and is a product of specific conditions of existence” (49).

(325). As long as the project of feminism relies on a shared and essential feminine self, a common identity, she argues, it becomes “exclusionary in principle” (325) – only those participants who fit neatly into the category of ‘woman’ will be included in a struggle for emancipation and autonomy. As soon as femininity and masculinity are set up as oppositions, the concept of gender comes into play. To assume that gender is a coherent expression of an internal stability is to assume that gender is something one can ‘be’, something innate and natural. Butler argues against such a conception of gender, claiming that “the substantive effect of gender is performatively produced and compelled by the regulatory practices of gender coherence” – gender is therefore “constituting the identity it is purported to be” (34). Instead of ‘being’ a gender, one ‘does’ or ‘performs’ it through “a stylised reiteration of conventions that eventually become naturalised and consolidated” (Genz & Brabon 125).

9 Butler also insists that “[t]here is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender” – there is only an “illusion of an interior and organizing gender core, an illusion discursively maintained for the purposes of the regulation of sexuality within the obligatory frame of reproductive heterosexuality” (186). This ‘illusion’ or fantasy is therefore created and consolidated through social practices that effectively mask the fictionality of a true gender. Butler notes that “under conditions of normative heterosexuality, policing gender is sometimes used as a way of securing heterosexuality”, while the deciding factor of this operation is “the gender hierarchy that is said to underwrite heterosexual relations” (xii/xiii) – namely the subordination of women that is proclaimed by feminists. According to Butler, there is “no natural necessity to see bodies as ordered into distinct sexes” (Digeser 656) – this necessity is rooted entirely in history, as it “lends a naturalistic gloss to the institution of heterosexuality” (Butler 153).

10 Considering Butler’s argument about gender performativity, it is important to reflect on the difference between this performativity and a self-willed and self-controlled performance. It is not possible to simply choose the gender one wants to perform. Instead, “gender is an involuntary and imposed production within a culturally restricted space and it is always ‘put on’ under constraint as a compulsory performance that acts in line with heteronormative conventions” (Genz 14-15). However, this does not mean that there is no space for a subversion or acting out against the imposed gender categories from within. Butler points to parody and drag as possible responses to the oppressive forces of consolidated gender norms. She claims that “[t]he replication of heterosexual constructs in non-heterosexual frames brings into relief the utterly constructed status of the so-called

heterosexual original” and that the “parodic repetition of ‘the original’ . . . reveals the original to be nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and original” (emphasis in original; 43). By performing gender in a specific or ‘unusual’ way, such as in drag, gender is revealed to be merely “an imitation of an imitation” (Digeser 660). While parodic interpretations of gender norms “are clearly part of hegemonic, misogynist culture, they are nevertheless denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization” (Butler 188). However, while there is a lot of agency to be found in this possibility of subversion and deconstruction of gender, not every repetition of gendered acts and gestures is necessarily disruptive – the potential for a rethinking of gender norms is always connected to a specific context and setting (189).

11 Returning to the idea of the subject of feminism, Butler does not propose to cast aside the term ‘women’ – on the contrary, she claims that “if feminism presupposes that ‘women’ designates an undesignatable field of differences, one that cannot be totalized or summarized by a descriptive identity category, then the very term becomes a site of permanent openness and resignifiability.” (16) If ‘women’ is opened up to include many different and also contradictory meanings, and if femininity is destabilised through performative acts of subversion, this can arguably strengthen an inclusionary and powerful form of feminism.

Linda Hutcheon’s Complicitous Critique

12 In her evaluation of postmodernism, Hutcheon aligns herself with theorists believing in a compatibility of postmodernism and feminism, precisely because postmodernism is not as a-political as it has been interpreted. The argument that “postmodernism is disqualified from political involvement because of its narcissistic and ironic appropriation” is dismantled as “politically naïve” because it ignores the postmodern move of “turn[ing] its inevitable ideological grounding into a site of de-naturalizing critique” (3). However, Hutcheon admits that this critique is neither pure nor unproblematic. It is one that acknowledges “its own *complicity* with power and domination, one that acknowledges that it cannot escape implication in that which it nevertheless still wants to analyse and maybe even undermine” (emphasis in original; 4). Postmodernism is here seen to be inextricably linked to the system it tries to subvert by contesting authorities and the construction of meaning, but at the same time aware of this position and the contradictions it implies.

13 Hutcheon's study of postmodern photography and fiction zeroes in on a "process of cultural 'de-doxification'³" that shows an "awareness of the discursive and signifying nature of cultural knowledge [...] raising the question of the supposed transparency of representation" (7). This circles back to the issue of female representation raised in the introduction to this article. Both gender knowledge and images of women, in fiction or elsewhere, are understood to be culturally constructed through discourse and signification, not grounded in an objective reality. The postmodern project, then, is to employ parody, "both using and ironically abusing general conventions and specific forms of representation" to point out their inherent contradictions and constructed-ness (8). Connecting this understanding of postmodern critique to a critical feminism, Hutcheon states that "complicity is not full affirmation or strict adherence; the awareness of difference and contradiction, of being inside and outside, is never lost in the feminist, as in the postmodern" (14). Just like postmodernism, feminism orients itself towards the margins of and the faultiness in dominant discourse and ideology, while constantly questioning its own place inside said discourse and ideology. These common denominators, for Hutcheon, allow for a cross-fertilisation of postmodernism and feminism, especially in the arts. If "[p]ostmodernism manipulates, but does not transform significations" in a parodic manner, feminism needs to take it a step further, as "subversion does not automatically lead to the production of the new" (168). The task of a feminist postmodern parody, then, is "to contest the old – the representations of both [women's] bodies and [...] desires – without denying them the right to re-colonize" (168).

The deconstruction of gender in *The First Bad Man*

14 While it is important to trace the common project of postmodernism and feminism in society and culture, this paper focuses on its specific influence on fiction. Robinson claims that "what we know about masculinity and femininity and what we understand as sexual norms and sexual identities are framed and limited by familiar narratives" (97). The potential for feminist writers therefore lies in the interrogation and rewriting of "the narratives that script us as masculine or feminine" (97). Miranda July's "devotion to women and their complexities . . . at the heart of all [her] creative endeavours" (Schilling n. p.) marks her work as a valuable resource for a feminist reading. July started creating a feminist film archive in the 90s that has since been contextualised "within feminist and queer history" (n.

³ Hutcheon takes on Roland Barthes' "notion of the 'doxa' as public opinion . . . and consensus" to emphasise that "postmodernism works to 'de-doxify' our cultural representations" (3).

p.). The remainder of this paper will show that her writing, specifically her first and to date only novel *The First Bad Man*, could and should be situated in a similar context, as it explores, questions and deconstructs notions of masculinity and femininity. Taking into account Judith Butler's ideas outlined previously, the next paragraphs will analyse the relationship between protagonists Cheryl and Clee as an example for gender performativity, especially as situated within the heterosexual matrix. Subsequently, Hutcheon's ideas about complicitous critique will be applied to the representations of masculinity and femininity explored in the novel.

'Adult Games', Gender Performance and Heterosexuality

15 The relationship between Cheryl and Clee starts out as a violent and abusive one. Cheryl, in her mid-forties, living alone, takes in her bosses' 20-year old daughter Clee who attacks her both physically and verbally. When Cheryl's therapist Ruth-Anne suggests that Cheryl put an end to the violence exerted by Clee, Cheryl begins practising self-defence with the fitness DVDs produced by Open Palm, where she works as a manager. As Cheryl starts fighting back, the violent encounters first introduced and enforced by Clee become "[a]n immensely satisfying adult game" (71), where Clee and Cheryl take on distinct roles – the attacker and the attacked. This 'game' can be described as gender parody, precisely because the self-defence moves Cheryl employs stem from instructions on how to defend oneself against a 'male' attacker. By taking these moves out of their designated context and using them for an undefined kind of pleasure, they are "denaturalized and mobilized through their parodic recontextualization" (Butler 188). The deconstruction of gender is taken further when Cheryl presents Clee with a gift, a soy candle, and only then becomes aware of its implications in the context of their frequent physical proximity. In this encounter, Clee is presented as what would be constructed as 'decidedly masculine' – she is sitting on the couch with her "knees wide apart" and likened to "a boxer", she "cough[s] huskily and spit[s] into one of the empty Pepsi bottles" and declares that the reason for her aggressions is that she is "'misogynist' or whatever" (75-76). Clee seems to feel the need to act in a 'manly' way to distance herself from the homosexual undercurrent that she apparently finds threatening. The (masculine) dominance and aggression exerted by Clee can be linked to "heterosexuality as a normative category of sexed, gendered and sexual identity which serves both to support the binary logic by which 'hetero-' and 'homosexual' identities are produced and to perpetuate the construction of homosexual identities as deviant and abnormal" (Carroll 2). In order to re-establish a heterosexual norm, Clee performs a 'male' gender to allow Cheryl

as a female suitor and to remove herself from the realm of ‘women’ whom she claims to resent.

16 The tensions between the game-like character of and the sexual implications inherent in Clee’s and Cheryl’s fights are further revealed to Cheryl when she learns that Rick, the gardener, bore witness to one of their encounters. His reaction changes her understanding of the situation, especially when she starts seeing it through his eyes:

Before every raw impulse there was a pause – I saw us through the homeless gardener’s eyes and felt obscene. Being outside society, he didn’t know about adult games; he was like me before I met Ruth-Anne, thinking everything that happened in life was real. (85)

This opposition of ‘games’ and ‘reality’ highlights Cheryl’s fear of feeling attracted to a woman, as well as being perceived as homosexual. However, the dichotomy presented here also highlights the constructed and enforced nature of heterosexuality as such. In order to allow for physical and also sensual contact, albeit in a distorted and violent context, Cheryl feels the need to label her relations with Clee as a ‘game’, as opposed to a reality in which the “taboo against homosexuality” (86) works against the possibility of developing a desire for someone of the same sex. Butler describes the formation of the homosexual taboo in great detail, coming to the conclusion that gender “identity is constructed and maintained by the consistent application of this taboo, not only in the stylization of the body in compliance with discrete categories of sex, but in the production and ‘disposition’ of sexual desire” (86). Sexual desire needs to be distributed according to certain norms, which is mirrored in the ‘adult games’ Cheryl and Clee employ to ward off implications of the taboo against homosexuality.

17 Struggling to find an “organized and respectable, less feverish” way of fighting with Clee, Cheryl turns to old self-defence “scenarios” produced by Open Palm prior to the advent of self-defence as fitness (85). The following interactions take their ‘game’ to another level, as the two women now re-enact self-defence scenarios that are meant to aid women in the decidedly ‘real’ case of an attack to foster their ‘unreal’ relationship – they are creating a simulation⁴ of a simulation. This allows for a further subversion of gender categories through the performance of distinct gendered roles. The Open Palm scenarios, bearing titles like “A Day at the Park” (86) or “Woman Asking Directions” (87), rely on a strict separation of gender, opposing the innocent, slightly hysterical woman, albeit fierce in the face of danger,

⁴ The term ‘simulation’ here, as in the novel, is used to describe the act of copying specific ‘role models’ and their actions, rendering it inherently playful and performative. (set document to English to make sure punctuations appear correctly)

with an aggressive, inherently 'bad' man. Their one-dimensionality is copied by Cheryl and Clee, with Cheryl always playing the part of the woman being attacked and Clee always playing the part of the man attacking. The irony here resides in the fact that Cheryl initiates the first attack, thus taking control of her own being-attacked-ness (86). Cheryl seems content with the even more 'unreal' character of her new fights with Clee, as "[t]his wasn't anything, just a re-creation of a simulation of the kind of thing that might happen to a woman if she didn't keep her wits about her" (July 87). Furthermore, she learns how to 'perform' her gender correctly:

[S]he demonstrated not just what to do but how to feel. [...] It was interesting to be this kind of person, so unself-conscious and exposed, so feminine. Dana could have had a career making videos like this for all occasions – waking up, answering the phone, leaving the house; a woman could follow along and learn what to do when she's *not* being attacked, how to feel the rest of the time. (88)

The consequence that can be drawn from this kind of performance is that "gender is itself a kind of becoming or activity, and that gender ought not to be conceived as a noun or a substantial thing . . . but rather as an incessant and repeated action of some sort" (Butler 152). If Cheryl is longing for an instruction manual on how to be a woman, this clearly designates the fictional status of a 'fixed' gender, one that exists prior to a cultural signification – instead of 'having' or 'being' a gender, Cheryl looks to another woman to produce her gender through acts and gestures. Her fear of being exposed reflects this gender insecurity, when she worries that Clee "would see me, see who I really was. A woman whose femininity was just copied from another woman." (July 89). This imagined instance of confrontation also plays with the postmodern notion of the decentred subject – one that is not autonomous and coherent, but constantly reconstructed and reproduced through discourse and specific situations, leaving Cheryl to ask herself the question: "*Do you even know who you are?*" and replying: "*No, I don't.*" (emphasis in original; 90)

18 While Cheryl finds a new role model for (idealised) femininity in her simulations, Clee identifies with and performs the masculinity employed in the self-defence scenarios. This is made explicit in a scene that introduces the title of the novel:

Until now there had been no overt acknowledgement of the video or that we were anyone but our own angry selves. "I'm the first man," she said. "The one in denim?" "The first bad man." It was the way she was standing when she said it – her feet planted wide, her big hands waiting in the air. Just like a bad man, the kind that comes to a sleepy town and makes all kinds of trouble before galloping off again. She wasn't the first bad man ever but the first I'd ever met who had long blond hair and pink velour pants. (91)

This instance can be interpreted as gender parody in different ways. First, it relates to Butler's remarks on drag as a subversive bodily act that "imitat[es] gender" and therefore "implicitly reveals the imitative structure of gender itself" (187). Clee's impersonation deviates from this understanding of drag insofar as her clothes could be perceived as decidedly feminine (perhaps even overly so) while her whole act (gestures, posture, language) are what would appear to be masculine. However, this only seems to add another layer to the subversiveness suggested by Butler – the comic contrast between the gender that is signified through simulation or theatrical performance and the gender that is signified through superficial appearance points towards the artificiality of gender incorporation (Butler 183).

19 Second, the phrase 'the first bad man' implies that there is an original masculinity, an ideal that can be copied. As Clee and Cheryl are simulating a simulation, the 'bad man' in the simulation who seems to be the original (the first) is "nothing other than a parody of the *idea* of the natural and the original" (43). While it is not made explicit that this gender performance is parodic, it strongly relates to Butler's claim that "it is only *within* the practices of repetitive signifying that a subversion of identity becomes possible" (emphasis in original; 199). The repeated simulation of a male gender, although it can consolidate its 'naturalness', can also, in specific situations, point out the contradictions inherent in such a univocal understanding of identity. Thus, the man who "makes all kinds of trouble" (July 91) also makes what Butler refers to as "gender trouble" (xii). The simulations acted out by Cheryl and Clee make Cheryl reflect on the differentiation between 'game' and 'reality' that becomes increasingly difficult. When talking to her therapist about the scenarios with Clee, she claims that "[f]or her it might not be a game, it might be real" and then goes on to "describe[] the wolfish intensity that came over her when she simulated" (July 92). Ruth-Anne's comment also reflects the fluidity of (gender) identity: "Real comes and goes and isn't very interesting" (92).

20 Finally, the simulations that Cheryl deemed safer than unscripted fights lead to a sexual obsession that further deconstructs a fixed gender identity. When Clee invites guests for a house party, Cheryl closely watches her, for the first time openly realising her attraction to Clee, describing her hair as "sleepy and golden" and her mouth as "too tender to be in public" (105). Soon afterwards, Cheryl imagines herself in the position of Philip, her twenty-two years older co-worker, whom she has feelings for and who has repeatedly asked her advice about whether or not he should sleep with a 16-year old girl he is entranced with. On the night of the party, Cheryl finally tells him to go along with it and then uses her imagined

connection with him to experience his sexual pleasure. However, instead of Kirsten, the girl he is sleeping with, she imagines Clee as a more suited partner: “This was the kind of young woman he deserved – a bombshell, not a rat-faced little girl” (108). The identification with Philip opens up new sexual realms for Cheryl, who now has “so much energy vibrating in [her] groin” (July 108) that the simulations take on a different nature: “I was playing something else now . . . , awkwardly wheeling around a phantom erection” (110). The aggressive, forceful sexuality that for Cheryl is strongly connected to the (imagined) penis can be related to Butler’s thoughts about “literalizing fantasy”: if “[p]leasures are said to reside in the penis, the vagina, and the breasts or to emanate from them, . . . such descriptions correspond to a body which has already been constructed or naturalized as gender-specific” (95). The need for a gender-specific separation, to support what Butler calls “melancholic heterosexuality” (96), leaves Cheryl unable to fantasise about Clee without inserting a penis that she thinks of as her own into her, reconfirming a heterosexual desire. In another session with Ruth-Anne, Cheryl’s somewhat enigmatic therapist, the discontinuity between Cheryl’s understanding of her own desires and the ones imagined through Philip becomes more obvious:

I described tapping into Phillip’s lust, his overwhelming appetites and aggressive explosions that convulsed through me. . . . “Right. And perhaps we don’t even need to call it Phillip’s lust? Maybe it’s just lust.” “Well, it’s not *mine*. These just aren’t the kinds of things I would think about, on my own, without him.” (July 111)

Cheryl’s refusal to mark the desire she experiences as her own also brings to mind “a matrix that accounts for all desire for women by subjects of whatever sex or gender as originating in a masculine, heterosexual position” (Butler 72). Only by performing, albeit in her fantasies, a ‘male’ sexuality, a form of desire is constituted because “[t]he libido-as-masculine is the source from which all possible sexuality is presumed to come” (72). This is reflected in Cheryl’s contention that she does “masturbat[e herself] to orgasm”, but that this is “just, you know, behind the scenes” (July 111).

21 While this conflation of masculinity and sexuality, as well as the consequent undermining of female homosexuality, could also be seen as a confirmation and consolidation of gender categories, the equalisation of Cheryl’s fantasies and an unhealthy obsession that she eventually conquers suggests otherwise. When using Phillip’s lust no longer achieves its aims, Cheryl goes through all the men she herself has ever known and imagines them having sex with Clee, the different penises “getting more abstract and unlikely” (118), only realising that she has a problem when Clee finds out about her fantasies. When the two women indulge in another fight, Cheryl seems to have “an

aggressive or manly facial expression”, leading Clee to believe that she is “shitting on [her] face or something” (127-128). Realisation then hits Cheryl: “While I totally wasn’t, in general terms I guessed I was. I guessed I had been shitting on her unceasingly for the last month” (128). Cheryl likens her very physical obsession to a “spell”, something like an outside force that has taken possession of her and that she needs to counter with an “antidote” (121). Exaggerating male sexual aggression and then defining it as something poisonous or tainted that can be warded off with the right determination, responds to the way men are presented in the self-defence videos Cheryl and Clee have been re-enacting. However, by making Cheryl the vessel for this sexual energy that at the same time liberates and confines her desires, a fixed gendered identity is called into question and subverted again. Masculinity is not seen as an innate characteristic that belongs to or constitutes a male body, but as a tool that helps Cheryl in coming to terms with her desires. The necessity of a distinctly ‘female’ desire is therefore called into question as well.

Feminist Postmodern Parody and Complicitous Critique

22 Hutcheon claims that “postmodern parodic representational strategies have offered feminist artists an effective way of working within and yet challenging dominant patriarchal discourses” (167). One of the ways this is done in *The First Bad Man*, is the juxtaposition of different ideas about femininity and masculinity, as held by different characters that are then subverted or ‘de-doxified’ through irony, creating a feminist postmodern parody. From her very first appearance, Clee is defined by a contrasting and seemingly contradictory mixture of attributes that are sorted by Cheryl as belonging to and escaping categories of femininity. Cheryl’s first thoughts when opening the door to her are: “She was a woman. So much a woman that for a moment I wasn’t sure what I was” (July 22). She also uses the word “bombshell” to describe Clee, explaining that “[i]t was more than just her chest dimensions – she had a blond, tan largeness of scale” and therefore placing a strong emphasis on (voluptuous) physicality as an indicator for femininity (23). Thus, Cheryl seems to be ‘male gaze-ing’ Clee, objectifying and categorising her, before this impression is subverted. Clee’s messiness and apparent disinterest in personal hygiene go against Cheryl’s conceptions of a (young) woman’s behaviour:

A smell began to coagulate around Clee, a brothy, intimate musk, that she seemed unaware of, or unconcerned by. I had presumed she would shower every morning, using noxious blue cleansing gels and plasticky sweet lotions. But, in fact, she didn’t wash. (26)

While underlining Cheryl's inability to get accustomed to another person sharing her living space, this paragraph also stresses some of Cheryl's ideas about femininity, namely that women should be neat and clean, as well as contained. This thought is made explicit in one of the therapy sessions with Ruth-Anne. Cheryl here describes Clee as "a dense, stenchy bull" and, reacting to Ruth-Anne's statement that "[b]ulls are male", Cheryl's words are: "A woman talks, too much – and worries, too much – and gives and gives in. A woman bathes" (53). Cheryl here suggests a 'naturally' female way of being: submissive, passive, anxious. However, while Cheryl only seems to reflect and project her own character, these ascriptions are clearly produced and upheld by the social discourse surrounding her.

23 Another feature that alienates Clee from Cheryl's understanding of what it means to be female is her tendency towards physical aggression. When Clee starts both physically and verbally abusing her host, Cheryl is too shocked to react (July 35) because this kind of behaviour evades the categories she knows. As Cheryl is uncomfortable with "these kinds of thoughts . . . just go[ing] on and on with no category" (42), she forms a conclusion for herself: "Whereas girls in my youth felt angry but directed it inward and cut themselves and became depressed, girls nowadays just went arrrrgh and pushed someone into a wall" (42). Thus, Cheryl seeks an explanation for Clee's behaviour in a generational gap and changing concepts of femininity, instead of blaming Clee's personality. This implies the complicity of women in the patriarchal discourses feminism seeks to disrupt. Female complicity, albeit one in feminist discourse itself, and the parodic critique that can ensue from it are rendered obvious in another short incidence taking place at the Open Palm office. When one of her co-workers brings her baby to work, Cheryl tells her off: "She gave me a betrayed look, because she's a working mom, feminism, etc. I gave her the same look back, because I'm a woman in a senior position, she's taking advantage, feminism, etc" (14) While this short exchange of looks underlines female complicity, suggesting a shared history and struggle, the exhaustive "feminism, etc." ironically disrupts this complicity, rendering it critical.

24 Deconstructive measures can also be found in the interactions between Cheryl and Phillip, especially in the ascriptions he makes and in his behaviour. When his character is introduced early on in the novel, an incident at an Open Palm fundraiser is described that gives the reader an impression of the kind of man depicted here:

He had lifted the heavy beads off my chest and [...] used the beads to pull me toward him. "Hey," he said, "I like this, this is handy." An outsider [...] might have thought this moment was degrading, but I knew the degradation was just a joke; he was mocking the kind of man who would do something like that. [...] The joke was, *Can you believe people? The tacky kinds of things they do?* (emphasis in original; 6-7)

The action itself is reminiscent of the assertion of male dominance – Phillip pulling Cheryl towards him, taking away her agency. Cheryl’s explanation of this behaviour as ironic or mocking, instead of letting her reclaim subjectivity, exposes her wish to see him as ‘more’ than “the kind of man who would do something like that” (6-7), ignoring the possibility that he might be just that, and that no irony is involved. However, the ambivalence regarding Phillip’s intentions also creates a certain tension between one-dimensional depictions of masculinity. This can be linked to a “double process of installing and ironizing” with which “parody signals how present representations come from past ones and what ideological consequences derive from both continuity and difference” (Hutcheon 93). Both a continuity, Phillip asserting male dominance, and difference – Phillip ironically asserting male dominance – are present and create a tension between representations of masculinity, thus deconstructing the notion of masculinity as such.

25 The ascriptions Phillip uses for Cheryl, on the other hand, demonstrate the arbitrariness of the signifiers ‘female’ and ‘male’. Phillip asks Cheryl’s blessing to begin an affair with Kirsten, allegedly because he trusts her opinion most:

I explained how strong you are, how you’re a feminist and you live alone, and she agreed we should wait until we got your take on it. . . . And I told her how perfectly balanced you are in terms of your masculine and feminine energies. . . . So you can see things from a man’s point of view, but without being clouded by yang. (July 47)

By ascribing a perfect balance in terms of masculinity and femininity to Cheryl, Phillip, at the same time, removes her from the realm of women he can find sexually attractive and puts her in a seemingly ungendered role: an advisor who can take on both the male and the female perspective. However, the irony lies in the equation of ‘feminist’ and ‘living alone’, as it suggests that a middle-aged woman who lives alone must surely be ‘strong’ and a feminist, because she does not allow a man into her life. This irony is underscored by other characters perceiving Cheryl as lesbian solely for superficial reasons: “People sometimes think this because of the way I wear my hair; it happens to be short. I also wear shoes you can actually walk in” (6). Kate, one of Clee’s party guests, contends that her father, after a date with Cheryl, thought she was “dressed like a lesbian”, “making a big show out of [Cheryl’s] failure to attract him” (109). This breaking down of signifiers like ‘male’, ‘female’, ‘lesbian’ and the exposure of the radical discontinuity between signifier and signified (Genz 144) is an integral part of a (feminist) postmodern parody that seeks to explore “the way in which narratives . . . structure how we see ourselves and how we construct our notions of self” (Hutcheon 7).

Conclusion

26 This paper has shown that postmodernism and feminism, especially in the last two decades, share many aims and objectives, like the questioning and subversion of (gendered) identity, unity of the subject and a “single epistemological truth” (Brooks 92). Marginalisation occurring inside the feminist project, namely of voices contesting the white middle-class position feminism seems to be grounded on, can be thematised by postmodern debates around “nationality and difference” (Brooks 92). Concerning the destabilisation and deconstruction of a fixed gender, Judith Butler’s gender performativity was related and then applied to the novel *The First Bad Man*. The relationship between Cheryl and Clee was shown to be situated firmly within the heterosexual matrix, while at the same time foregrounding the construction of the institution of heterosexuality. Their ‘adult games’, simulations of simulations, effectively displace and defer a fixed gendered identity. (Female) sexual desire and its production is called into question as well when considering Cheryl’s fantasies as involving a ‘male’ desire. While the analysis of gender categories, their instalment and their subversion, could be expanded to include for example the role of motherhood (as Clee eventually becomes pregnant, but leaves the baby with Cheryl who is then forced into an ‘unnatural’ form of motherhood), this would go beyond the scope of this discussion.

27 Recalling the framework of postfeminism, the different representations of women and men employed in this novel are reminiscent of what Genz calls the “hybrid qualities” of “modern-day femininity”, in that it “allows for multiple layers of signification and female identification that go beyond the dualities of subject and object, perpetrator and victim, power and powerlessness” (7). This hybridity was linked to Linda Hutcheon’s complicitous critique, a subversion that is only possible from within the discourse that produces it. Through irony and the creation of a feminist postmodern parody, seemingly stable notions of masculinity and femininity are challenged and opened up in *The First Bad Man*. This includes the representation of women like Cheryl and Clee and of men like Phillip, the assumptions they form about each other and, emerging from these, their ideas about what it means to be male or female. As pointed out before, these modes of installing and then subverting gender expectations and relations are necessarily limited to the frameworks that produce gender expectations. However, this subversion from within can be seen as a first step towards a more open and flexible understanding of gender and, going further, of the subject of feminism today. Tanja Nusser argues that feminism today “is about keeping ever present the contradictions and synchronicities that do not let themselves be incorporated into

one (dominant) narration” (141), meaning that there is not a single answer to the problems of directionality and agency that emerge from an intersection of postmodernism and feminism. Nevertheless, this paper provided one possible productive intersection between the two fields, as “engaged in a multivalent and contradictory dialogue, forging a postmodern feminism and/or postfeminism that exceeds binary logic” (Genz & Brabon 110).

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***Brown Girls* (2017) by Fatimah Asghar and Sam Bailey**
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1 In *Brown Girls*, the viewer observes a portrait of racialized youth. *Brown Girls*, directed by Sam Bailey and written by Fatimah Asghar, is set in contemporary Chicago. In February of 2017, the OpenTV webseries released on its own, independent URL. Viewers can access the website, and therefore the episodes, from numerous countries; however, *Brown Girls* is a comedy that confronts American issues. A number of U.S. sociopolitical events set the stage for *Brown Girls*' focus on race, queerness, and femininity: the 2016 Presidential election, the Pulse nightclub shooting in Orlando, and an ever-increasing rate of police brutality against people of color.

2 While the viewer can recognize these broad American social influences throughout each of the untitled seven episodes, the webseries introduces the characters through archetypal images of youth. The first scene in episode one is an intimate portrait of a young woman's messy room. The shot begins without any music. A phone rings as the viewer sees shots of a desk crowded with a chalkboard, photographs, and an origami dog. Leila (Nabila Hossain) wakes up to a call. At timestamp 00.04-01:19, Leila says, "I was not sleeping, Auntie ... I didn't forget, I was just distracted ... Sex? No, Auntie, I'm not having sex!" while her naked partner, Miranda (Melissa Duprey), lounges on the bed. This moment sets the tone of playfulness, a mood that permeates every episode and finds physical form in a 'Children at Play' sign that hangs in the apartment. Additionally, these comments demonstrate how Leila and other young characters of color navigate youth and 'adult' concerns: sexuality, family, and identity. This first scene sets the tone for *Brown Girls*, an Emmy-nominated comic webseries that honors adolescence — in all of its awkward, humorous, and tense moments — without reinstating the pressure to grow up.

3 Many shows about young characters rely on a coming-of-age narrative by presenting a story about how characters grow out of childhood. While growing up is a fairly universal experience, the Bildungsroman can also condescend to youth by showing adolescence as a second tier to adulthood, something from which to *mature*. *Brown Girls* avoids the Bildungsroman trope by celebrating youth, especially Brown and Black youth, at its core. The title may remind us of HBO's *Girls* (2012), a series that features the self-indulgent concerns of white women. *Brown Girls* flips this expectation on its head. Each episode is a snapshot into the daily lives and concerns of twenty-somethings Leila and her roommate Patricia (Sonia Denis). Patricia and Leila's

relationship guides the viewer through the series; the show, *Brown Girls*, is truly about these young women. These roommates become our narrators. Most of the action in this show reflects the life of an average young adult: hookups, cooking (and burning) dinner, and talking with friends. However, the creators depict these scenes with attention and care, guiding the audience to the realization that these everyday actions, these everyday lives of young women of color, are *worthy* of being archived and portrayed on screen.

4 *Brown Girls* asserts the value of their brown girlhood rather than conforming to social norms that chart adulthood as a linear path. In fact, Asghar ends the online series with an unemployed Patricia asking her mother (Lily Mojekwu) for support. Visually, the viewer feels time repeating itself. By the final episode, episode seven, Patricia and Leila seem to be right where they started, even to the camera shots across Patricia's room that remind us of the first episode: collaged posters, pictures of Patricia as a child, and a baby-blue bong. However, the young women continue to express autonomy while they request help from the adults close to them. At the end of episode seven, at timestamp 09:39-09:54, Leila promises, "Patricia, we're going to make this work" as they clink their glasses and take a drink. The webseries ends hopefully. Despite Leila questioning her dead-end job and Patricia being fired from her position as a bartender, the two join in a celebratory 'cheer.' The moment undercuts what we, the viewer, may perceive as the women failing on their journey to adulthood.

5 Writer Fatimah Asghar and director Sam Bailey imbue these moments of brown youth with their own significance, reminding viewers that the experiences of adolescence hold their own weight and beauty. The color palette of the show reinforces this celebration of youth with primary colors. A bright disposition washes across the natural lighting in nearly all scenes and the yellow background in the credits. This color scheme does not imply that youth is always sunny. Rather, a viewer may interpret that *Brown Girls* uses these colors and daytime shoots to bring racialized youth into the light. As Robin Bernstein of *The New York Times* writes in her article "Let Black Kids Just Be Kids," many people in the U.S. perceive children of color as less innocent and older than their white peers (pars. 2-3). *Brown Girls*, by name alone, recognizes this youth and offers a space, without tragedy or condition, for these girls of color to exist as they are.

6 For many young characters of color, the mischievous moments of youth are all too often coded as criminal. However, *Brown Girls* reasserts the innocence of parties, financial instability, and casual sex. Play permeates Patricia's and Leila's consequential moments. After Leila punches

her ex-girlfriend's new partner in episode four, she staggers out of a party alongside her friends. Leila, Patricia, and their friend Victor (Rashaad Hall) take turns running in the street. They laugh and carry one another, piggy-back style, through the empty avenue. However, *Brown Girls* also confronts the heavy obstacles that young people face in their daily lives, including racism and carcerality. In episode five, a hungover Leila wakes up and Googles if she, a Muslim woman, can be arrested for punching someone. Here, *Brown Girls* masterfully contrasts two parts of Leila's reality. On one side, Leila experiences carefree adolescence, such as attending a party and playing in the street. Nonetheless, Leila also feels the gut-punch reminder that her youth will not protect her from being tried as an adult in court if she faces assault charges. As it seeks to preserve the traces of brown girlhood before Leila and Patricia grow older, *Brown Girls* charts the intersectional concerns that burden these young women.

7 This webseries effectively highlights brown women's experiences through its production value and its narrative authority. Sam Bailey is a black woman, and Fatimah Asghar identifies as a Pakistani-Kashmiri American. In June of 2017, HBO expressed interest in adopting and developing *Brown Girls*. While HBO has yet to announce when it will release new episodes of *Brown Girls* or how the series may change, I look forward to observing how the creators handle Leila and Patricia's trajectory on a new platform. I hope that HBO's *Brown Girls* continues to reflect adolescence as a time capsule that validates the events and concerns of youth, especially since viewers rarely see racially marginalized characters who have the freedom to 'be' young onscreen. If HBO expands or refocuses the series, I anticipate that Asghar and Bailey will reconsider their characterization of Victor, the gay best friend of the two protagonists. While *Brown Girls* avoids the cliché of the coming-of-age story, it does fall into a stereotypical portrayal of a queer man as the sassy 'voice of reason' for his female friends.

8 Created and directed by young women of color, *Brown Girls* offers a sense of textured authenticity with unfiltered plotlines and camera shots. The webseries accompanies other television shows and films that feature young women of color: Netflix's *Roxanne Roxanne* (2017) and *Dear White People* (2017); *Urban Hymn* (2015); and *Black Panther* (2018). In all of these films, women of color are strong not in spite of their youth, but in part *because of* their youth. The gritty realism of *Brown Girls* punctuates the relatively normal circumstances, traumas, and sportiveness of the protagonists. While white viewers can and do enjoy this webseries, *Brown Girls* presents intimate writing by and for women of color. With this audience in mind, I imagine

that sociology and gender studies instructors may use the show to present and analyze intersectional identities such as queerness, class, and race. College-aged viewers, in particular, will identify with Leila and Patricia's struggles to assert themselves around and be understood by their older siblings and caregivers.

9 *Brown Girls* reminds viewers that young womanhood is not just 'child's play,' and adolescents of color deserve a media platform to see a girlhood filled with wonder, significance, and yes, even play.

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‘People of Colour’ and the Metropolis: Politicizing *Berliner Farben* (2017-2018)

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1 In an interview, filmmaker Poliana Baumgarten provides the reasons for which she started the web-series *Berliner Farben* (2017-2018), which is freely available on Youtube and depicts the lives of racial and sexual minorities living in Berlin, Germany. In Baumgarten’s words, “I started *Berliner Farben* out of desperation. As a teenager, I realized that in Germany PoC [People of Colour] are rarely presented in the media. And if they are then it is done in a very stereotypical way. That’s why I wanted to create a platform where PoC [People of Colour] are portrayed and their individual stories and voices count” (Interview). Baumgarten’s project, thus, purports to render greater representation to ‘people of colour’ by embracing “the diversity of Berlin” (Description, Trailer). With nine episodes that resemble the format of a documentary but are equally ethnographic in nature, Baumgarten’s lens meets an activist, poet, journalist, rapper/singer, and female disk jockeys in order to capture their efforts towards visibility in Germany. While each episode stands out on its own, they remain disconnected given the scope of the project itself, which although ambitious, remains unclear.

2 The major problem of the series is that its ideological agenda remains confused. Whether it is Baumgarten’s choice of words in summarizing her project, or the people she interviews, the series appears variegated and does not come together to draw a holistic picture. Perhaps this is also the narrative’s political project to not unify but embrace multitude, mimicking the heterogeneous nature of the city itself, yet the disconnected narrative reveals greater problems than it resolves. For instance, in the trailer of the series, Baumgarten explains that it represents “People of color and Member[s] of the LGBT Community” (Description, Trailer), but a category like ‘people of color’ might not always be representative of non-white subjects because it erases the particularities of their racial experience. Hence, the use of an umbrella term to slot experiences of racial minorities seems as problematic as their misrepresentation, which the narrative aims to counter. Furthermore, such a methodology also turns a blind eye to the power dynamics prevalent between various ethnic groups, and it seems Baumgarten’s narrative also avoids addressing these issues by taking refuge in plurality. The narrative rarely questions the opinions of the people it represents, and part of this issue lies with the ethnographical nature of the series, such that the voice of the narrative becomes indistinguishable from the voice of the person represented. Few episodes in which the subjects voice their political positions starkly manifest how the pluralistic politics of the

series might run the danger of becoming apolitical, since the narrative's position remains ambiguous. In Episode 7, Halima Saroukh, "a born muslim" (Description, Episode 7) talks about how she recently arrived at the decision to start wearing *hijab* (the head scarf) and how the experience has been liberating for her: "I feel like it frees me of the schema: 'I need to be pretty or sexy in order to be accepted'" (*Berliner Farben* Episode 7, 00:05:23–35). It is interesting that unlike popular beliefs where *hijab* is seen as an extension of Islamic patriarchy, Saroukh asserts how she 'chooses' it in order to free herself from the demands of the beauty industry. However, Halima's experience might not account for every woman who wears it, and therefore presenting it uncritically poses concerns that remain unresolved throughout the narrative.

3 Despite the problems in the web-series elaborated in the paragraph above, *Berliner Farben*, (which roughly translates as colouring Berlin), is successful in portraying how certain spaces and practices could be empowering for racial and sexual minorities. Right from the first episode, which features Jumoke Adeyanju, creator of "The Poetry Meets Series," the narrative establishes how alternative spaces and forums might not only allow people to establish a sense of community but also enable them with a 'voice' (*Berliner Farben* Episode 1, 00:01:49–02:18). Similarly, in episode 3, viewers meet "non binary" women disk jockeys who started the event series "Hoe_Mies," "a party series" that aims to function as a subcultural space for women and the LGBTQ community (Description, Episode 3). While one may dispute that subcultural spaces are not necessarily utopian and may reveal underlying problems that are quiet similar to mainstream cultural practices, *Berliner Farben* successfully documents how minority groups require such spaces in order to make themselves visible. Whether it is events like the poetry series or the hip-hop parties, they are especially directed to enable women who are racial minorities to assert themselves. Moreover, by documenting such events, Baumgarten effectively portrays the multicultural nature of the city, Berlin.

4 Apart from revealing how specific spaces can be empowering for women, Baumgarten's subjects also speak about subtle forms of racism that have become normalized in society. For instance in episode 5, Mayowa Osinubi, a filmmaker, talks about her racial experience and how she often gets accused of "acting white" (*Berliner Farben* Episode 5, 00:02:47–57). Furthermore, she points out how she has received "back-handed compliments" because of the manner in which she talks and conducts herself (*Berliner Farben* Episode 5, 00:03:58). Such recollections reveal how racial prejudices continue to predominate the ways in which people perceive their racial

‘other.’ *Berliner Farben* is a step towards recognizing the existence of racial and sexual prejudices prevalent in society and an attempt to challenge such structures.

5 While the narrative touches upon many issues without unifying them in any manner, it deserves praise for representing the subjects without appropriating their voice. With lingering close-up shots of women’s faces juxtaposed with images of high-rise towers and city streets, Baumgarten’s camera foregrounds how the individual makes a ‘difference’ in the ‘big’ city (“Berliner Farben Trailer”). And in the scheme of documenting the efforts of the individuals represented, Baumgarten promotes solidarity by ignoring questions of ethnicity, and clubbing people under the homogenizing term, ‘people of color.’ In many episodes African subjects speak about their experiences, and yet the audience is never made aware about their nationality and other markers of identity. Such a limitation tends to become counter-productive for the series that otherwise raised significant issues about the overlaps between gendered and racial experience. This is not to discount how Baumgarten lucratively traverses under-represented spaces and, at a meta-textual level, even creates one such space where minorities can freely speak about their personal and political beliefs, but to merely gesture that the series would benefit even further if it becomes self-reflexive.

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