

STORYTELLING DEFINING HUMANS IN TWENTY-FIRST CENTURY DYSTOPIAN NOVELS

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Abstract

The conflict between humans and creatures considered non-humans is a major part of a particular trend in twenty-first-century dystopian novels written by women published in English. In these novels, storytelling is used to push on the boundaries of what being human means and therefore the ways humans live. The future in these dystopian scenarios is filled with spaces for resistance, community values and proposals for new ways of living. But to carve out these new worlds, a discussion on what is human and what is not precedes to show that any new form society may take needs to challenge the assumptions of our present day world. In the selected novels, that include Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling*, Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods*, and Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam*, when those initially considered non-humans tell stories, they are perceived as humans. However, instead of integrating the previous human culture and reproducing its practices, these new humans propose other forms of humanity with other social arrangements, beliefs, gender configurations, and culture. They point to how humanity is a plural and open concept, not a restrictive ideal, and on the ways we can envision possible futures once a more plural meaning of the word human prevails. Throughout the article I discuss briefly the traditional humanist view on humanity, how it appears on dystopian fiction and how it is challenged, the many ways these ideas are present in the corpus selected and how they are explored and blurred. Finally, I divide the selected novels into three groups according to how the meaning of storytelling in the text challenges the notion of human.

Keywords: dystopia; twenty-first-century dystopian novels by women; storytelling

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In the End, Humans

Twenty-first-century dystopian fiction by women tend to use storytelling as theme to propose discussions on the definition of humanity.¹ This old trope of science fiction is reworked to encompass discussions of possible futures. In these violent and decadent dystopian societies portrayed, the time for change comes and the protagonists undergo times of profound social changes – due to revolutionary wars or cataclysmic events – that lead to the beginning of a new world. This new *status quo*, however, needs a diverse form of social arrangement not to repeat a past that is represented as a mistake. However, before new ways of living are represented, there is the matter of what being human even means. By challenging traditional assumptions of who is human and who is not, the protagonists in the selected novels are capable of envisioning new worlds that are as plural and hopeful as their definition of humanity.

As the initially non-humans – which include different species of humans, genetically altered beings, cyborgs, robots, and aliens – engage in storytelling, they are progressively perceived by other characters (and possibly by the reader) as human. Storytelling becomes the foundation on which a plural definition of humanity is founded. During my PhD research, I analyzed a selection of dystopian novels by women from 2000 to 2018 that presented this theme and divided them into three groups according to the way they perceive how storytelling defines the perception of what is considered human and what is not. The same grouping is used in this article. The texts in the first category, which has Ursula Le Guin's *The Telling* (2000) as its prominent example, utilize a moral tone that establishes that stories make humans better. The novels in the second division attempt at defining human as the one who tells stories. In these highly metafictional works, narrative is the most treasured resource in a dystopia of scarcity. Jeanette Winterson's *The Stone Gods* (2007) is the representative of this group. Finally, with Margaret Atwood's *MaddAddam* (2013) as the primary example, the third category focuses on the creation of a new humanity that will coexist with *sapiens* in a new world. The novels in this group propose radical societies that challenge single narratives. Storytelling in the selected novels works both to rescue a discussion on the power of narratives and to widen the definitions of humanity.

Defining the Human

Humanity is traditionally defined under two parameters: the capacity for reasoning and the capacity for emotion.² The first approach postulates that humans, as opposed to animals, can reason about their own reasoning – in Theory of Mind³, this characteristic is called metarepresentation. It differentiates humans from other mammals that are also capable of reasoning, such as chimpanzees. Humans also use reasoning for co-operating, an adaptation that allowed the species to live in larger groups and spread around the world (Boyd 2009, 53). Lisa Zunshine's (2006) approach to Theory of Mind and fiction and

Brian Boyd's biocultural analysis of literature take into consideration reasoning as a fundamental evolution in human brains. Philosophy has also devoted a vast amount of its body of work to the idea of reason. Aristotle refers to humans as rational animals capable of accessing and understanding the truths of the world (Kietzmann 2019, 25) having thus the right to rule. Kant's transcendental idealism, precisely his idea of synthesis, exemplifies this trend in Western tradition. Andrew Brook defends that cognitive science today relies heavily on Kant's concept of the mind and the self. Empirical psychology, including the works of Freud, defines the mind in a Kantian manner: the consciousness that a subject has of represented objects unified through synthesis (Brook 2019). Humans are self-conscious in their reasoning processes; we can infer, sense, and attribute meaning to events by using logic.

A second approach to the definition of human considers that we have a complex set of emotions that allow us to be a unique species. It is not that the cognitive processes of the mind are denied. On the contrary, they are reasserted and expanded: differently from other animals, humans use emotions in reasoning processes, being able to create and express our selves. It is not solely metarepresentation that defines the species, but the experience of acting on the world through the emotions that forge the self. As an instance of this rationale, one may consider Romanticism. William Wordsworth's (1801) famous assertion that poetry is an "overflow of powerful feelings" with "its origin from emotion recollected in tranquility" reads as a statement on the human creative force. The Romantic genius may be interpreted as nothing more than the human who lives to its fullest potential, extracting from experience the emotions that give each human a unique self, capable of creating using reason, something no other animal can do.

Science fiction has often used these two parameters to explore and extrapolate the idea of humanity. On the one hand, Philip K. Dick's and Isaac Asimov's works use the reason approach to define humans. If machines can learn, represent, and have a consciousness, then are they not human as well? What are the consequences of such a change? These are often the questions raised in their novels. On the other hand, books such as Aldous Huxley's *Brave New World* (2006) use the emotion approach to debate what being human means. For instance, if all of humanity is drug-induced happy and content, is it human at all? If humans cannot express their emotions and create, is it worth having such a complex mind in the first place?

I do not believe, though, that works of fiction adopt one approach only. They exist in a spectrum with reason and emotion as opposing forces in what comes to defining humans. Dystopian narratives oscillate in this spectrum, often moving towards one pole or the other. The novels selected for this research follow the trend of valuing emotions, asserting the idea that they power the human narrative mind. For instance, in Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy, the orogenes – altered humans with the power to listen to and manipulate the Earth itself – are presented as the ones whose emotions are not considered: "But a rogga [derogatory term for the Orogenes] is not any man. Roggas have no right to get angry, to want justice,

to protect what they love” (*The Fifth Season* 2015). Orogenes are bound to obey humans and are recognized for their reasoning, but it is in the category emotion that they are excluded. If their feelings and experiences do not matter, they are inferior; their narratives have no value. It is through storytelling that orogenes start to form their identity and show they feel just like other humans do.

The allusion to slavery is apparent in Jemisin’s text. White supremacist thought thrived on the notion that black people were less than human, possessing reason and feelings inferior to the white person’s. Scientific racism, a distorted pseudoscience that emerged from social Darwinism, was used to justify the enslavement of black people in Africa by Europeans. Religious discourse, especially Christianity, also corroborated the idea with the statement that black people had no souls. In Jemisin’s trilogy, the orogenes are used for labor by other humans and belong to the bottom of society. They are both feared and labeled inferior, unpredictable creatures with no feelings and morals.

Many novels use the idea of less than-human experience to denounce social injustices. In Suzanne Collins’s *The Hunger Games* trilogy, the people in the districts are seen as inferior. They work to sustain the Capitol but live in terrible circumstances: rationed food, extreme poverty, and horrible work conditions. Their children are sent to slaughter on national TV for the entertainment of the Capitol in a fashion that does not differ from Christians sent to die in the Colosseum. The figure of the protagonist Katniss is constructed to show the narrative of the districts: they too have valid emotions and experiences, and they too are deserving of a dignified life. In Marissa Meyer’s *Cinder* (2012), the cyborg protagonist works as a mechanic in the suburbs of New Beijing. Her kind is used in pharmaceutical trials, so “real humans” do not have to undergo dangerous side effects. Cinder’s tutor dismisses her because she cannot cry and doubts her ability to grieve her sister’s death. During the most painful period of her life, the Imperial soldiers question if Cinder can feel anything at all. When her lover, the prince Kaito, finds out she is a cyborg, he rejects her in disgust, asking if their affair was real or just programmed. Again, storytelling – using the Cinderella fairy-tale trope – is the resource to rescue Cinder’s experience and show that she is capable of emotion as any human. In these novels, the district subjects and cyborgs work as an allegory for minorities. They represent the less than human experience of black and indigenous people, women, and the poor.

These alternative ways of being human that encompass differences are portrayed in narratives that foreground storytelling. Many of them, such as Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy, Lidia Yuknavitch’s *The Book of Joan* (2017), and Nalo Hopkinson’s *Midnight Robber* (2001), are often labeled postmodernist for their use of metafiction, self-reflexivity, language experimentation, and radical representation of ex-centric subjects. However, their definition of human that falls into the emotion extreme creates an idea of postromanticism.⁴ These novels present the idea of the value of art, self-expression, passion, and purpose in one’s life. They also use allegorical narratives to convey a sense of beauty and meaning to chaotic events. What deviates them from a pure Romantic aesthetics is the

absence of the idea of the sublime. There is no grand awe in human experience. Humans are only a speck of dust in a vast universe; instead of fear and dread, this rationale is portrayed matter-of-factly.

The dystopian novels mentioned put storytelling in the foreground, not only in form – using metafiction – but also thematically. Storytelling is at the core of these narratives, and it becomes an oppositional body of knowledge that challenges the reader to think about new ways of living. I call this feature radicalized storytelling and I propose that it is necessary to acknowledge the plurality of the concept of human⁵ to create new worlds. In this sense, they present non-*sapiens* humans coexisting with *sapiens* humans and the conflicts and cooperation that can arise from this contact.⁶ By telling their stories, all species of humans claim their identity and dismantle the notion that *sapiens* is the only possible paradigm for humanity.

Humanizing the Non-Human

When discussing notions of humanity in thought-provoking texts, words such as posthumanism and transhumanism come to mind. In general terms, posthumanism opposes the humanistic idea that humans, possessing reason, are at the center of creation. Transhumanism, on the contrary, continues the humanist project in which human beings can, through reason, evolve and improve themselves by means of technology. However, instead of having a divinity as the propeller of this evolution (as in the intelligent design pseudoscience) humans are responsible for it. As much as the terms posthuman and transhuman are valid for the discussion of dystopias, especially science fiction, I do not use them in this article because the reading I propose for the selected novels is centered on the idea of human as *genus*. This rather biological view is relevant because the initial non-humans presented in these texts are a different *species* of humans. The cyclic nature of these narratives, which often return to the beginning of times, reinforce the connection to a previous time in history when humans were a plural concept. The end is the beginning is the end. The selected novels present the idea that history is a spiral, going through the same moments, only on different levels. This focus on the plurality of humanity that existed before – and that may exist in the future – makes the use of notions such as post and transhumans not particularly useful in this article.

The movement present in the selected novels is not of showing life after humans, but life when the lenses of what being human means are taken away. Julio Jeha (1991) discusses the necessary estrangement to break such a hegemonic view on humanity. According to him, the dominance of the adult European white male has determined the perception of the world that is imposed on the rest of humanity (231). The construction of what is the human experience is shown in the selected novels as it is: a construction. Humanity is a broader term that encompasses the humans that existed before us and the ones that will come to exist. In stock, there is storytelling, the feature in the human cognition that enabled the creation of different complex cultures.

The movement perceived in these dystopias written by women is the radical estrangement Jeha discusses. These novels portray human individuals that are aligned to the feminine, black, indigenous, mechanic, and alien; traces that have been disassociated from the “standard humanity.” Radicalized storytelling in these texts allows this representation of humanity to be challenging also of the limited perception humans have of their ways of living. As Harari (2015) poses in the final considerations of his book, the reaction of humans to these new humans is an imperative of our times as well as of how alternative ways of living will emerge. These new human organizations, as the selected novels show, may align to traditional knowledge, different gender relations, and radically different social arrangements.

In her “A Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway (1991) considers the notion of a defying entity, the cyborg. Her “ironic political myth” (150) defines cyborgs as

resolutely committed to partiality, irony, intimacy, and perversity. It is oppositional, utopian, and completely without innocence. No longer structured by the polarity of public and private, the cyborg defines a technological *polis* based partly on a revolution of social relations in the *oikos*, the household.” (151)

Cyborgs are beings that break boundaries: the first, the one between human and animal; the second, between living organism and machine, and finally, between the physical and non-physical. The radical aspect of cyborgs is accepting and embracing contradictions while rejecting totalizing thought.

The selected novels are full of cyborgs. Their presence destabilizes the rigid concept of human and ruptures clear-cut definitions. If the common ground for humans is storytelling, then the possibilities are infinite. The creation of cultures, identities, and social arrangements is never-ending; thus, it is unreasonable to expect a single way to be human. The cyborg imagery helps us understand two essential arguments: that contradictions should be embraced rather than relegated to totalizing thought, and that one should take responsibility in the relations between society and technology (181). In this sense, the aliens, robots, and genetically enhanced humans presented in the novels embody the cyborg identity.

These contradictions in essence that the cyborg identity possesses can be found in the Stone Eaters, beings that can walk through the Earth at a rapid pace in Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy. Their bodies are made of stone, and they feed on rocks. They are survivors of time immemorial, with a primal and robust connection to the Earth itself. During the season that strikes the Stillness – the name given to the Earth in this series – the Stone Eaters get involved with humans. The protagonist, Nassun, notes their peculiar ways,

Hoa moves slowly again. They don’t do this often, stone eaters. Movement is the thing that emphasizes their uncanny nature, so like humanity and yet so wildly different. It would be easier if they were more alien. When they move like this, you can see what they once were, and the knowledge is a threat and warning to all that is human within you. (*The Stone Sky* 2017)

The external appearance of a Stone Eater is different from whatever found in humans. However, they have something human that connects them with others. Stone Eaters both defy and acknowledge humanity and its possibility of change. The same way Stone Eaters were once the paradigm and are not anymore, the humans in the Stillness are susceptible to the same.

Another example of a cyborg is Phoenix, the protagonist in Okorafor's *The Book of Phoenix* (2015). A genetically engineered human, Phoenix has the power to set herself and her surroundings on fire and rise from the ashes once again. She can also fly and connect to immaterial beings. Mmuo, one of her allies, says about her,

You are an American, Phoenix. So though you know Africa well, you will believe in the power of science over all that we know. But you are an African, too, so you know it in your flesh, your strange flesh, that the spirit world rules the physical world.

Phoenix believes that science and the will of the goddess Ani coexist and mold each other. She uses science and all her scientific knowledge to understand the world around her and act on it; at the same time, she unquestionably believes in Ani, being capable of feeling the presence of the goddess and talking to her. Phoenix lives the contradiction and embodies it – she is both a scientific experiment and the chosen daughter of the goddess.

The common ground for the non-humans, the cyborgs, in the selected novels, is their use of storytelling to challenge other humans. Beings of contradiction and irony, as Haraway defines them, these non-human characters both resemble and deviate from *Homo sapiens*; both follow and stray from humanity. It is precisely due to this uncanniness that humans initially are so eager to label them as non-human. Nonetheless, the capacity to tell stories brings them close to humans who are forced to reconsider their preconceptions about what is contained in the word human.

Group 1: Stories Make Better Humans

The novels in the first category have storytelling as a moral standard. For them, diverse and fair societies use storytelling as a form of knowledge and construct societies around it. The more a group or a character uses storytelling, the more humanly elevated they are in their own view of the world. As a primary example, I analyze Le Guin's *The Telling*.⁷

Part of the Hainish Cycle novels, *The Telling* discusses human diversity. In Le Guin's universe, the Hain, the first humans, colonized other worlds. Some of these worlds were left behind, forgotten, with human DNA in them that evolved and adapted to different environments for thousands of years in their unique ways. Terra – the name for Earth in this universe – is one of these abandoned experiments of colonization, as well as Aka, Athshe, and Gethen. Some humans, such as the Akans, are very similar to the humans from Terra – that I will refer

to as *sapiens* – in physical appearance and cognition.⁸ Humans in Athshe, on the other hand, are green-furred and one meter tall, while androgynous humans populate Gethen. The encounter of different humanities – Terran and Akan – in the novel becomes a potent reflection not only to define what is human but to state that stories make humans better.

The Hainish novels and short stories frequently draw on conflicts between different kinds of humans and the consequences of these conflicts. Focusing on the novels, Elizabeth Cummins (1993) writes,

the integrity of individual people, societies, and worlds can be achieved when the uniqueness and difference of each separate thing is honored. The integration of these diversities is achieved when the interactions and interdependency among them is respected. The search for a mode of human relationships based on integration and integrity is reflected in the structural feature that the three major Hainish novels share. (71)

The possibility of integration and integrity is found through love for the difference (*The Left Hand of Darkness*), the search of a common language (*The Word for World is Forest*), and personal maturity (*The Dispossessed*). As thought experiments on what it means to be human among a diversity of humans, the works in the Hainish cycle might be read as a critical evaluation of humanity's values and capabilities and to what extent they hold.

Cummin's comment appeared before *The Telling* was published; however, I would like to take her rationale and state that the novel presents the possibility of integration and integrity through storytelling. This theme is also mirrored in the novel's structure, which unfolds in first-person narration. Suttty's personal story mingles with the story of Terra and Aka, and both contain and amplifies the value for the narrative form that the novel proposes. As a dystopia, it works differently from the previous Hainish novels because it presents the narrative of the individual versus the collective, a struggle for a narrative to continue to exist amidst totalitarianism. *The Telling* is the only Hainish novel in which the society portrayed is on the verge of extinction and is fighting for its right to be once more.

The first chapters of the novel try to separate the Akans living in the cities and the ones living in the countryside. Suttty says,

the other Two Observers presently in Dovza City, they had all discussed the massive monoculturalism of modern Aka in its large cities, the only places the very few offworlders permitted on the planet were allowed to live. They were all convinced that Akan society must have diversities and regional variations and frustrated that they had no way to find out. (13)

The corporate state controls writing, speech, and media, focusing on the "march to the stars," technological development, and behavior. When Suttty hears she is allowed to visit the people in the countryside, she asks if they are "an ethnic fragment population." Her Ekumenical Envoy, a kind of supervisor, states they are

“sectarians, ... rather than ethnic. A cult. Possibly remnants in hiding of a banned religion.” The citizens under corporate control are frequently described as dull, and the Akans in the countryside are seen as lively and exciting. To Suttty’s eyes, and consequently, to the reader’s, the ones that follow the telling are better humans.

The Telling is about being able to tell multiple stories because, without it, there is oppression. The narrator considers the situation on the planet,

Aka’s abrupt and tremendous technological advance was sustained by rigid discipline universally enforced and self-enforced. It seemed that everybody in the city worked hard, worked long hours, slept short hours, ate in haste. Every hour was scheduled. Everybody she’d been in touch with in the Ministries of Poetry and of Information knew exactly what they wanted her to do and how she should do it. (34)

The one-story of the corporation suppresses human’s creativity and ability to build different realities. Their focus on uniformity creates a society with the same problems, such as traffic, burnout, and fanaticism. Without the openness to different narratives, there are no inventive solutions to these problems. Instead of the claimed technological development, Aka is merely copying other planets that have undergone the same process centuries before it.

Le Guin has often been labeled a moralist writer. Tony Burns (2004) disagrees; he argues that she is not a moralizing author, but someone who “considers humans as beings by nature ethical animals, and who, as a result, has an overriding interest in the ethical dimension of human existence” (140). He goes on to present how Le Guin’s texts are embedded in Taoism and on the view that alienation from other’s humanity eventually deprives us of our status as a human. This notion is very present in *The Telling*: the Akans that embrace difference are better humans than the ones in Dovza or Terra. When Suttty, in her conversation with the monitor Yara, can see him as an equal and not an enemy, she becomes a better human too. She says, “thank you for telling me what you told me, Yara. ... And for letting me tell you. I hope you... I hope things work out. Goodbye” (255). At this moment, she gains wisdom and finally understands the Akans.

Contrary to the Akans that follow the corporate state and the Terrans that follow one religion fanatically, the ones who live the telling have a better vision of the world and can propose alternative ways of living. However, not only that, there is a moral judgment of superiority to them. Maz Uming remarks about humans,

so, without the telling, the rocks and plants and animals go on all right. But the people don’t. The rest of the world knows its business. Knows the One and the Myriad, the Tree and the Leaves. But all we know is how to learn. How to study, how to listen, how to talk, how to tell. If we don’t tell the world, we don’t know the world. We’re lost in it, we die. But we have to tell it right, tell it truly. That’s what went wrong. Down there, down there in Dovza, when they started telling lies. ... Telling people that nobody knew the truth but them, nobody could speak but them, everybody had

to tell the same lies they told. Traitors, usurers! Leading people astray for money! ... No wonder the world stopped going around! (145)

For him, storytelling is necessary for humanity to establish. Humans' learning and creating are done through storytelling, the ability to describe, and inscribe oneself into the world. Nonetheless, storytelling can also be used for manipulation, and the lack of variety of narratives lead to greed and ruin. Maz Uming tells Sutti about the malpractices that led to the corporation state and the forbidding of the telling. It is clear for her and the reader that the telling is a superior way of living.

The Akans, humans that are not *sapiens* from another world, may be read as cyborgs in Haraway's terms. They reject duality, attempting to create a sense of wholeness in their knowledge. In this sense, they integrate differences and propose pacific coexistence and non-violent societies. The development of their technology, however, is very different from the humans' in Terra and the ones they influenced in Aka. Nevertheless, by the end of the novel, Sutti proposes the return of the telling's practices so society can integrate their way of living to the new technologies developed. This vision holds the promise of a society that treasures storytelling and make humans better.

Group 2: Stories Define Humans

In this second category, the novels use storytelling to define whether a being is human or not. They propose societies based on more egalitarian principles that value diversity and reject binary thinking, but the reader does not see how these humans organize themselves. There are only discussions about how it would be. I analyze Winterson's *The Stone Gods* as the main example in this category here.

The Stone Gods can be read as an attempt to define what it means to be human. Throughout its multiple-layered narratives and stories inside a story, the novel explores humanity's strict meanings attributed to the human experience mainly through its two main characters: the robot Spike and the scientist Billie. First assigned as a machine with programmed capacities, Spike is repeatedly called non-human by the other humans she encounters, including Billie. However, as the interaction between the two intensifies, Billie starts to doubt whether Spike is so unlike her. When the scientist finally acknowledges that Spike is human – to the point she falls in love with her – it is because of the stories she tells. Spike can create stories and metaphors to understand the events of her life; she has a sense of self mediated through storytelling. As in the novels in this category, in *The Stone Gods*, the ability to tell stories defines the human in a straightforward manner.

Billie's movement goes from considering Spike a mere *robo sapiens* to seeing her as a *homo machina*. This exploration of the limitations and limits of humanity happens in the first part of the novel, "Planet Blue," and is later repeated in the last two parts, "Post War 3" and "Wreck City." Billie says, "nobody feels sorry for them. 'They're only machines'" (6). Even though she is a discontent citizen, Billie

buys into the prevailing assumptions of her society that robots have to serve and to think logically following a program. However, she is startled by 'Spike's capacity to reason and wonders if robots are not evolving while humans are regressing. Still, 'Billie's convictions about a strict division between humans and machines prevail during her first encounters with Spike. The logic behind is that humans have an exceptional quality to define them against other beings.

Billie's attempts to find this quality lead her to extent conversations during her space travel from Orbus to Planet Blue. Pink, the girl-like woman celebrity that gained a ticket to the space exploration program, despises the notion that Spike is having sex with Captain Handsome: "no offense intended to you, Spike. 'I'm not prejudiced or anything, 'it's not your fault that 'you're a robot – I mean, you never had any say in it, did you? One minute you were a pile of wires, and the next thing you know 'you're having an affair" (69). To that, Spike responds she is not in love with Handsome, but Pink insists, "Well, of course not – 'y'know, like I said, 'you're a robot." Spike retorts, "That 'isn't why I 'don't love him" (70). For Spike, it is clear that she is capable of love and also of not loving someone. The phrase "'you're a robot" permeates the narrative at this point whenever Spike makes the crew uncomfortable, especially Billie. The scientist insists on the emotional divide: humans have emotions, and robots do not.

The emotional assumption falls apart when Billie sees herself unavoidably attracted to Spike. She says, "I 'don't want to get personal ... but 'I'll say it again – you are a robot. Do you want to kiss a woman so that you can add it to your database?" (76). Spike, however, is not fooled by the scientific disguise in the question. She responds, "Gender is a human concept ... and not interesting. I want to kiss you." Ildney Cavalcanti (2011) argues that *The Stone Gods* presents a visionary and utopian side of contemporary feminist science fiction: the redesigning of bodies that go against dualist and hierarchical patriarchal values with hybrid bodies (Cavalcanti 19). In this way, readers may see possibilities outside binarisms that bond the female body to repetitive social practices. Billie and 'Spike's relationship exposes such a vision of binary bodies because they explore new sensual and sexual experiences. They are not only defying the notion that Spike is a robot but the idea that she is female or assigned as female by the crew.

The idea that robots depend on humans, and therefore, are inferior is also discussed in the novel. Billie uses this argument after she acknowledges that robots can feel and express emotion. Spike says, "That was once true. ... It 'isn't true any more. We are solar-powered and self-repairing. We are intelligent and non-aggressive. You could learn from us" (79). When Pink interrupts the conversation to say humans could never learn from a robot because they know nothing about life, Spike comments that "There are many kinds of life. ... Humans always assumed that theirs was the only kind that mattered. That's how you destroyed your planet." It is clear at this point in the novel that Spike has more knowledge about building a new world than any other person on the ship. She asserts herself not only as a repository of human science but as a critical thinker who is also able

to feel emotions and has ideas for a better future. To Billie's and the reader's eyes, she starts being less of a machine.

Another aspect of humanity is related to the notion of consciousness. In *The Stone Gods*, it is Spike herself who presents this discussion to Billie: "is human life biology or consciousness? If I were to lop off your arms, your legs, your ears, your nose, put out your eyes, roll up your tongue, would you still be you? You locate yourself in consciousness, and I, too, am a conscious being" (76). As a conscious being, Spike is self-aware. Considering human evolution, Brian Boyd writes, "greater self-awareness offers real advantages in anticipating 'other's actions and reactions, but it also carries costs, including the ability to envisage our own death and absence from the ongoing world" (404). When robots start evolving beyond their initial programming, they gain consciousness of life and death. Their existence is reflected in the same way human existence is. Spike poses the notion that she not only feels and thinks like Billie, but that she sees life in the same manner.

Spike, however, is only perceived as human when she shows she can weave a tale. After she takes part in Handsome's stories about forgotten planets and decaying civilizations, Spike starts to be considered a living being. Billie says, "she was alive, reinterpreting the meaning of what life is, which is, I suppose, what we have done since life began" (99) right after she mentions she forgets "all the time that she [Spike]'s a robot." The ultimate acknowledgment of Spike's unquestionable humanity is when Billie asks her to tell a story. While waiting for their imminent deaths, Spike tells a metaphorical tale about a planet made out of Nothing. From that, they discuss the meaning of love and Spike defines it as "the chance to be human" (110). At this point, able to create her narrative, use metaphors, and elaborate on abstract concepts, Spike becomes human to Billie's and also to the reader's eyes.

This same movement is repeated in the last section of the novel, "Wreck City," when the other incarnation of Spike tells an alternate Billie that she has chosen to disconnect from the mainframe. Billie becomes outraged, claiming Spike is not a person, she is not even a robot, "she's training" (210). In this part, Spike is still a prototype with only a head. However, she is convinced she will learn to be depressed and have all the other feelings. When Billie goes out to executed because she lost Spike, she sees Spike as a human, finally. They share a conversation about a book Billie found on the subway, *The Stone Gods*. When Spike shows she can understand stories, Billie is convinced she will evolve to tell them as well.

In "Post War 3," Billie defines her job as "I teach a robot to understand what it means to be human" (162). Nonetheless, it is Spike who ultimately teaches Billie the lesson. Considering Spike as human does not mean she will behave like *Homo sapiens* or continue with their way of living. On the contrary, Spike expands the concept of humanity. With new forms of humanity appears a new hope for a world in which the cycle of destruction will not prevail. Spike is not bound to gender, binary thinking, or organized society. She embodies the possibility of a different future for a different humanity with other values. A way of living that *Homo sapiens* may not understand, but that is not inhuman.

Group 3: Stories Are the Foundations of a New Humanity

The novels in the third category also portray the negotiations between humans and those initially considered non-humans. However, the third group presents the beginnings of society and the first foundations of a new human culture. Differently from the novels in the second category that only point to the possibility of a new world, these ones explore the options of having humans and new humans negotiating their cultures. As the primary example of this group, I discuss Atwood's *MaddAddam*.⁹

MaddAddam begins with a conflict between two different kinds of humans: the Maddamites, survivors of the virus that almost obliterated the *sapiens* population, and the Crakers, genetically engineered humans that are not affected by the plague. For the first time in the trilogy, the Crakers encounter a group of humans.¹⁰ The initial interaction already poses the differences between the two species: the male Crakers, who mate seasonally, understand that the women Amanda and Ren are ovulating and start performing their mating rituals. Toby witnesses the act and labels it “a cultural misunderstanding,” even though she wishes to separate them. Marks de Marques (2015) calls attention to how this first encounter sets the tone for the discussion on whether the Crakers are humans:

to see it as a cultural misunderstanding (in which case the Crakers are humans who share a different culture) and to have the desire to separate them, much like people do with animals, with cold water. It is important to mention, though, that not once is the word rape used throughout the narrative to describe the sex act. (“Children” 142)

The Crakers have no notion of rape because of their mating seasons. For them, an ovulating female is looking for a male. Still, the Crakers express emotion, have reason, Theory of Mind, and empathy, attributes that would define them as human. The violence of the first encounter and its horrible ambiguity haunts the narrative.¹¹

Initially, the Maddamites see the Crakers as aberrations. The first are a group of brilliant scientists kidnapped by Crake to create his project of enhanced humanity, called Paradise. They call the genetically altered creatures – the formerly mentioned Crakers – “Frankenpeople” and “walking potatoes.” The desire for distance, though, is frustrated when the Crakers insist they want to see Snowman-Jimmy, who is in a coma in the Maddamites’ place. Toby, now in charge of teaching them about the world, sees in this act of empathy and compassion, the possibility that “they’re people” (*MaddAddam* 34). To that, the response is, “they’re definitely not like us. ... No way close. They should go back to wherever they live” (35). This refusal to see them as humans may be because the Maddamites created the Crakers. They witnessed the DNA manipulation and the many trial and error projects that led to the Crakers. The absence of a “human spirit,” or of “the mystery that is human life,” is met with suspicion.

Throughout the novel, the Maddamites, mainly Toby, start perceiving the many ways in which the Crakers are close to humans. Crake's vision of replacing humanity with an improved version that would be incapable of symbolic thinking and, therefore, of creating the concept of a god results in irony: the improvement of humans creates other humans.¹² For Crake, what defines humanity is the presence of culture, and the Crakers start developing one. According to Marks de Marques,

this means that Jimmy allows the Crakers' entry into the symbolic world of culture and, thus, a return to humanity (or humanism), the very traces of which Crake tried to erase in his creation. Language is, thus, both restorative and creative, as it creates the Crakers' myths of origin and, by doing that, restores their human position. ("Children" 140)

The way the Crakers establish their customs and their mythology unsettles the Maddamites because it reminds them of the primal days of *Homo sapiens*, their first rituals, art, language, and myth.

The Crakers' capacity for symbolic thinking endorses the perspective that storytelling is at the deep core of humanity. While discussing the works on the Paradise project, Manatee says, "the singing was not my idea. ... We couldn't erase it without turning them into zucchinis" (*MaddAddam* 43). Other features also prevailed, such as imagination and Theory of Mind. During the process of creating better humans due to their lack of human qualities, Crake carried out the idea that there is a human nature, after all, and that it is not possible to erase it. *MaddAddam*, however, shows this is not limiting. Humanity can take many forms, but it has, in its foundation, the capacity for telling stories.

Initially only listening to Snowman-Jimmy's stories, the Crakers later participate in it: "Once Toby has made her way through the story, they urge her to tell it again. They prompt, they interrupt, they fill in the parts she's missed. What they want from her is a seamless performance, as well as more information than she either knows or can invent" (45). The repetition with difference creates the necessary environment for the Crakers to train their narrative abilities and their capacity for mimesis. Their curiosity and close observance of humans prompt young Blackbeard to ask Toby to teach him to read and write. Now with more tools, the Crakers do not need to rely on the Maddamites for their narrative experiences. Marks de Marques writes,

such stories (obviously invented) are, thus, transmitted in a vertical hierarchy, from humans to posthumans. But at the moment, Blackbeard learns how to read and write; he also learns how to tell stories. The entry into the symbolic world of narrative and storytelling allows the young Craker boy to replace his human proxies in the construction of a genuine Craker mythology. ("Children" 143)

With their customs and stories, the Crakers establish their culture that can now be recorded and passed to the next generations. Along with storytelling, they gain a sense of history and identity.

The Crakers' humanity is acknowledged by humans the moment they tell their stories. From then on, they are seen as individuals, each with a different personality, that should be respected. The Maddamites ally with the Crakers to fight the Painballers – violent criminals who survived the plague and continue to murder, rape, and torture – even though the Craker's role is limited to tracking. "We do not do battles," tells Blackbeard, "but Crake made the two-skinned ones so they could have a battle" (*MaddAddam* 160). After the battle, during the trial, the Maddamites stop considering the Painballers humans: "Who cares what we call them. ... So long as it's not people" (367). There is a consideration about using their sperm since they are "true humans," but the argument falls flat. With three women pregnant with Crakers' children, the horror is not the hybrids to be born, but the idea of a Painballer's offspring. Ren warns, "A child with such warped genes would be a monster. ... The mother couldn't love it" (369). Even though the Crakers are not voting members in the trial because of their non-violent nature, their presence establishes that the Maddamites see them differently now.

Even though the Crakers share with the Maddamites the ability of storytelling – reason enough for them to be considered humans in the narrative – they have significantly different features. Besides their seasonal mating, herbivorous eating, and colorful skin, they display unintended abilities from the ones designed by Crake. When Snowman-Jimmy is in a coma, the Crakers claim they communicate with him, "nevermind that he's unconscious, they're convinced they can hear him" (45). The same thing happens when Snowman-Jimmy dies. Blackbeard says, "but Snowman-the-Jimmy was travelling in his head far, far away, as he had traveled before, when he was hammock and we purred. But this time he went so far away that he could not come back" (364). The Crakers also understand the genetically altered pigs, pigeons,¹³ through some mind-reading ability, and they translate the pigeons' wishes to humans and vice-versa.

MaddAddam portrays at the same time the dawn and the dusk of humanity. On the one hand, *Homo sapiens* is almost extinct and with few means of survival. On the other hand, the Crakers are adapted to the environment and are creating the foundations of a new human culture. The presence of the hybrids expands, even more, the horizon of a future in which humanity is a broader and more inclusive concept in cyclic history.

Stories in these novels, like the others in this third category, are the basis of community life. They are not only the promise of a better world but the foundations of this world at work. Storytelling is the human common ground that is used to explore the manifold ways humanity can present itself.

In the novels of the first group, the prevailing notion is that humanity not only can be improved, but that the key to it is the sharing of experiences. The dystopian scenarios presented are based on the lack of storytelling and how societies that undervalue it are deemed to be extinct. To say that these novels insist on a moral solution is not to say that they lack on complexity. Specifically in *The Telling*, there are not simple solutions or actions ready to be taken. The task to fight for the telling and its plurality over "the dangers of a single story", to

mention Chimamanda Adichie, may seem banal and simplistic, but the narrative presents the tensions and complexities of having many voices and many views as the fundamental basis of a culture. This very acceptance of plurality made it possible for the technocrat thought to exist, so a reflection on the paradox of tolerance is the protagonist's main struggle and mirrors that of that culture.

The Stone Gods, as representative of the second group, presents the idea that stories are the defining factor of humans. These are the most experimental novels, as they use metafiction and embedded narratives constantly. They reflect on how narratives are constructed and on their power over people. Winterson's novel may be read as overly romantic and relying heavily on the emotion pole of the reason-emotion spectrum of definition of humanity. Storytellers sometimes are seen as almost supernatural forces in a manner very similar to that of the romantic genius, the one who creates extraordinary things out of nothing. However, I believe the experimental form of these novels counterbalances a purely romantic ingenuity and pushes the reader to see social constructs, such as gender, as artificial.

Finally, the creation of the new world is explored extensively in the text of the third group, with *MaddAddam* as the example chosen. This new reality is not a promise or an experimentation, but propositions of new societies that have as their basis different values regarding gender, race, and class. The worlds in these dystopias start as "bad place," but they evolve, through the power of storytelling, to hopeful communities that radically differ from the mistakes of the past. These alternative ways of living include different human species coexisting after major catastrophic events, which does not mean they do not have conflict, as the rape episode in the mentioned novel shows. A new model for humanity is not a heaven, with no crime or confrontation, but a place in which these things can be worked on with new lenses.

The stories humans tell have shaped the world we live in, but what if different stories had been told? Dystopian novels in the twenty-first-century written by women often dwell on the power of storytelling to construct other ways of living and the great impact stories have both individually and collectively.

Notas

1. In my PhD research, I analyze thirty-eight novels, published in English, that follow this trend. This article is adapted from sections of my dissertation: "Stories to Make Us Humans: Twenty-first-century Dystopian Novels By Women."
2. There is an underlying characteristic as well: as far as we know, humans are the only species that know about their own mortality. This capability lies behind dystopia – the thought that the world will end if things go on like a certain way.
3. In general terms, Theory of Mind is the ability one has to understand and consider other people's state of mind.
4. Claudia Moscovici discusses the persistence of Romantic ideals and representations in literature and arts despite the Modernist and Postmodernist movements. She coins the concept of Postromanticism in *Romanticism and Postromanticism*.
5. The notion of plurality of the concept of human rejects the Humanist notion and encompasses an anti-anthropocentric vision of the world. It opens the category

humanity to diversity.

6. This language of referring to sapiens humans and non-sapiens humans derives from the argument in my dissertation regarding the fact that humans have, in the past, been plural, in the sense species other than homo sapiens – like the extinct homo habilis, homo erectus, and homo neanderthalensis – coexisted. This idea is extensively explored in Yuval Harari's controversial book Sapiens.
7. The Hunger Games trilogy, mentioned on the introduction of this article, is categorized in this group in my research.
8. Sutt, the novel's Terran narrator, does not mention any difference between the Terran humans or Akan humans. She says things like "the vast majority of human beings in this world" (98). However, as Akans and sapiens developed in two different planets from the same homo variation, it is somewhat accepted in the Hainish universe that they are two different species.
9. Okorafor's novel The Book of Phoenix, and Jemisin's The Broken Earth trilogy, mentioned in the introduction, are part of this group in my research.
10. In Oryx and Crake, they meet Oryx, who they consider a deity, and later Snowman-Jimmy, who becomes their prophet. There is only a brief hint of the Crakers' presence in the final pages of the second volume, The Year of the Flood.
11. In the interpretation of the novel I propose here, the Crakers rape the women because they are humans, even though of a different kind – they are homo crakers. Later on in the novel they understand the meaning of this action and learn about consensual sex. This also works as another comment on how Crake's experiment failed: his idea of using mating seasons to end all sexual violence backfires.
12. For a discussion on how Crake's project can be understood as both posthuman and pre-human, see Marks de Marques's "Human After All? Neo-Transhumanism and the Post-Anthropocene Debate in Margaret Atwood's MaddAddam Trilogy."
13. The pigeons first appear in Oryx and Crake as pigs who had humans' neocortex cells implanted successfully. After the plague, the pigeons escape the labs and organize themselves. The Maddamites understand they have some kind of cognition, but do not understand it fully. The Crakers can understand the pigeons and communicate with them.

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