

“WHEN YOU DIE, YOU WILL LIVE”: DYSTOPIA, POSTHUMANISM AND ZOMBIES IN THE MALL RATS SERIES BY LILY HERNE

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ABSTRACT

Zombies have become prominent figures in popular culture in the twenty-first century. Books, movies and series are all fascinated with the walking dead and the possible meanings of the figure. International portrayals of zombies raise concerns about a lack of self-control; by contrast, this paper argues that Lily Herne’s Mall Rats series, which is about a zombie outbreak in South Africa, explores posthumanist associations with the dead. The philosophical approach of posthumanism can be used to question the ideas and conceptualisation of human identity. While humanism places humans at the centre of the universe, both in control of and separate from other living, animal and non-human beings, posthumanism acknowledges that this is only a myth. According to posthuman thought, human subjectivity is created through a connection to animal and non-human beings; it is an assemblage that co-evolves with all living beings on the planet. Thus, posthumanism can be used to study the representations of human identity that have been used to situate the human above other life forms. Herne depicts this posthuman subjectivity through her South African zombies categorised as Rotters and Guardians whose thoughts and emotions are connected with each other, animals and humans. It is this connection to all things that Herne proposes will end any form of discrimination. As it becomes more and more uncomfortable for the reader to side with zombie slayers, the posthumanist objective is realised as traditional beliefs that humans are somehow superior and more conscious than other beings on Earth come into question.

Keywords: *Deadlands*; Lily Herne; posthumanism; zombies; young adult dystopian fiction; South African fiction; Mall Rats series; apocalypse

The twenty-first century has seen an increasing number of dystopian novels being published for young adults, especially post-apocalyptic dystopian novels. Within this genre the zombie has become an icon of the apocalypse. Many scholars have examined the post-apocalyptic landscape and the zombie figure, speculating about what the figure represents and what messages it is relaying to readers, especially to readers who are children and teenagers. This article attempts to examine the zombie figure in dystopian fiction for young adults through a posthumanist lens. In this article, posthumanism refers to the conceptualisation of the human. Pramod Nayar’s (2014, 3–4) definition of posthumanism will be referred to as he notes that posthumanism rejects the idea of the superior human over other life forms, and instead seeks to view the human as an assemblage that evolves and lives equally with all other forms of life. Lily Herne’s *Mall Rats*¹ series will be used to focus on South African zombies to determine whether they are similar to their American counterparts or whether they come with different and uniquely South African messages due to Herne’s posthumanist impulse within her novels.

The term “dystopia” has come to encompass several meanings and an increasing number of young adult novels published in the twenty-first century fall into this genre. Tom Moylan (2000, 417) describes dystopia as a genre that “represent[s] a very unpleasant imaginary world in which ominous tendencies of our present social, political, and technological order are projected into a disastrous future culmination”. The focus of this genre is often on a society that pretends to be a utopia, a place free of discrimination or abuse, but that has actually been corrupted and represses its citizens. The society appears considerably worse than the society in which the reader lives (Moylan 2000, 74). According to Moylan, dystopian narratives highlight the terrors and fears of the contemporary world: “A hundred years of exploitation, repression, state violence, war, genocide, disease, famine, ecocide, depression, debt, and the steady depletion of humanity through the buying and selling of everyday life provided more than enough fertile ground for this fictive underside of the utopian imagination” (Moylan 2000, xi).

However, young adult literature focuses on questions of identity. Miranda Green-Barteet (2014, 36) argues that one of the major themes of young adult fiction is the claiming of one’s subjectivity. Moreover, according to Roberta Seelinger Trites (in Green-Barteet 2014, 36), in young adult fiction protagonists “learn about the social forces that have made them what they are. They learn to negotiate the levels of power that exist in the myriad social institutions within which they must function, including family; school; the church; government; social constructions of sexuality, gender, race, class; and cultural mores surrounding death”. Trites (2000, 3) further states that, “Children’s Literature often affirms the child’s sense of self and her or his personal power”. Therefore, when the young adult genre is combined with the dystopian genre,

1 Lily Herne’s *Mall Rats* is comprised of four novels: *Deadlands*, *Death of a Saint*, *Army of the Lost*, and *Ash Remains*. The final book of the series, *Ash Remains*, is currently out of print and has not been included in this article.

it enables characters to question how their identity is being created by dystopian factors and issues. While reading about these dystopian societies, replete with discrimination, consumerism, environmental crises and violence, the connection between social ills in the fictional world and the reader's own world becomes apparent. Trites (2000, 20) suggests that young adult fiction problematises "the relationship of the individual to the institutions that construct her or his subjectivity". It is this comparison between the reader's own society and the fictional dystopian society that opens the genre to its didactic possibilities, especially when used in young adult fiction. Moreover, the characters continually question their identity and who they are, especially when they come to realise that the society that they once trusted is corrupt and oppressive. According to Balaka Basu, Katherine Broad and Carrie Hintz (2013, 1), "With its capacity to frighten and warn, dystopian writing engages with pressing global concerns: liberty and self-determination, environmental destruction and looming catastrophe, questions of identity and the increasingly fragile boundaries between technology and the self". Similarly, David Hahn (2015, 177) says that, "Dystopian fiction can, therefore, communicate with young readers about current issues and their fears for their environment, and allow them a space to reflect upon their society and its future".

In recent young adult dystopian fiction particularly, the focus is on the cause of the dystopia, which is often a cataclysmic or post-apocalyptic event. Basu, Broad and Hintz (2013, 3) argue that zombies, nuclear holocausts and war "all function to destroy civilisation as it once stood, leaving small bands of survivors struggling to exist in a world forever changed". This destruction of civilisation creates an interesting space in which new meanings of identity can be contested and created. Alice Curry (2013, 18) argues that the apocalyptic event that occurs in the novels, or in the background of the novels, serves to alienate the world and environment with which the reader is familiar. This alienation distances the reader from nature and results in the post-apocalyptic world becoming a "blind space" that can be reconfigured with new meanings (Curry 2013, 19). In this way, Curry's blind space is similar to Homi Bhabha's "third space". Bhabha (1994, 53) discusses the third space when referring to the production of meaning within postcolonial texts. According to Bhabha (in Jansen van Vuuren 2015, 22), fantasy opens up the third space, which is a space between the postcolonial and the colonial that allows for identity and meaning to be interrogated. Although Bhabha's third space suggests a post-structural approach to literature that specifically refers to the meaning of images and identity through the structure of language, it is useful to this study as, similarly to Curry's blind space, the third space "makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process, destroys this mirror of representation in which cultural knowledge is customarily revealed as an integrated, open, expanding code" (Bhabha 1994, 54). Thus, Bhabha's third space similarly suggests a blind space that can be used to create new types of identity. Moreover, it is the postcolonial African landscape in Herne's series that adds to the flexibility and possible reconfiguration of identity within the blind space of young adult fiction as this space similarly invites the interrogation of traditional

ideas of identity creation. As Bhabha (1994, 54) argues, "Such an intervention quite properly challenges our sense of the historical identity of culture as a homogenising, unifying force, authenticated by the originally Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People". Thus, within the African postcolonial context, Bhabha suggests that readers find themselves in a "moment of transit where space and time cross to produce complex figures of difference and identity" (Bhabha 1994, 2).

Thus, identity has never been as flexible and unstable as it is in the post-apocalyptic blind space. It is this blind space that opens dystopian young adult novels to new meanings and that allows readers to examine and scrutinise their current society. According to Curry (2013, 18), "such a dramatic erasure of previous knowledge serves to interrogate the current epistemological frameworks held responsible for crisis whilst laying the groundwork for new and different modes of human-earth interaction".

The zombies of post-apocalyptic dystopias are similar blind spaces in young adult fiction. Brought about by some catastrophic event or infection, the zombie body becomes a site fraught with new meanings and possibilities. Through the alienation of the human body and human subjectivity, the undead confront readers with a distortion of their old world orders and traditional notions of identity. Curry (2013, 81) argues that "in the social and discursive materialisation of the body, the zombie is a creature of pure appetite and bodily desire".

Kyle Bishop (2010, 12) analyses zombie figures that are prominent in films and states that the contemporary zombie narrative "conjures up images of unnatural creatures that have risen from the dead in search of human flesh". Bishop (2010, 12–13) argues that the contemporary zombie is an American creation. The typical American zombie from contemporary films is perhaps the zombie figure with which most readers or viewers will be familiar. These figures are often corpses raised from the dead who pursue living humans and kill them "mercilessly by eating them alive" (Bishop 2010, 20). Bishop explains that these zombies "possess only a rotting brain and have no real emotional capacity" (2010, 20). Thus, Bishop (2010, 20) states that, "To that end, zombies cannot be reasoned with, appealed to or dissuaded by logical discourse".

This American meaning of the zombie is apparent in Herne's *Mall Rats* series. In the first book, *Deadlands*, Herne's zombies are seen as monstrous, moaning figures unable to control themselves. Herne calls her zombies Rotters and thus aptly conjures up images of those American zombie figures with their decaying, rotting flesh. The reader's first glimpse of the Rotters is through Lele de la Fontein² as she is mourning the death of her grandmother. Lele says when she spots a Rotter: "The thing moved in rapid, jerky gestures. It was heading straight for the opening, crawling on all fours, jaw gaping impossibly wide, a ghoulish moan coming from its throat" (Herne 2011, 7). In this depiction of the zombie, it is a monster, a "thing" as Lele calls it, only intent on

2 Lele is the main protagonist of the first book in the series, *Deadlands*. In the novel she joins the Mall Rats, a group comprising Ash, Saint, Ginger and Hester. The other novels start introducing all of the Mall Rats' voices as they narrate the story.

killing people. The zombie thing is unable to control itself. It is driven by instinct only. Any thought, feeling or consciousness is absent from its identity, much as it is from its American counterpart.

The insatiable figure of the zombie is strengthened in the depiction of the Hatchlings, or the newly-infected zombies, of the series. Unlike the older Rotters who move slowly and have an old book smell to them (Herne 2011, 134), the Hatchlings are incredibly dangerous. Even Lele, who at this point in the series is mysteriously immune to Rotter attack³, is in danger from the newly reanimated. They are unhumanly fast and attack their victims with fury, rage and hatred (Herne 2011, 128):

Their eyes were rolled back in their heads, and their skin was the grey of the newly dead, as if all the blood in their bodies had been drained away. One of them threw back its head and howled, a horrible keening sound, more human than the moans I was used to hearing. The Rotters moved as one, racing towards us so swiftly that their limbs seemed to blur.

Moreover, it is through the insatiable zombie figure that dystopian literature reflects twenty-first century concerns with consumerism, environmental degradation, racism, war, gender and sexuality (Hahn 2015, 522–523). The zombie seems to be an extreme depiction of an unthinking teenager who buys whatever is advertised and engages in any type of social activity, whether it be sexual or not, merely because it feels good right now. As Russ Thorne (2013, 119) argues, “The zombie generally has no self-determination and is driven purely by hunger: they become at once our fear of the baser, more animalistic side of human nature and of losing our sentience and capacity to govern our own lives”.

Therefore, the zombie’s presence in dystopian societies makes characters question their own identity. Curry (2013, 82) explains that, “The insatiable figure of the zombie is employed to interrogate the ways in which the desire to consume becomes written onto the body of the young protagonist”. In other words, Curry suggests that the zombies question the consumer identity of the protagonists and, therefore, the consumer-driven lifestyle of the young readers. This idea is overt in Herne’s novel where there is a mall left intact by the Guardians, the mysterious figures who control the Rotters and bring the survivors food and electricity. By keeping the mall open, the Guardians ensure that the Mall Rats are concerned with bringing the survivors in the enclave clothes and other items that they do not really need. Thus, the Guardians are using consumerism to distract the survivors and to ensure their complacency. The Guardians acknowledge that they left the mall intact because it was society’s “god”. One of the Guardians tells Ash and Lele, “We couldn’t destroy the thing you love most. Before we came, we watched you carefully. Places like this are where you spent most of your time and energy” (Herne 2011, 299).

3 In *Deadlands*, Herne reveals that the zombie outbreak is due to a type of alien parasite within human bodies. The Mall Rats characters have the potential to become Guardians because they were infected by the alien parasite when they were children.

However, in addition to these meanings of the zombie, when Herne places her zombies within a very South African context, she raises a larger question of identity that extends past “who am I?” to “what does it mean to be human?” Judith Inggs (2015, 113) argues when discussing Herne’s series that, “Identity politics and sexual identity, burgeoning sexual feelings, friendship, loyalty and betrayal, as well as a conflict between the individual and the collective are evident in the plot and in the relationships between the characters, all of whom in some way are searching for a home and community to which to belong”. Inggs (2015, 123) discusses the zombie phenomenon in South African young adult dystopian fiction as focusing “inevitably on the boundary between life and death, the body and the corpse and which pushes these boundaries further, challenging and subverting the perception of the living dead as Other.” Inggs argues (2015, 109) that in post-apartheid South African fiction questions of identity have poignant significance, “as the apartheid system classified certain races as of less worth than others, resulting in the unjustifiably cruel and heartless treatment of other human beings.” Thus, Inggs (2015, 108) notes that zombies are often complicated in the South African post-apartheid setting because of the “history of attitudes towards difference, degrees of being human, and the segregation of society into different levels or castes.” Therefore, the Mall Rats series complicates the distancing of the zombie as an Other and scrutinises the reasons that are often used to justify discrimination. This meaning of the zombie arises when the novel is read using a posthumanist lens. Posthumanism is a philosophical and political theme in literature. According to Neil Badmington (2011, 374), posthumanism rethinks the dominant humanist account of who we are as human beings. The presiding humanist idea in many post-apocalyptic or science fiction novels is that humans are fundamentally more “good” or “alive” than other living beings. It is this superiority to which the readers unknowingly ascribe that allows them to view the Mall Rats’ zombie-killing antics as positive and awe-inspiring despite the violence of the killings. If the zombies are not “human”, then the murder is pardoned. This is evident in *Deadlands*, when Lele sees Ash and Saint in their zombie-killing mode for the first time (Herne 2011, 128):

[Ash and Saint] dispatched the last one almost effortlessly, and this time, its head tumbled from its body and bounced back towards me, ending up only a few feet from where I was sitting. I couldn’t take my eyes off it. I know it sounds sick, and you’re probably thinking that I should have been puking in shock or something, but it wasn’t like that. I knew it wasn’t human, you see.

Lele’s perception of the zombie as an “it”, offers it no type of “human” identity. It is not male or female. It has been reduced to a non-human entity. By distancing or alienating the zombie body, reducing it from a human one to a non-human one, Lele successfully excuses herself from feeling any remorse or shock over the killed Rotter. As she argues, “it wasn’t human”.

Throughout the first book of the series, Herne sets up the traditional notions of human superiority through her focal Mall Rats characters, especially Lele. According to Badmington (2011, 374), in humanism, “the human being occupies a natural and eternal

place at the very centre of things, where it is distinguished absolutely from machines, animals, and other inhuman entities [...] where it behaves and believes according to something called ‘human nature’”. In *Deadlands*, this belief is paramount. The Rotters and Guardians are shown as Other figures and are portrayed negatively because of their apparent contrast to the traditional human characters. The main distinction between the humans and zombies arises from the idea of consciousness. It is possible for readers to assume that Herne’s Rotters are similar to Bishop’s American zombies who “possess only a rotting brain and have no real emotional capacity” (Bishop 2010, 20).

Thus, in keeping with the contemporary American zombie, Herne describes the Guardians and Rotters as “cold, human-shaped shells” (2012, 63) and “things” (2011, 7). When Lele looks at Paul, a classmate of hers from Malema High who has been turned into a Guardian, she says, “Paul’s irises were no longer the faded blue I remembered. They were just dense black spheres and didn’t seem to reflect the light” (Herne 2011, 298). It is this discussion of the Guardians’ black eyes that makes them appear devoid of emotion and consciousness. In the traditional idea of the eyes reflecting emotion, the fact that the Guardian’s pupils are black seem to confirm the humanist beliefs of the Mall Rats that the Guardians and Rotters are human-shaped shells with no consciousness. It is this belief that allows the traditional human characters to kill the Rotters and treat them as inhumanely as they like.

As Nayar says, being human has been defined in “the rational mind, or soul – which is entirely distinct from the body” (2014, 6). Therefore, “[T]he body becomes less significant as the focus turns towards the soul, and the concept of the soul reinforces what sets humans apart from all other creatures – regardless of their biotechnological origins” (Newcomb 2014, 181). It is the belief in a unique personality and consciousness that upholds the binary of human/non-human and makes it possible for the Mall Rats to see the Guardians and Rotters as the non-human enemy that must be killed. However, through a posthumanist lens this idea is challenged and contested.

Posthumanism recognises that man is not the centre of everything “because humans are no longer – and perhaps never were – utterly distinct from animals, machines, and other forms of the ‘inhuman’” (Badmington 2011, 374). Badmington continues that humans “are the products of historical and cultural differences that invalidate any appeal to a universal, transhistorical human essence; are constituted as subjects by a linguistic system that pre-exists and transcends them; and are unable to direct the course of world history towards a uniquely human goal” (Badmington 2011, 374). Similarly to gender theorists who argue that masculinity and femininity are mere societal constructs that can be contested, posthumanism contests that “humanness” and “humanity” are similar constructs that entities in power have used to solidify their position over other living beings on the planet. It is this new meaning of being human that makes Elaine Ostry’s (2014, 222) statement about young adult dystopian fiction so apt: “What it means to be human has never been more flexible, manipulated, or in question”.

It is only when Ripley, an old Mall Rats member who has been turned into a Guardian, helps the Mall Rats escape Cape Town that the unconscious nature of all of the Guardians becomes questioned. Herne uses Saint in *Death of a Saint* to raise questions about the consciousness of the Rotters and Guardians. In contrast to Lele’s clear humanist beliefs, Saint does not want to believe that the girl she loves, Ripley, is a human-shaped shell just because she has become a Guardian (Herne 2012, 94):

‘How much of you is in there, Ripley?’ I touch her hand. I’m expecting it to feel icy and ... dead, but her skin is warm. I have no idea if I’m talking to a Ripley-shaped shell that’s been infected by an alien virus, or whatever it is that keeps the Rotters and Guardians from ageing, or if there’s a part of her that’s still alive in there. I can’t help it, I feel hope growing in my chest.

The hope that Saint feels is strengthened later in *Death of a Saint*, when the Mall Rats move through Bloemfontein and find a warden, Mr Philiso, who is taking care of Rotters in a prison. This setting should be unsettling, but the Mall Rats do not view Mr Philiso and his prison negatively. Although they are shocked to realise that the prisoners are Rotters, they see that Mr Philiso treats them as if they are human (Herne 2012, 307):

‘When the infection spread in here, I tried to save as many as I could. Some ... escaped, of course. But it is my duty to look after them, see that they get proper care. And when I feel that they are ready, that they have paid their debt, I release them.’

‘What?’ Saint says. ‘And they don’t attack you?’

‘Of course not! They know that I only have their welfare at heart.’

It is Mr Philiso’s positivity and quirkiness, and the fact that he moves around with the Rotters in the recreation room without being attacked by them, that leads Saint to ask Lele: “What if he’s right though? What if there is some humanity left in them?” (Herne 2012, 314) The novel seems to allow readers to question the humanist perception that the Rotters are unconscious shells and so starts to move away from the American meaning of the zombie figure.

In the third novel, *Army of the Lost*, Herne uses a new character called Tommy to further the idea that the Guardians and Rotters are not unconscious shells but have retained something of their former identities. Tommy lives in the enclave in Johannesburg and he first starts to question whether the Rotters are as “dead” as people contend when he comes across a school teacher who is teaching a group of Rotter children. He describes how the Rotters seem to be interacting with the teacher and he suggests that they are conscious of what is going on around them. When Tommy tells the teacher that the children are dead, she is upset by his statement (Herne 2013, 94):

The smile snaps off and she slams her palm on the desk in front of her. ‘I will not have that sort of language in the classroom!’

Tommy readies himself to flee if he has to. ‘Really, missus. They are dead ... I mean, just look at them’.

A student with the remains of pigtailed drooping from the back of its neck moans loudly, and for a second, Tommy thinks he can detect understanding in its eyes. It looks almost ... sad.

As in the incident with Mr Philiso, it is suggested that if characters take the time to listen to the Rotters and treat them well, they will not act like those insatiable monsters described in *Deadlands* and American zombie films.

Moreover, Tommy’s interaction with another child Rotter reaffirms this idea of the conscious, gentle zombie. After fleeing Sandtown with Ginger, Tommy comes across a zombie that has been stuck in a toilet cubicle for almost 10 years. When Tommy opens the cubicle door for the Rotter, he says, “It turns back and moans, as if it’s saying ‘thank you’ – reminding Tommy of the weirdly human behaviour of those dead schoolchildren – then lurches towards the door and lunges into the corridor” (Herne 2013, 163).

Later, Tommy sees the Rotter again and decides to give him a Transformer toy. The interaction between the Rotter and Tommy is very similar to what might happen between any older child and young child. When the toy falls, the Rotter throws its head back and moans, almost as if it wants to cry. Affectionately almost, Tommy names the Rotter “Optimus Prime”, after the Transformer toy. In the act of naming the Rotter, Tommy helps to give him an identity. By allowing the Rotter to be more than a nameless creature, an “it”, he allows Optimus to reaffirm some of the “human” qualities and unique characteristics that are seen as prerequisites for being human according to humanist thought.

Moreover, when Optimus seems to follow Tommy around and ultimately saves him from a Hatchling, Optimus seems to use the restricted identity that Tommy gave him and asserts his consciousness, emotions and humanity (Herne 2013, 295):

The Hatchling stops suddenly, mid-swipe. It shakes its head, and almost looks confused, as if it’s just remembered something it’s forgotten.

Another figure lurches into view. A small figure, the blue of its T-shirt visible beneath a swathe of bandages drooping off its limbs like a mummy’s.

‘Optimus!’

Optimus sways, raises a hand and opens his mouth in a facsimile of a smile.

Not only does Optimus reassert his own identity and consciousness, but he also manages to suggest to the reader that the other Rotters, even Hatchlings, are also capable of a similar consciousness. Optimus does this through the way he stops the Hatchling. There is no need to attack the Hatchling or decapitate it, as the human characters deal with them. Instead, Optimus uses some kind of mental connection with the Hatchling and, as the novel suggests, merely reminds the Hatchling of its own consciousness. As Tommy recalls of his experience, the Hatchling shook its head as if it remembered something that it had forgotten. Therefore, there is no violence in the incident, but rather a reaching out to the non-human figure and a reminder to the figure of its own consciousness.

Thus, when Herne places the Rotters in a post-apocalyptic South Africa, she allows them to be described in more positive ways because of the blind space and the third

space that the setting evokes. It is owing to the flexible blind space that it becomes possible for Herne to slowly change the human/non-human binary. Moreover, although Herne often describes the danger of the Rotters, especially the Hatchlings, she never overtly writes about the brain-eating zombies that readers have come to expect from twenty-first century pop culture. Instead, Herne describes a type of rage that overtakes the Rotters when they first turn. When Tommy witnesses people being changed into Hatchlings he says: "A dark shape jerks out of the darkness behind the door and smashes against it, howling with fury and spraying the glass with spittle. It's one of the runners, his face a distorted mask of rage and hatred, his eyes blank, black holes" (2013, 236). Later, when Tommy asks Ginger how the Hatchlings lose their speed and rage and become the more docile Rotters, Ginger says, "It's like they stop being so angry at being infected or something after a while" (2013, 237). The idea that the Rotters only attack out of frustration or anger is an interesting one, especially when taking into account the marginalisation that they will inevitably face from the humans in the series. It is possible that the anger of the Hatchlings is at their new formed state, but once they come to accept their more posthuman position, that anger abates.

The notion of any being set in opposition to humans as having consciousness is important in this series because it links the different beings, or species, to humans. As Nayar (2014, 5) argues, "the human's awareness of his self – to recognise himself for what he is – or self-consciousness is also treated as a sign of being human". Therefore, through the Rotter schoolchildren, Optimus, and Ripley, Herne suggests that the Rotters and Guardians have self-awareness, consciousness and rational minds. It is this combination of human characteristics in a posthuman body that helps to reveal the myth of the central, conscious human. As Newcomb (2014, 178) argues, the categorisation of the posthuman figure as less-than-human has become artificial.

Furthermore, when the Mall Rats discover that the Guardians are teenagers who have been turned into liminal beings, part Rotter and part human, the binary human/non-human is not sufficient to distance the Guardians and Rotters anymore. This strengthens the notion of critical posthumanism in the novel. As Nayar (2014, 3–4) says, critical posthumanism "seeks to move beyond the traditional humanist ways of thinking about the autonomous, self-willed individual agent in order to treat the human itself as an assemblage, co-evolving with other forms of life, enmeshed with the environment and technology". Thus, the idea that the human is a separate and superior being is rejected (Nayar 2014, 4) and it becomes uncomfortable to simply view the Rotters and Guardians as an Other.

Herne uses Saint's transformation into a Guardian to reject the humanist belief that humans are superior and isolated. Saint becomes a true liminal posthuman figure, able to blur the distinctions between human/non-human and human/animal. Through her transformation, Saint examines and alters her own subjectivity and identity. However, this is not only because of her physical transformation due to the silver strands within

her blood⁴, but because of the link she feels with all other beings on the planet (Herne 2012, 344–5):

It is as if a thousand-watt globe has been switched on inside me. As if every nerve ending, every synapse has been electrocuted and I feel the pull of a thousand – a million – invisible threads. Different voices, a multitude of languages: Zulu, Xhosa, French, Tswana and others that I don’t recognise. A babble; connected but separate. One murmurs ‘Did I leave the oven on? Did I leave the oven on?’ over and over again, another repeats ‘Sipho, don’t leave me. Sipho don’t leave me’, another ‘It’s not real, it’s just a dream’.

The Rotters. I’m hearing the Rotters.

For the first time the reader hears the very “human” moans and concerns of the Rotters. In this light, the zombie becomes a posthuman figure that calls into question the identity of the traditional human. As Nayar (2014, 8) asserts, “Posthumanism as a philosophical approach involves a rethinking of the very idea of subjectivity because it sees human subjectivity as an assemblage, co-evolving with machines and animals”. It is this assemblage of subjectivities that is beautifully depicted through the Guardians. As liminal beings, they are connected with everything and everyone around them: Rotters, animals and humans. They do not exist in isolation, nor do they identify themselves in isolation. They continually affirm, throughout the entire series, that “we are all connected” (2011, 316).

This connection is the critical posthuman position that the series presents to its readers. Herne seems to affirm a posthuman impulse to view everything on the planet as important and vital to its system. Through the Guardians and Rotters she suggests that humanist beliefs will result in the end of world. When Saint asks her twin, Atang, who is also a type of Guardian⁵, why the Guardians came to the world, he affirms that humanity was busy destroying itself (Herne 2013, 213–214):

<why did you come here, Atang?>

<dying>

<you were dying?>

<no, *you* were going to die>

An image of a frozen world; a dark sky. Thousands of people trudging through thigh-high snow, laden down with possessions, many of them falling down and not getting up again. Saint can’t tell if the devastation is a result of a cataclysmic natural disaster or if it has been caused by some kind of nuclear bomb or other human-made device. She isn’t sure if she *wants* to know.

4 As revealed in *Deadlands*, Lele, Saint, and Ash have the potential to become Guardians because they were infected by the alien parasite when they were children. Lele describes the alien parasite as silver strands within her blood (Herne 2011, 316).

5 According to the series, several years before the Guardians came to Earth they took and experimented on pairs of twins by trying to alter their bodies. After the twins were returned, only one of them grew up while the other remained a child physically and mentally. Only in *Army of the Lost* does Herne reveal that the Mall Rats’ twins are also types of Guardians and can communicate with the Rotters and other Guardians.

<you saved us?>

<yes>

It is through a posthumanist position that the zombie figure is able to save the planet. Atang seems to suggest that as long as humans continued with their insatiable consumerism, environmental degradation and materialism, the world was heading to a man-made cataclysmic event. Therefore, in order to bring about a positive change, it is important for the traditional human to die. Herne achieves this through her image of the Rotter zombies. She transforms them from the insatiable, greedy American zombies into figures who are connected with and dependent on all living things on the planet for survival.

According to Nayar (2014, 8), posthumanism “calls for a more inclusive definition of life, and a greater moral-ethical response, and responsibility, to non-human life forms in the age of species blurring and species mixing”. Herne uses Saint to present a more inclusive definition of being human to her readers. Being human no longer means being central, exclusive and isolated. Instead it means being reconciled to all Others. It means appreciating non-human life forms and being able to live with them harmoniously. The connection between the Rotters, animals and humans through the Guardians is a visible, physical and bodily form of this new inclusive definition.

Although this article thus far has attempted to present the Rotters and Guardians as an alternative human identity brought forth by the blind space of the zombie body and the posthuman associations of these blind spaces, the series is problematised by the intruding nature of the zombie apocalypse. The main complication arises from the lack of choice all of the Rotters have in becoming zombies, and even the lack of choice the Guardians have in becoming liminal figures. In *Deadlands*, it is apparent that becoming a Rotter is not positive. Although the religious fanatics of the series, who call themselves Resurrectionists, believe that the Rotters and Guardians are good, Lele is against their beliefs from the outset of the novel. This can be attributed to the fact that she is the humanist figure of the series, but she could also be alluding to the problematic idea of the Rotters and Guardians all being turned into zombies, and possibly even posthuman figures, against their free will. Interestingly, Herne potentially uses the true posthuman character of the series, Saint, to complicate the idea that this new posthuman existence that the Guardians bring to the world is the best solution for humankind’s problems. Saint dies in a car accident and then reawakens in her new state (Herne 2012, 334–338). Herne explains earlier in the series that this is possible because of experiments that the Guardians performed on her and her twin brother when they were toddlers. Therefore, her transformation is also absent of choice. This seems to be presented in the novel through an internal struggle within Saint between her two new identities: the Guardian side that Herne refers to as Saint and the human side that Herne refers to as Ntombi. Saint describes these differing parts of herself as follows in *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013, 74–75):

Saint has lost all sense of time. How long has she been lying here? [...] She doesn't feel any pain although she has an idea that at some point her back was broken. The memories of how she ended up in this position are vague and out of order, like pages of a manuscript scattered to the wind. At first she attempted to snatch at them, not ready to let go of the full story. Her story. But then the darkness trickled in and her grip started to weaken until all that was left were nonsensical scraps with no beginning or end. And if she lets go of those meaningless pieces, if she forgets and gives into the darkness's seduction then she could be like the others, the ones tickling her subconscious. [...] But Ntombi, the stubborn part of her that refuses to forget, won't let her submit. Not yet.

This dualism again highlights the problematic idea of the posthuman identity being forced onto the characters in the series. It seems to suggest that there has to be a compromise between the humanist and posthumanist characters. As the reader learns through Saint/Ntombi's journey, the Guardians are not only the new definition of the human, but also have a greater choice in becoming that new type of human. Saint asks Atang in *Army of the Lost* why they created the Guardians and made them different from the Rotters, and to this he responds: “<you'll be the next wave. one of the survivors. evolution>” (Herne 2013, 323).

However, unlike transformations previously in the series that have been forced onto the characters, it seems that Herne starts to focus on the importance of characters choosing to adopt a posthuman identity. This idea is most explicit in *Army of the Lost*, when Ash agrees to kill himself to become a Guardian. Although Ash only intends to do this so that he can control the Rotters and destroy them⁶, Herne has successfully created a situation in which she can combine free will and a posthuman identity. As Herne's series is unfinished, with the final book, *Ash Remains*, currently out of print, it is difficult for this article to determine whether Herne will use Ash's decision to become a Guardian to save the Rotters, Guardians and humans, and thus herald a new posthuman era in the series, or whether she will reinforce traditional humanist ideas by allowing Ash to destroy the Rotters and Guardians and therefore solidify their identities as an Other that must be feared and rejected.

Therefore, it becomes pivotal in the novel for the humanist characters, like Lele, to allow their humanist side to die. As Thabo tells Lele in *Deadlands*, “You have the potential to be like us. The seed was planted long ago. When you die, you will live” (Herne 2011, 317). Nayar argues that the death of humanism is vital so that the binaries of human/non-human, human/animal and human/inhuman can be broken down (2014, 4). Nayar refers to a quote by Cary Wolfe to support why a redefinition of being human is so important (Wolfe quoted in Nayar 2014, 4):

6 At the end of the third novel, *Army of the Lost*, the characters are planning a way to gather all of the Rotters and kill them. Meanwhile, Saint is moving towards uncovering a secret surrounding the Rotters and a way to save them from their zombie state. It is unclear at this moment how Herne will resolve all of these issues in *Ash Remains*, the final book of the series.

As long as this humanist and speciesist structure of subjectivisation remains intact, and as long as it is institutionally taken for granted that it is all right to systematically exploit and kill non-human animals simply because of their species, then the humanist discourse of species will always be available for use by some humans against other humans as well, to countenance violence against the social other of whatever species – or gender, or race, or class, or sexual difference.

Wolfe’s warning seems to have gone uncontested in the South African dystopia Herne portrays. In an attempt to undo similar discrimination, Herne presents a radical view of exploitation and Othering through the enclave in Johannesburg that has become known as Sandtown. In Sandtown, the people are separated by wealth, an uncomfortable reality for any South African reader, and are sold as possessions in order to get their families away from the squalor of Sandtown. Tommy describes the living conditions of the poorest of the poor in *Army of the Lost* (Herne 2013, 18):

Stepping through the door Tommy pulls his sweatshirt up over his mouth to block out the stench of urine and mouldering concrete that rolls over him like a wave. The air down here is damp, the crumbling walls drip with green slime and he has to duck every so often to avoid being conked on the head by the kerosene lamps that hang from the curved roof, bathing everything in a sickly yellow glow. Hunched figures scurry past him, and he’s forced to step over the bundles of rags that line the edges of the walkway. Family groups huddle in the gloom; wide-eyed children with dirty faces and naked torsos bob and weave between the passers-by, the offspring of the lowest of the low who can’t afford a bay in Sandtown and are forced to live in the service tunnels and old sewage pipes that stretch beneath the city.

In contrast to this scene the reader is shown the opulence of one of the city’s wealthiest survivors, Steven Coom, whose workers live within Monte Casino. They have electricity, water and an abundant amount of food. As Wolfe warns, the humanist and speciesist structure has been used by some humans in this series against other humans, somehow defending why class structure can be used to delineate poor people as an Other, thereby banishing them to the service tunnels and old sewage pipes underneath the city. The series suggests that a posthuman position is the only way to curb this kind of discrimination and distinction.

Therefore, this article has attempted to show that Herne’s zombies, imbued with Bhabha’s third space and Curry’s blind space, have allowed for the traditional idea of the American zombie as an unconscious figure to be recreated. Instead of presenting the unconscious, brain-eating zombies of American films, Herne allows her zombies to usher in a new posthuman identity. Herne uses the zombie figure to plant the seed in the reader’s mind of a new and inclusive human outlook. This redefinition of what it means to be human is presented as the best way to end the violence and corruption of the dystopian state that the Mall Rats find themselves in and, consequently, to end the discrimination in the reader’s current society. However, it is only after the Mall Rats have adopted a posthuman position that they will be able to stop viewing the Rotters

as an Other. And it is only after this has been accomplished that other binaries of race, gender or class can be abolished. Once the traditional humanist dies, he or she will truly live.

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