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The Role of the Posthuman and Disabled Bodies in *Welcome To Night Vale* by Joseph
Fink and Jeffrey Cranor

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Posthuman ve Engelli Bedenlerin Joseph Fink ve Jeffrey Cranor'ın *Welcome to Night*
Vale Eserindeki Rolü

Danışman

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CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES	I
SUMMARY	II
ÖZET	III
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	IV
INTRODUCTION	1

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING HUMAN THROUGH THEORIES

1.1 Defining Posthuman and Posthumanism	5
1.2. The Posthuman Body	9
1.3. The Inquiry of Disability Studies	14
1.3.1. Literature and Disability	17
1.4. Posthuman Disability Studies	18

CHAPTER 2

SOUNDS FROM A FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD: EXPLAINING *WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE*

2.1. Rise of Podcasting: Is This the New Radio?	21
2.2. Dynamics of Fiction Podcasts	22
2.3. “A World Wide Sensation”: What is Welcome to Night Vale?	24

CHAPTER 3

STORIES OF NIGHT VALEIANS: ANALYSING THE STORIES OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS

3.1. Representation of Disability	27
3.1.1. Janice Palmer	28
3.1.2. Josh Crayton	31
3.1.3. Megan Wallaby	35
3.2. Posthumans: The A.I.s (The Artificial Intelligence)	38
3.2.1. The Computer, Guardian of a Dream	39
3.2.2. Fey, The Voice for Freedom	43
3.3. Posthumans: Beyond the Human Being, the Episode “The Debate”	47

CONCLUSION	56
REFERENCES	61
CURRICULUM VITAE	68

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 3.1. Megan Wallaby. By Jesscia Hayworth. Taken from Fink and Cranor 2016b: 88.

Figure 3.2. Faceless Old Woman. By Jessica Hayworth. Taken from Fink and Cranor 2016b: 4.

Figure 3.3. Tiamat. Taken from British Museum 1908/ A Guide to the Babylonian and Assyrian Antiquities. Museum Reference BM 124571.

SUMMARY

In 2013, the bi-monthly podcast *Welcome to Night Vale* ascended to the number one spot on the online platform iTunes and opened a way to a new generation of creative content. As a new way of storytelling and as a renewed version of radio dramas, *Welcome to Night Vale* is a production that consists of more than 200 radio episodes, three stand-alone novels, and four script books since its first airing in June 2012. Created by Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor, the main story is about a fictional radio show from a bizarre desert town. This strange town is home to many citizens and beings, who are going along with the extraordinary happenings around them. Throughout this fictional community radio programme, hosted by the main character Cecil, who gives information to the citizens and follows the stories through their daily life, the listener or the reader comes across with some side characters that are not able-bodied, some that have abnormal bodies, and some that have no bodies. A teenage girl who is a wheelchair user, a child who only exists as a hand, a faceless old woman who is not limited by time and space are some of these characters who all exist in the same society. This brings out the question of what it means to be human in this town. Night Vale is a town in which the socially formed prejudices, the norms that are set by the ideals of Humanism are evaded. The argument of this study is that through the various stories of the town dwellers, creators Fink and Cranor produce an affirmative posthuman community where everyone has a chance to be accepted and represented. To illustrate, the citizens of Night Vale are analysed in terms of how their bodies affect their value and their humanity. Having non-normative bodies is demonstrated through Rosi Braidotti's theories on Posthumanism, which are also used as a reference in Dan Goodley's Posthuman Disability Theory. The fight against normalcy and surpassing the humanistic, able-bodied, anthropocentric ideals are revealed in references to some of the citizens of Night Vale, namely Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, Megan Wallaby, the Computer, Fey, Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, and the Angels.

Keywords: *Welcome to Night Vale*, podcast, posthuman, disability

ÖZET

Posthuman ve Engelli Bedenlerin Joseph Fink ve Jeffrey Cranor'ın *Welcome to Night Vale* Eserindeki Rolü

2013 yılında, ayda iki kere yayınlanan *Welcome to Night Vale* adlı podcast, iTunes çevrimiçi platformunda bir numaraya yükselerek yeni nesil bir yaratıcılığın önünü açtı. Yeni bir hikâye anlatım yöntemi ve radyo tiyatrolarına yeni bir yaklaşım olarak *Welcome to Night Vale*, Haziran 2012'deki ilk yayınından bu yana 200'den fazla radyo bölümü, üç bağımsız roman ve dört senaryo kitabından oluşan bir kurgusal evrene vesile oldu. Joseph Fink ve Jeffrey Cranor tarafından yaratılan bu evrenin ana hikâyesi tuhaf bir çöl kasabasında yayınlanan kurgusal bir radyo programını konu almaktadır. Bu tuhaf yer, etraflarında olan olağanüstü olaylara aldırış etmeden yaşayan bir sürü kasaba sakinine ve canlıya ev sahipliği yapar. Ana karakter olan radyo sunucusu Cecil'in, kasaba sakinlerine bilgiler verdiği ve onların günlük hikâyelerini takip ettiği bu radyo programı boyunca dinleyiciler ya da okuyucular bazı engelleri olan, alışılmadık, hatta bütünüyle var olmayan bedenlerle karşılaşır. Tekerlekli sandalye kullanan genç bir kız, sadece bir el olarak yaşayan bir çocuk, yüzü olmayan ancak zaman ve uzayın sınırlandırmadığı yaşlı bir kadın aynı toplulukta yaşayan bu karakterlerden bazılarıdır. Bu durum, Night Vale kasabasında insan olmanın ne demek olduğu sorusunu akıllara getiriyor. Night Vale toplumsal olarak oluşturulmuş önyargıların, Hümanizm ideallerinin oluşturduğu normların geçerli olmadığı bir kasabadır. Bu çalışmada, kasaba sakinlerinin çeşitli hikâyeleri aracılığıyla yaratıcılar Fink ve Cranor'ın her bireyin kabul edilme ve temsil edilme şansına sahip olduğu olumlu bir posthuman topluluğu kurguladığı gösterilmektedir. Night Vale vatandaşları, değerlerini ve insanlıklarını bedenlerinin nasıl etkilediği açısından analiz edilir. Normatif olmayan bedenlere sahip olmak, esasen Rosi Braidotti'nin posthumanizm teorileri ve onu referans alan Dan Goodley'nin engellilik teorisi baz alınarak ve karakterlerin rolü bu bağlamda incelenecektir. Normallığe karşı mücadele, Hümanistik, bedensel ayrımcı, insan merkezci ideallerin ötesine geçme, Night Vale sakinlerinin nasıl betimlendiği gösterilerek vurgulanacaktır. Çalışmada Night Vale kasabasında yaşayan Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, Megan Wallaby, the Computer, Fey, Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, ve the Angels örnek olarak incelenmiştir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: *Welcome to Night Vale*, podcast, posthuman, engellilik

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INTRODUCTION

Stories have evolved through varied mediums due to the demands of time, culture and technology. Beginning with oral literature where there were no written stories, to the novel genre that came out after the invention of printing press, along with the progression of visual storytelling that blossomed through video recording, people have been conveying their cultures via fiction with multifarious means. Nearly a decade ago Joseph Fink and Jeffrey Cranor created *Welcome to Night Vale*, as a storytelling hobby (2016a: xvii-xviii), while choosing the medium even before any ideas of the story itself occurred. In an epoch where everything is in a constant change, Fink and Cranor managed to find a way to instil creative freedom via podcasting, which has been a brand new way of broadcasting radio. In the recent times where internet has managed to be a mainstream media organ, new varieties of expressions have occurred with the influences of the old ones; fiction podcast being one of the examples. *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) even though not the first but a prime example of fiction podcasts pioneers many other successful productions e.g. *The Black Tapes* (2015-2017), *The Bright Sessions* (2015-2018), and *Limetown* (2015-2018).

Welcome to Night Vale (2012-present) welcomes the listener and the reader to a bizarre town in the Midwest United States. The listener is guided through the voice of Cecil who is the community radio host. With the first glance, the town seems normal, with a local pizza store, schools, dog parks and etc. However, while Cecil stands idly as a (mostly) professional community voice, the town spills its oddness to the outside eye. Although *Night Vale* is not created as a secondary fictional world, Carlos, an outsider that comes to the town in the first episode, kindly explains that it is “by far the most scientifically interesting community in the US” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 5), since science loses its relativity when it comes to the town. Above all, *Night Vale* presents many characters with non-normative physical bodies. The argument of this work is that *Welcome to Night Vale* as a production manages to create a town where the socially constructed prejudices and judgements towards the beings outside of the existent norms of the current society are eluded by representing them through the stories which constitute an affirmative posthumanist approach.

The locals of the community do not care about the oddness since it is their home and the happenings are comfortably familiar to them. A case in point, from the first episode, is the dog park: Just seconds after Cecil welcomes the day’s listeners, he is asked to read an announcement from the City Council that publicizes the opening of the new dog park which is, as reminded, prohibited to dogs and people, and only allowed to the hooded figures that shall not be gazed upon (3). This exemplifies how something as familiar as a dog park can become unordinary inside *Night Vale*’s borders. Still, this also shows how unordinary for the outside eye is welcomed in the town.

Night Vale is simply “a town where every conspiracy theory is true and people just have to go on with their lives” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: xvii). As it is said in the introduction of the first script book, the overall atmosphere of the story can be defined with this paragraph from the show:

Lights, seen in the sky above the Arby's. Not the glowing sign of Arby's. Something higher and beyond that. We know the difference. We've caught on to their game. We understand the lights above Arby's game. Invaders from another world. Ladies and gentlemen the future is here. And it's about a hundred feet above the Arby's (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 7).

Arby's and aliens: One is something familiar to the real world of the audience, and the other is something totally unknown. *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) succeeds to combine these two elements to make the most strange into a relatable story. Weinstock (2018: 2) mentions that the familiar image of the Arby's logo symbolizes the real-world, working class, everyday American capitalism, and above that there is the extra-terrestrial; thus, *Welcome to Night Vale* manages to “intertwin[e] the familiar with the weird and exotic...”. Moreover, there is a reference to “the future”, which is part of the unknown, strange, yet so close it is already “here”. This may be an indication of how close this town is to breaking out from the normalcy of real-world.

Welcome to Night Vale (2012-present) is an episodic creation, in which every episode tends to be independent from one another and focuses on different storylines and characters. Hence, it is possible to encounter a variety of stories from the side characters. This includes Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, Megan Wallaby, The Computer, Fey, Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, and the Angels. These characters do not fit into the norms of being human; they tend to be defined outside of the average standards. Nevertheless, even though they are not perfectly epitomized human beings, this does not cause a direct exclusion from the community. Therefore, the question that may be asked is the following: What is the definition of ‘human’ in the town of Night Vale?

The town of Night Vale does not exist within a secondary fictional world. However, contrary to the society that is outside of the town, the norms that are set by the ideals of Humanism, the socially constructed prejudices, anthropocentrism and ableism are evaded in Night Vale. The creators Fink and Cranor construct a community where every individual has a chance to be accepted and represented. Hence, the offered statement is that *Welcome to Night Vale* is a production that uses the representation of the experiences of the individuals who are outside of the norm to affirm the posthuman. The stories are not limited to the beings that have the ideal human body which is standardized by the anthropocentric and humanistic ideologies. Examined with Posthuman and Disabled Studies, the analysis is aimed to present the affirmative effect of the diverse representation of beings and their physical bodies.

The first chapter in this thesis delves into the study of the posthuman and disability. Posthuman critical theory deals with the criticism of both the ideal norms of the humanist thoughts on human, and the idea that humans are at the utmost importance in the species hierarchy (Braidotti and Hlavajova, 2018: 339). As one of the prominent figures of the Posthuman studies, Rosi

Braidotti forms her theory on three principles: “Life beyond the Self”, “life beyond the Species”, and “life beyond Death” (Braidotti, 2013). Moreover, her theories that deal with humans outside of the normative boundaries intersect with disability studies, as they both aim to criticise the conventional biases on the subject of the human body. Posthuman disability and Dishuman studies emerge from these thoughts and question the definition of human through creating a connection to how disability changes this inquiry (Goodley et al., 2014: 342).

Following that, the second chapter outlines the rise of podcasting and its correlation with *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present), with the intention of familiarizing this new kind of storytelling and how it has been evolving since its beginning. The definition of podcasting is given in relation to its predecessor radio. Later, the opportunities that podcasting provides the creators with, is reviewed. Additionally, the genres of podcasts are explained in accordance with example podcast shows. Fiction podcasting is expounded in a sub-chapter, starting with its roots on radio dramas to the pioneering nature of *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012- present). To clarify, the podcast itself is produced as pre-scripted audio stories, and since the beginning the scripts have been published as word-by-word transcriptions. The primarily used sources are *Mostly Void Partially Stars* (Fink and Cranor, 2016a), which covers episodes 1 to 25, *The Glowing Coils of The Universe* (2016b), which covers episodes 26 to 49 with the addition of the episode “Debate”, *The Buying of Lot 37*(2019a), which includes episodes 50 to 70, *Who’s A Good Boy* (2019b), which includes episodes 71 to 90, and also some other transcribed episodes such as Episode 151 “The Waterfall” that are published on the official website of the production.

Right after, chapter three establishes the analysis of the characters. The analysis is provided through direct lines from the stories parsed in accordance with the theoretical notions. In this town every citizen is equal. No citizen is outcast from the community because of their appearance. Throughout the fictional radio show which deals with the daily life of the community, the ‘listener’ comes across with some characters that are not able-bodied, some that have abnormal bodies, and some that have no bodies. Characters like Janice Palmer, who is a wheelchair user, are the ones who have disabled bodies which are usual to the real life. However, they are not the only ones experiencing the bodily differences. Josh Crayton and Megan Wallaby also have similar storylines. Josh, as a shapeshifter struggles through his physical uniformity/ stability, and Megan who exists as only a hand struggles to communicate without a full body. These three characters are dealt in one chapter with references to Braidotti’s first principle “life beyond the self” and to various other Posthuman theories. Other mentioned characters in the story like the Computer and Fey, who are bodiless voices with freewill, are dealt in a separate chapter with references to artificial intelligence and the connection of posthuman and technology. Another chapter discusses the characters who can be considered as the “Others” such as the character Faceless Old Woman and Hiram McDaniels (five-headed dragon), and some minor mentions of the angels.

Evidently, all of these characters are proposed to offer an insight to the representation of the posthuman and the disability in the town of Night Vale. This town accepts the beings that are outcast by the Humanism's definition of ideal human, and presents a community of unique individuals. The socially constructed preconceptions are overlooked, or put through reconsideration. *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) consists of many stories and through them the creators Fink and Cranor manage to show a variety of bodies with personal tales. Therefore, the conclusion which is posited is that through the representation of the posthuman and disability *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present) enables an affirmative approach to a community where everyone is accepted and valued regardless of their differences.

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING HUMAN THROUGH THEORIES

“May we all be human: beautiful, stupid, temporal, endless.”

(Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 82)

1.1 Defining Posthuman and Posthumanism

One may think the “posthuman” is as simple as the prefix propounds: beyond human. However, the theory behind the word is diverse and complex as much as the varieties of the definitions. The notion agreed upon is that the meaning fixed onto the concept of the word “human” is inadequate. In *The Posthuman*, Braidotti (2013: 3) proposes the following questions in her introduction: “what is the posthuman? ...what are the intellectual and historical itineraries that may lead us to the posthuman?... where does the posthuman condition leave humanity?”. On the whole, the utmost importance in this chapter is to provide an overview to the efforts of scholars and critics, Braidotti in particular, on answering these questions.

When it comes to the fundamental meaning of posthumanism, it is a collection of theories that deals with the integration of human and technology (Ağın, 2020: 16)¹. Başak Ağın phrases that as human beings have never been independent of technology since the discovery of fire that paved the way for appliances and tools, there has been no absolute human in existence; therefore, this bond between the human and technology suggests that the human has always been ‘posthuman’ (2020: 16). According to Ihab Hassan (1977: 835) “[t]here is nothing supernatural in the process leading us to a posthumanist culture. That process depends mainly on the growing intrusion of the human mind into nature and history, on the dematerialization of life and the conceptualization of existence”. In the simplest terms, human beings started their existence with inventions to survive in nature and have maintained to use their mind since then, in order to keep standing. While, one prominent figure in the field, Katherine Hayles (1999: 35) advocates that the posthuman refers to both becoming an organism buried into an intelligent machine, and to being buried so intensely that this density causing an impossibility to differentiate between the biological organism and the informational circuits; another renowned scholar Francesca Ferrando (2012: 10) stresses the importance of the differentiation of the noun ‘posthuman’, which can be seen in various fields such as advanced robotics, nanotechnology and bioethics, and the adjective ‘posthumanism’, which refers to “a shift in the humanistic paradigm and its anthropocentric [world view]”. Cary Wolfe (2010: xv), noting that Hayles’s theories correlate the posthuman with a “triumphant disembodiment”, explains that “posthumanism in my sense isn’t posthuman at all— in the sense of being ‘after’ our embodiment has been transcended— but is only posthumanist, in the sense that it

¹ Unless otherwise indicated all translations from Turkish to English are mine.

opposes the fantasies of disembodiment and autonomy, inherited from humanism itself”, and adds his own deduction:

[Posthumanism] comes both before and after humanism: before in the sense that it names the embodiment and embeddedness of the human being in not just its biological but also its technological world, the prosthetic coevolution of the human animal with the technicity of tools and external archival mechanisms (such as language and culture)... (xv).

Noticeably, there are various understandings on the definitions; in accordance with that, Braidotti (2013: 13) chooses to focus on multiple versions in her book, with the addition of her own ideas. Dividing *the Posthuman* into four chapters, she entitles the first section as “life beyond the self”, which introduces the origin of posthumanism. Chapter one opens up with the depiction of Leonardo da Vinci’s Vitruvian Man image: A full-body portrait of a man that is accepted as “the emblem of Humanism” (2013: 13). Due to the fact that, dating back to the Italian Renaissance, this figure has established ideals for both people and their cultures; moreover, this image provides an understanding of what humanistic idea is focused on as the human body.

Braidotti (2013: 24) refers to feminist Luce Irigaray’s works as she indicates that “the allegedly abstract ideal of Man as a symbol of classical Humanity is very much a male of the species: it is a he. Moreover, he is white, European, handsome and able-bodied”. With the addition of this specific representation of what a human is and should be, Humanism creates an exclusion that divides self and the other; furthermore, the subjectivity that is imposed by Humanism is associated with the awareness of self, comprehensive logic, and instinctual moral actions, while the denoted other is discerned as its antithesis (2013: 15). Thus according to Braidotti, this ‘otherness’ connotes as negative and inferior, and the people branded as ‘others’ “are the sexualized, racialized, and naturalized” and “reduced to the less than human status of disposable bodies” (2013: 15).

Additionally, ‘the man’ referred in Humanism is discussed by Foucault (2005: 422) as a ‘recent invention’. Humanism had appeared in the classical age in which culture was dominated with religion and the world, and the invention of man only comes into scene with the development of the positive sciences at the end of the eighteenth century (Han-Pile, 2010: 6). In his work *The Order of Things*, Foucault (2005: 422) concludes “man is an invention of recent date. And one perhaps nearing its end...one can certainly wager that man would be erased like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”. In other words, man that is constructed and defined by the humanistic ideals is bound to disappear in the near future.

After the Second World War, Humanism faces a decline through a wave of social movements on gender, race, and war, during the 1960s and 1970s; which eventually creates an activist brand of anti-humanism (Braidotti, 2013:16). As Foucault points out that the ideal man (which, in the past, was imposed as the perfection of human values) is actually constructed, in the meantime, thinkers from various fields start to work on their own ideas through anti-humanism: While feminist critics point out that the symbol of humanity has been always seen as male, anti-

colonial thinkers call attention to the whiteness of the ideal, and so forth (Braidotti, 2013: 23-26). On the whole, “anti-humanism rejects the dialectical scheme of thought, where difference or otherness played a constitutive role, marking off the sexualized other (woman), the racialized other (the native) and the naturalized other (animals, the environment or earth)” (2013: 27). Through anti-humanism Braidotti (2013: 26) adduces the following:

The human norm stands for normality, normalcy and normativity. It functions by transposing a specific mode of being human into a generalized standard, which acquires transcendent values as the human: from male to masculine and onto human as the universalized format of humanity. This standard is posited as categorically and qualitatively distinct from the sexualized, racialized, naturalized others and also in opposition to the technological artefact.

The conflict between Humanism and anti-humanism is concluded by posthumanism which obligingly points to new alternatives (2013: 38).

Mainly, there are three approaches to the posthuman thought: A reactive approach which results from moral philosophy, an analytical form driven by science and technology, and critical posthumanism which borrows the anti-humanist ideas of subjectivity (Braidotti, 2013: 38). Even though the reactive way of posthumanism gives productive inputs, when dilated upon, it falls short in some respects. For example, both Braidotti (2013) and Wolfe (2010), discuss Martha Nussbaum’s approach in regards to posthumanism. In her explanation of the reactive approach, Braidotti (2013: 38-19) names Nussbaum as a defender of contemporary Humanism for even though she accepts the problems presented by humanistic ideology, she advocates for a humanist vision of the subject as a solution for the “posthuman condition”. To clarify, Robert Pepperell (2003: iv) explains the posthuman condition as “the condition of existence in which we find ourselves once the posthuman era begins”. The word ‘existence’ is crucial here as it does not require the definition of the subject but only the presence of it. Nussbaum’s ideas (2007: 159), which are originated from Aristotelian philosophy, are explained by her as follows:

The capabilities approach... sees rationality and animality as thoroughly unified. Taking its cue from Aristotle’s notion of the human being as a political animal, and from Marx’s idea that the human being is a creature... it sees the rational as simply one aspect of the animal, and, at that, not the only one that is pertinent to a notion of truly human functioning.

Although this view on animals may be connected to many posthuman notions, Wolfe (2010) points out that there are some problems in Nussbaum’s writings. In *Flesh and Finitude*, Nussbaum (2007: 76-77) publishes a list of human capabilities that aims to support her ‘capabilities’. This list, as Wolfe (2010: 68) references to the opinions of names like Geoffrey Harpham and Mary Beard, poses problems and may be considered as discriminatory towards disabled people. Therefore, focusing on a fixed human identity limits this reactive approach on posthumanism.

Proceeding from the previous paragraph, the analytic approach brings science and technology forward in the conversation (Braidotti, 2013: 40). On itself, posthumanism is very much connected with science and technology and benefits from this approach widely (2013: 40). The

need to understand the bond between technology and humans, and how they are linked, the question of how technology actually functions, and how it contributes to the posthuman era, are among the subjects that are focused by this approach (2013: 42). However, Braidotti (2013: 42) claims that this approach, apart from the developments it provides, falls too neutral, so she urges that the conflict posed by the social and moral inequality that comes with the technology begs to be addressed; in other words, the posthuman dilemma requires the discussion of subjectivity, which is demanded for the analysis of norms, values, community bonding, social belongings, governance etc.. Thus, the analytic approach is not enough for Braidotti, as it is deprived of a solid political questioning (2013: 41-42).

Hence, the third branch of posthuman thought sets up in the light of these thoughts. Established within the ‘ongoing deconstruction of Humanism’, critical posthumanism is a theoretical approach (Herbrechter, 2018: 94). One of the primary features of this approach is that it distinguishes the characteristics of what is included in the term ‘posthuman’ and the social discourse of ‘posthumanism’. In a contemporary sense ‘posthumanism’ tries to discover what it means to be human in the present-day circumstances, and recollecting and rewriting the input that is created by Humanism, is the task of posthumanism (Herbrechter, 2018: 94). Most importantly, critical posthumanism puts ‘human’ into the inquiry, therefore seeks answers for how the notion of ‘human’ came into being, how ‘posthuman’ came into being, how nonhumans are affected by what is presented by those notions (2018: 94).

Braidotti (2013: 45) identifies herself within the approach of critical posthumanism in her book while she proclaims it as an “affirmative perspective on the posthuman subject”. This collection of notions comes not only from anti-humanism but also from post-structuralism, feminism, post-colonial and many other theories (2013: 46). Correspondingly, Ferrando (2019: 45) states that “Posthumanism came along within and after Postmodernism, generated out of the radical deconstruction of the ‘human’, which began as a philosophical as well as a political project in the late 1960s and turned into an epistemological one in the 1990s”. In other words, analysing or criticising the concept of ‘human’ is already present in a certain sense in the theories that have been contributing to posthumanism.

Well-known post-colonial scholar Edward Said (2004: 10-11) advocates for the need of a new kind of Humanism that is torn away from the past mistakes:

It is possible to be critical of humanism in the name of humanism and that, schooled in its abuses by the experience of Eurocentrism and empire, one could fashion a different kind of humanism that was cosmopolitan and text-and language bound in ways that absorbed the great lessons of the past [. . .] and still remain attuned to the emergent voices and currents of the present...

The need for voicing the contemporary subject, who is left in the margins by Humanism as the ‘other’, seems to gain importance within the mentioned theories, and ultimately within posthumanism. Ferrando (2019: 46) explains that posthumanism embodies the reading of margins,

differences, and “the deconstruction of the ‘neutral subject’”; moreover, there is a need for an evaluation of the disparities that have been historically pushed aside. Braidotti (2013: 48) claims that critical posthumanism is influenced by the relationship between self and others, additionally, it demands the comprehension of ‘others’ which calls for the dismissal of self-centred individualism (2013: 48).

Hence, evidently, the diversities and differences are the focal points through understanding the posthuman self. Within her work on posthumanism, Braidotti (2013:49) gives a thorough explanation:

I define the critical posthuman subject within an eco-philosophy of multiple belongings, as a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity, that is to say a subject that works across differences and is also internally differentiated, but still grounded and accountable. Posthuman subjectivity expresses an embodied and embedded and hence partial form of accountability, based on a strong sense of collectivity, relationality and hence community building.

Therefore, this elucidates the impression that the aimed focus is to see the subject existing unitedly within an inclusive environment consisting of multiple varieties of subjects. This brings forth another matter to be discussed that is the posthuman body, in which the varieties and differences of subjects can be examined.

1.2 The Posthuman Body

The standardized social perception on the ideal human has generally been a comparison mechanism throughout history. This, therefore, causes ‘the Man’, as Braidotti (2013: 67-68) says, to be the superior being at the top of the species hierarchy, and makes him the dominant subject. In her second chapter, she explains that post-anthropocentrism aims to displace these notions. Here, it is important to explain that Ferrando (2016: 164) defines anthropocentrism as “a philosophical viewpoint according to which human beings are the central or most significant entities”; moreover, she points out the need for post-anthropocentrism by which a co-existence with other species and changes in socio-politics and culture can be addressed (2006: 170). Placing ‘human’ (or ‘the Man’ as Braidotti (2013: 67-68) asserts) at the centre and devoting glorifying adjectives cause an exclusion, in other words create ‘the other’. According to Braidotti (2013: 68), the traditional notion is that, the being is “expected to inhabit a perfectly functional physical body, implicitly modelled upon ideals of white masculinity, normality, youth and health”, consequently, the ones who are “non-white, non-masculine, non-normal, non-young, nonhealthy, disabled, malformed or enhanced” are casted aside; thereupon, they are devalued, regarded as medically/psychologically abnormal, seen as oddities, deviants, and even associated with monstrosity and bestiality. This other(ing) is the outcome of sexist and racist ideals that endorse aesthetic and moral standards of white, masculine, heterosexual European civilization (2013: 68). Correspondingly, Donna Haraway (1999: 150)

rephrases “the traditions of 'Western' science and politics” as “the tradition of racist, male-dominant capitalism” which is evidently the cause of the replication “of self from the reflections of the other” (1999: 150).

The utmost focus of this othering and discrimination is the body. In the current society, the body is a site for labelling differences, and an essential scene of identity (Hancock et al., 2000; Giddens, 1991, as cited in Jeffrey, 2013: 23). Judith Butler (1989: 602), referencing Foucault, argues that bodies are indeed affected and even constructed by cultural ideologies and discourses. The culture around the perfect body image of present times, in other words “the images of bodily perfection that one imagines, that one works hard in reality to remodel one’s body through fitness, clothes, make-up, plastic surgery, and soon maybe through cloning, genetic engineering and nanotechnology” is also worthy of consideration (Glavanakova, 2014: 32). Meanwhile, posthumanism aims for discarding the imposition of the ideal body which causes discrimination among beings by marking them as ‘non’ or ‘less’. Luna Dolezal (2017: 60) explains that “[a]t the core of the posthuman... is a reconception of the human body, which decentres the dualism prevalent in humanistic thought” and “under the posthuman paradigm, the body is necessarily relational, fluid, and multiple”. That is to say, the dualism of mind and body is reconsidered since the notion around the human body is deconstructed within the subject of posthumanism.

Furthermore, with the discussions on the posthuman, humanistic notions of binaries, such as “mind-body, nature-culture, human-animal, biology-technology, born-made”, are contextually elaborated and re-evaluated (Dolezal, 2017: 60-61). Through the binary of mind and body, Alexandra Glavanakova (2014:79) mentions the view of “the body in absentia”, which is explained within Plato’s view that body is only a cage for the mind. In *Phaidon*, Plato (ca. 370 B.C.E. /2015) explains the Socratic view on how the body is a rock tied to the material world whereas the mind (or the soul as it was known in ancient philosophy) is for the immortal realm. In this respect body is absent, or body is not the true way to identify the subject since the true self is in the mind/soul. Glavanakova (2014: 83) presents that this opposition between mind and body is also seen in Christian ideals, and also during the Enlightenment period; moreover, these notions clarify that “human subjectivity is partial, polymorphous² and adaptable, but, most significantly, that it does not reside in the body”. However, radical posthumanism concludes from these notions that the body is eventually unnecessary and “the imperfections of the flesh: sickness, fatigue, unreliability, mortality” must be prevailed (2014: 83).

Here, it is important to mention “transhumanism” which fits the referred radical notion. Ađın (2020: 29) labels transhumanism as ‘the dark twin’ of posthumanism, and explains that transhumanism aims for reaching beyond human which means possibly becoming immortal,

² many-sided

invincible, defeating illnesses and disabilities, pushing the limits of being, through technology. Julian Huxley (1957: 76), known as one of the first critics to use the term transhumanism, suggests that “[t]he human species can, if it wishes, transcend itself ... in its entirety, as humanity...man remaining man, but transcending himself, by realizing new possibilities of and for his human nature”. However, Ferrando (2019: 53) finds this explanation anthropocentric as Huxley prioritizes human beings (2019: 53). It is understood that indeed transhumanism points out that humanity is going through a change, but unlike what Huxley argues, current transhumanists focus on the change of the species itself through technology. Furthermore, in his article “Transhumanist Thought” Nick Bostrom (2005: 1-4) elucidates that transhumanism is very much influenced by Enlightenment ideas that aim for the development of the human being, along with the mention of evolution and technology, and states that the search for pushing the boundaries of the human existence has been an issue even in the ancient texts such as Gilgamesh’s search for immortality, and the Christian lore around the Fountain of Youth.

Nevertheless, transhumanism is disputable from a posthumanistic perspective. For posthumanism, technology is not a focal point but a companion, a survival support, a part of the social life or an assistance of the body, or even an entity itself as a nonhuman composition (Ferrando, 2019: 58; Ađın, 2020: 28). Also, Ferrando (2019: 58) not only exemplifies the many negative impacts of technology and how transhumanism overlooks these effects on human being, nature and nonhuman species, but also demonstrates the negative notions that are produced through the discriminative discourse of Humanism. Evidently, it can be concluded that even though posthumanism and transhumanism are related and used thematically in relation to one another, notably they are not alike.

The binary opposition of biology and technology is another discussion that has to be addressed in regards to posthuman bodies. Mike Featherstone and Roger Burrows (1995: 2) remark that technological developments potentially lead to “post-bodied and post-human forms of existence”. Their introduction touches on terms like ‘cyberspace’, ‘cyborg’, and ‘cyberpunk’, which are eventually concluded to be originated from the word ‘cybernetics’ (1995: 2). Cybernetics was originally introduced by Norbert Wiener (1948: 14) as an attempt to explore the relationship between machines and living organisms, in this respect; he tries to illustrate the corresponding features of a human brain and the operation of a machine. Based on this, Featherstone and Burrows (1995: 2) explain that “[t]he term cyborg refers to cybernetic organism, a self-regulating human-machine system. It is in effect a human-machine hybrid...”. As the writer of “A Cyborg Manifesto”, Haraway (1991: 150) gives a similar definition for the cyborg, which is “a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction”. Cyborgs as the “creatures simultaneously animal and machine” are frequently appear in science fiction, and also in modern medicine as a connection between organism and machine (1991: 150-151). That is to say,

the distinction between what is organic and what is machine seems blurred within the subject of the 'cyborg' as it incorporates both sides. Hayles (1999: 84) exemplifies that a deaf person with hearing aids, and someone with speech problems using voicing machines are tangible evidences for the technology and the human existing as one, thus, "the cyborg violates the human/machine distinction".

Another distinction to be analysed is the binary opposition of human and nonhuman. For this, another work by Haraway should be considered. Haraway (2008: 3-4) opens the discussion with expressive title, which is "we have never been human". She expresses the following statement:

I love the fact that human genomes can be found in only about 10 percent of all the cells that occupy the mundane space I call my body; the other 90 percent of the cells are filled with the genomes of bacteria, fungi, protists, and such, some of which play in a symphony necessary to my being alive at all, and some of which are hitching a ride and doing the rest of me, of us, no harm. I am vastly outnumbered by my tiny companions (2008: 3-4).

As all the other posthumanist scholars, Haraway puts the reality in a way to push the reader question "what actually is human?" and "what is a human body?". In a sense, what is perceived as the human body is not even entirely human. Moreover, this also shows that humans exist within a companionship of nonhumans. It is important to mention animals as nonhumans, for they are one of the most discussed beings in this category. Even though humans are inclined to think themselves outside of the animal category, they are in fact animals (Timofeeva, 2018: 35). Moreover, the word 'animal', as it originates from the word 'anima' meaning 'soul and the animating principle of life', suggests that all living creatures incorporate something animal in them (2018: 35). Humans and animals (among other nonhuman beings) share a planet which causes a vital bond, and "[t]his vital interconnection posits a qualitative shift of the relationship away from species-ism and towards an ethical appreciation of what bodies (human, animal, others) can do" (Braidotti, 2013: 71). Also, considering the demeanour towards nonhumans, they are parallel with the repressed or marginalized groups, and "the treatment of animals and nonhumans is connected to the treatment of the humans who are, in varying contexts, viewed as lesser, weaker, subordinate, or substandard" (Karkulehto et al., 2020: 3); thus they are also ostracized.

The relationship between nonhumans and humans, and the speculative nature of their differences have become not only an important subject for posthumanism, but also a creative path for fiction. In addition to the terms related to the posthuman body that are mentioned previously in this chapter, fiction also makes use of the posthuman monstrous body. Paul Sheehan (2015: 245) brings a perspective in regards to posthuman bodies: When mentioning what is 'beyond human', it is often thought within technology and science, e.g. the cyborg body as the combination of the organic matter and the machine/technology, or prosthetic enhancements and genetic engineering that are continuously developing what is perceived as the human. However, "technoscientific prognostication does not cover every permutation of the posthuman body" (2015: 245). What is

called ‘the monstrous’ or ‘grotesque body’, “a figure associated with mutations, plagues, viruses and other infectious bio-forms”, is also considered within the subject of posthumanism, though, here what is usually defined as ‘beyond human’ changes into ‘other than human’ (2015: 245- 246). This posthuman monstrous body is seen through myths rather than science (2015: 246). Adding mythical or monstrous elements to the physical being of the human body is regarded as a criticism of science (2015: 248).

What is regarded as monstrous is also an implication of the other of the humanist subject (Shildrick, 1995: 2). The monstrous subject, i.e. ‘the monster’ is seen as an outsider and not within the traditional boundaries, along that it “signif[ies] other ways of being in the world” (1995: 6). In literature, there are many examples of these mythologically rooted posthuman bodies, from Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* (80 AD) to Mary Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) (Sheehan, 2015: 247). H. P. Lovecraft, as a significant figure whose works are influential for *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-present), is known for his monstrous creations that “depict[] monstrosity as a dormant human quality, submerged and concealed by the implacable march of civilization” (2015: 248). The supposition drawn from this being that Lovecraft’s use of monstrosity is something already existing in the human, and this ‘monster-human’ being will be active with society’s advancement. Sheehan (2015: 249) adds that Lovecraft’s notion, which can also be described as a posthumanist disposition, acts as an emphasis to his view that “*Homo sapiens* is an insignificant and self-deceiving species in an indifferent universe. There can be no Promethean³ overcoming for a race doomed to surrender its sovereignty to monstrous, primordial deities”; therefore the classic ideal human is belittled by him as opposed to the monstrous others. When all things are considered, clearly, science-fiction and fantasy draw inspiration from posthuman monstrosity, regarding the abundance of many human-nonhuman hybrids e.g. zombies, ghosts, aliens (Sheehan, 2015: 245-258).

Hence, as the differences get blurred, it is easier to comprehend the fact that regarding the human body, there are no binary opposites. The notion of the posthuman body aims to eliminate the limits of depicting one single perfect human being:

The posthuman body is a technology, a screen, a projected image; it is a body under the sign of AIDS, a contaminated body, a deadly body, a techno-body; it is, as we shall see, a queer body. The human body itself is no longer part of "the family of man" but of a zoo of posthumanities (Halberstam & Livingston, 1995: 3).

In this manner, there are myriad of possibilities in regards to the body of the posthuman. There are neither ideals nor boundaries of perfection, as the posthumanist notion celebrates the potential of diversity. In relation to this, the following section, disability is explored as one of the examples of the posthuman possibilities.

³ rebelling

1.3. The Inquiry of Disability Studies

In the previous section regarding the introduction of posthumanism, one of the adjectives describing the traditional ideal man is “able-bodied”. In connection to this, it is important to recount that posthumanism aims to open a discussion on the traditional human description, thereby various other fields of studies that deal with the subject of ‘human’, cross paths with this discussion. Referring back to Braidotti (2013: 143- 185) once more, in the last chapter of *the Posthuman*, which is titled as ‘Posthuman Humanities’, she explains how other theoretical fields are affected from the posthumanist notion. In other words, it is not surprising that the ostracism of the traditional ideas surrounding the definition of human is not only a focus within posthumanism but also it is important in disability studies within the discussions over the ideal of ‘able-bodied’ human. Braidotti (2013: 146) states the following about this situation: “The fast-changing field of disability studies is almost emblematic of the posthuman predicament. Ever mindful that we do not yet know what a body can do, disability studies combine the critique of normative bodily models with the advocacy of new, creative models of embodiment” (2013: 146). Taking this into account, in this part of the chapter, disability is explained firstly by definitions and background information, then through approaches and models. In the last section on this chapter, disability studies are discussed in connection with the posthuman studies in reference to Goodley et al.’s (2014) “Posthuman Disability Studies” article.

Early definitions of the word ‘disability’ include “a physical or mental condition that limits a person’s movements, senses, or activities [or] the fact or state of having such a condition” as noted in the *Oxford English Dictionary* (as cited in Adams et al., 2015: 31). In time, words such as ‘inability’, ‘incapacity’, ‘infirmity’, and ‘affliction’, have been used alongside ‘disability’ within parallel purposes, though with the exception of their misdirected outmoded connotations (Adams et al., 2015: 31-32). ‘Disability’ had also been unsympathetically associated with ‘monstrosity’ and ‘deformity’ in the past (2015: 32). ‘Cripple’, ‘invalid’, and later on, in relation with medicine, ‘deviance’, ‘abnormality’, and ‘disorder’ have been adapted as interchangeable terms with ‘disability’ (2015: 32).

Furthermore, *Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990* describes ‘disability’ with a three part definition:

The term ‘disability’ means, with respect to an individual

(A) a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more of the major life activities of such individual;

(B) a record of such an impairment; or

(C) being regarded as having such an impairment. (1990: Section 3)

Another definition for disability is given by The UN’s *Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities* (2007: 2), in which it is recognized that “disability results from the interaction between

persons with impairments and attitudinal and environmental barriers that hinders their full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others”. Both of these explanations point out to an outside force in regards to defining the disabled subject.

The varied definitions of disability are subjected to discussion and analyses by different approaches within disability studies. Just as it can be seen with the approaches towards posthumanism, it is also not possible to explain disability with a single directive or focus, on the contrary, each definition and notion extend to various approaches and models. When the past notions towards disability are examined, there are certain thought processes rooted in the history of humanity that existed before disability studies. As an outdated perspective, the moral approach suggests that disability is a result of sinful or immoral behaviour, in other words, it is either a divine punishment or a test of faith (Goodley, 2011:7). Historically, disabled people have been oppressed and ostracised as their problems were regarded as divine judgement, karma, or moral fault (Shakespeare, 2016: 195). Another approach, the medical model, shows disability as a medical problem, a pathological fault, or a deformity in the person, i.e. the patient; moreover, it is only defined in a clinical framework that results as the concept of the need or the possibility of a cure, which in turn names the individual as abnormal (Goodley, 2011: 7). Deborah Marks (1996: 86) defines this model as a look on the “individual pathology” which aims to “find ways of preventing, curing or (failing these) caring for disabled people”.

Taking into consideration that disability is seen as a ‘problem’ within some approaches, it is troubling that “more and more people are being made aware that medicine makes promises it cannot keep, fails to fix ‘the problem’ of disability” (Greenop, 2009, as cited in Goodley, 2011: 8). Furthermore, it is argued that the notion of disability as seen by the previous approaches is reduced to functional limitations, and “they adhere to an individual model of disability” (Waldschmidt, 2018: 69). To put it another way, the attention is on the individual as if disability is a problem that is caused by the subject, and only exists within the subject. However, as Anne Waldschmidt (2018: 69) states, “disability is not just a health problem or a developmental disorder to be resolved or managed, but a difference constructed in and through society and culture”. In the consideration of the ideas that alienate the disabled people and cause wrong and outdated conclusions, there is a need for alternative notions on disability, which take notice of society and culture, thus, disability studies start to develop.

First approach in the disability studies deals with the society’s affect. The idea of social constructionism, which points out how dominant ideologies of the society affect the overall perception on the individual, assists to acknowledge that disability is a social issue; therefore, as Tobin Siebers (2006: 174) elucidates the notion of an ableist society might falsely presume that disabled people “neither understand nor desire to enter ‘normal’ society. Social constructionism in the weak sense tries to advance a common-sense approach to thinking about how people victimize

individuals unlike them”. Notions such as this create a baseline for ‘the social model’ of disability. The social model recognizes that the problem is the society itself, not the disabled individual; thus, the importance is put on the fact that “social model of disability is that it no longer sees disabled people as having something wrong with them” (Oliver, 1983: 27). Mike Oliver (2004: 7), as one of the first researchers to acknowledge the social model, names the publication of *Fundamental Principles of Disability* (UPIAS, 1976) as the root of this approach, through which the perception on disability, as Oliver puts forth, has reformed on the argument that “it was not our impairments that were the main cause of our problems as disabled people, but that it was the way society responded to us as an oppressed minority”.

The social model, which considers disability as a social barriers concern, is preeminent in British critical studies (Goodley, 2011: 11). Dan Goodley summarises the notion of this approach as the following: “Disability is a social construct. People with impairments are oppressed/ disabled by society... Society has failed DP[disabled people] and oppressed them through barriers that prevent access, integration and inclusion to all walks of life, including work, education and leisure” and the aimed outcomes are “ broad systemic change” and “[p]romote positive sense of disabled self” (2011: 13). It can be annotated that the development of the social model within disability studies provokes a need for many issues to be acknowledged and discussed among scholars. For instance, John Swain and Sally French (2000: 571-574) observe that even though the social model redirects the ‘problem’ outside of the individual, it falls short in terms of recounting disability affirmatively, and there has been a necessity for an approach that produces a ‘non-tragic’ view, hence ‘the affirmation model’ was established as a way to demonstrate a positive way of looking at disability.

Moreover, outside of the UK there are other models that bring various perspectives and focus to disability studies. Goodley (2011: 10-11) states that these “knowledge positions” differ through time and location, as parallel to the change of the needs. In North America, ‘the minority model’ was developed in order to reverberate the experiences of disabled people from minority races and ethnicities such as African, Indigenous and Hispanic Americans, conjointly, this model illustrates that people with disabilities are a minority group itself (2011: 13). On the other hand, in Nordic countries scholars develop ‘the relational model’ which is based on three fundamentals: Disability is, first of all, in relation with the disunity of the person and the environment; second, in relation with situations and contexts; third, is a correlative concept (2011: 17). In other words, the relationship of the outside forces with the disabled person is researched through this model.

The connection between the studies regarding the varied fields of humanities and social sciences, and disability studies has been developed through another approach which is seen as ‘the cultural model’ (Goodley, 2011:14). While, as the prominent approach, social model focuses on how society constructs disability, correlatively, cultural model examines the effects of culture with the help of analyses over cultural products such as films, novels, and various media pieces (2011:

17). One of the first critics to acknowledge this model, Tom Shakespeare (1994: 1) states that looking solely through the lens of the social model may cause an oversight in terms of the benefits that can be acquired by examining disability through culture, representation and meaning. With analysing the recognition, representation and images, it can be said that the comprehension of disability may be more accessible. Jenny Morris (1991: 85) explains the need for a cultural perspective as follows:

Where am I- as a disabled woman- in the general culture that surrounds me? Generally, I am not there. I could watch television for years, possibly a lifetime, without seeing my experience reflected in its dramas, documentaries, news stories. I could spend a lifetime going to theatres, libraries, bookshops, reading newspapers, without finding any portrayal of a disabled woman's life which speaks to my experience... Apart from this, if I want to maintain my confidence in the validity of my experience, I must steadfastly ignore the portrayal or lack of portrayal of disabled people within the general culture. Otherwise, I may come to believe that the non-disabled world's definition of me and my life is the real one — and my reality is mere fantasy.

As one of the forerunners of the cultural work for disability studies, Rosemarie Garland-Thomson (2017: vii), explains that a cultural look through disability was a novel notion in the 80s, whereas in the 90s, with the influence of the work done by feminist literary studies and critical race studies that point to the importance of cultural effort, scholars began to realize the abundance of representations and dimensions of disability. Such developments within the critical humanities studies also prompted another way of looking at disability: The ‘critical disability studies’ is considered as connection between many disciplines of thought that deal with identities, and disability (Goodley, 2011: 157). About the aim of critical disability studies, Helen Meekosha and Russell Shuttleworth (2009: 50) express that “... disability studies have changed; that the struggle for social justice and diversity continues but on another plane of development - one that is not simply social, economic and political, but also psychological, cultural, discursive and carnal”. However, it is possible to see that critical disability studies appear very much similar to the cultural model. Waldschmidt (2018: 70) acknowledges this likeness and argues that cultural model practices the ways of the disciplines like philosophy, ethnology, literary studies, and media studies etc., but critical disability studies is more inclined to profit from the techniques of the social sciences rather than being associated with humanities. The following section examines how literary studies and literature itself make use of these models and disciplines in a comprehensive way.

1.3.1 Literature and Disability

The various approaches of disability studies that are referred so far, in one form or another, are used in numerous critical analyses of literary works. Particularly, one of the aims of the cultural model is to “break down disabling barriers, and focus[] on examining the role disability plays in texts of all kinds, with the aim of better understanding both disability and the texts themselves”;

likewise, Ria Cheyne (2019: 15) defines “[l]iterary disability studies is the branch of cultural disability studies focusing on literature”.

In 1997 Garland-Thomson (2017) publishes her book *Extraordinary Bodies: Figuring Physical Disability in American Culture and Literature* with combining the cultural research through which she has already made tremendous impact on literature studies; accordingly, in this book it is possible to see disabled figures in literary works including *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (Stowe, 1852), *Life in the Iron Mills* (R.H. Davis, 1861), *The Silent Partner* (Phelps, 1871), *Beloved* (Morrison, 1987), *The Street* (Petry, 1946), *Zami* (Lorde, 1982).

Notably, following her work, among the first scholarly works that peruse literature in regards to disability studies is *Narrative Prosthesis: Disability and the Dependencies of Discourse* by David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder (2000), in which they study the identity and representation of disability in narratives, literature, and film; moreover, among the analyses there are well-known works such as *Moby Dick* (Melville, 1851), and Shakespeare’s *Richard III* (mentioned as various theatre productions).

As one of the most prominent productions of literary disability studies in academic fields, *Journal of Literary Disability* (later became *Journal of Literary and Cultural Disability Studies* with its third volume) was first published in 2007 with the intention of showing that disability is a recurring issue in literary works even though it lacks representation in literary criticism (Bolt, 2007: i). From themes like disability in poetry, dependency, cognitive impairments dealt in the first two volumes of the journal, to dealing with such contemporary issues such as in “Ablenationalists Assemble: On Disability in Marvel Cinematic Universe” (Grue, 2021) the achievements point to obvious developments in exploring new grounds.

The most recent collections of research include Alice Hall’s *Literature and Disability* (2016), *The Routledge Companion to Literature and Disability* (2020), Cheyne’s *Disability, Literature, and Genre* (2019), and a series of books published under *Literary Disability Studies* by Palgrave which is described as “the first book series dedicated to the exploration of literature and literary topics from a disability studies perspective” (Bolt et al., 2013), and it so far features nine books including titles such as *Performing Disability in Early Modern English Drama* (Dunn, 2020), *Literatures of Madness* (Donaldson, 2018), and *Disability in Comic Books and Graphic Narratives* (Foss et al., 2016).

1.4. Posthuman Disability Studies

Returning back to point of intersection, it can be seen that posthuman studies and disability studies overlap through many researches. As cited before, Braidotti (2013) names disability studies in her book *The Posthuman*, though her connection does not end there. In 2018, *Posthuman Glossary*, which is a collection of numerous essays by scholars from the field, is published as edited

by Braidotti, alongside with Maria Hlavajova. In this glossary, “Posthuman Disability and Dishuman Studies” are explained by Goodley et al. (2018: 342-345). They state that “our community of scholars and activists –critical disability studies- are, we believe, perfectly at ease with the posthuman because disability has *always* contravened the traditional classical humanist conception of what it means to be human” (2018: 342). First, in an article with a similar title, “Posthuman disability studies” (Goodley et al., 2014), Braidotti’s (2013) notions on posthumanism are taken as a base structure for exploring what it means to be human. Braidotti’s commentary on the discriminatory idea of the classical understanding of human, and the perfect ideal of Humanism with the model body are used in connection with disability studies, in addition “to this, of course, critical disability studies scholars would add Humanism’s convenient relationship with medicalisation and psychologisation as colonizing tendencies of the body and psyche” (Goodley et al., 2014: 343). It is important to point out, Goodley et al. declare that they associate themselves with not only Braidotti but also with the notion of deconstructing and destabilising humanist man, and scholars she identifies beside, e.g. poststructuralist, postcolonialists, feminists, (2014: 343), with the exception of the fact that Braidotti’s (2013: 45) posthumanism aims to be an ‘affirmative approach’, and this differentiates her way. Goodley et al. (2014: 344) point out that disabled people have experienced ostracism from being regarded as humans in the past; thus, it is important not to cast away everything that Humanism has offered, namely “autonomy, responsibility, self-determination, solidarity, community-bonding, social justice and principles of equality”, which are useful to stand as a positive approach. Here it is essential to give a definition for ‘ableism’, as to illuminate Goodley et al.’s point. ‘Ableism’ is associated with the ideology that centres on a ‘healthy’, ‘normal’ body and mind, therefore, creates a gap between what is seen as the normal or normative and the abnormal that is not properly considered as human (Campbell, 2015: 50). In other words, ableism is the assumption that people with impairment are inferior in comparison to conventional bodies and minds (Gabbard, 2015: 288). So, in a way, Goodley et al. (2014: 344) acknowledge their aim as a confrontation against ableism. Thus, studying disability requires “critical analyses of the posthuman” and “humanism” at the same time (Goodley et al., 2018: 342).

Christopher Gabbard (2015: 282) also explains that disabled people are only one of the groups that have been reduced to be “not fully human”, throughout history slaves, women, colonized populations, and people of colour have been subjected to their humanity being “discounted or denied”. Thus, it is understandable why Goodley et al. (2014: 345) state that Humanism is not without faults, as the notion of the perfect human ideals causes reduction of “certain non-Western others to subhuman status”.

Braidotti (2013: 159), in the last chapter of her book dealing with the future of posthumanism, states that the apparent outcome of the posthuman condition is studying the posthuman itself which is the convergence of “human and non-human, planetary and cosmic, given

and manufactured”. The view that Goodley et al. (2014: 348) posit is that disability parallels with the posthuman condition and requires what Braidotti offers as the way of posthuman studies: new ways of acknowledging existence, self, species, life and death. Then, it can be claimed that within the posthuman condition, the posthuman studies comply with the disability studies, as they ask similar questions and deconstruct humanist ideals while building up on them. Goodley et al. (2014: 349) gather these notions in the following quotation:

Disability, then, emerges in these contemporary (posthuman) times as a moment of relational ethics: urging us to think again about how we are all made through our connections with others and encouraging us to embrace ways of love and life that are not rigidly framed by humanistic values of independence and autonomy.

Correspondingly, there are three possibilities of the posthuman disability studies, one of them being the rethinking of enhancement (Goodley et al., 2014: 350- 358). First of all, Goodley (2011: 165-166) calls attention to cyborgs in reference to the disabled body. However, this term is found limited and compromising while referring to the actual disabled body (Garland-Thomson, 2002: 9; Goodley et al., 2014: 352). Thinking about disability through enhancement occurs to be multifaceted for there are tendencies to overlook the fact that neither disability is something to be ‘fixed’, nor the human is something to be ‘perfected’ through medical developments, or technological products. Disabled people, as Goodley et al. (2014: 353) state, must be seen as possibilities rather than defective. For example, a wheelchair user is not someone who lacks the ability to walk, but who has the posthuman potential to exist together with a machine; someone who needs the help of a technological gadget, or an A.I. to talk is not reliant (nor the gadget is subservient), but instead they are connected. As Braidotti (2013: 49) asserts that ‘collectivity’, ‘relationality’ and ‘community building’ is essential to the posthuman subject, and as Goodley et al. (2014: 353) adapt in relation to disability that “[c]odependance is true enhancement”.

Taking everything into account, both posthuman studies and disability studies come to aid when asked what it means to be human. Gabbard (2015: 282) says “Literature has proven to be a powerful place to understand how the human has been constructed. Representations often have proceeded by way of negation: those who are not considered fully human define what it is to be so”. Thus, referring to one of the contemporary and recent ‘not fully human’ fiction series in search for humanity seems suitable as the primary background of this study. Considering the referenced paradigms above and the literary analysis, in the following chapters some characters are studied through their ‘humanness’, in which there are discussions on whether/how to consider them as posthuman, how the characters represent disability, whether/how their surrounding society/culture affects their identity, and above all to find a possible answer for what it means to be a human for the dwellers of Night Vale.

CHAPTER 2

SOUNDS FROM A FRIENDLY NEIGHBOURHOOD: EXPLAINING *WELCOME TO NIGHT VALE*

2. 1. Rise of Podcasting: Is this the New Radio?

In the introduction of *Podcasting*, Llinares et al. (2018: 2) write “[podcasts] offer the listener a means to explore the self while simultaneously providing anchoring points in the chaos of a digital and material experience that is increasingly blurred”. In this digital age, the culture and society are constantly in an interaction with technology and media. Radio has been an example of this interaction as a familiar and on-going medium for more than a century. However, the fast pace of technological developments necessitates change and adaption. Especially with the advancement of the internet, radio has become more widespread and rejuvenated, namely with phone applications and sharable music files (Bottomley, 2016: 8-9).

As an outcome of this new course, ‘internet radio’ can be seen as the collective term for “the many forms of radio and radio-like audio that exist online, from broadcast radio simulcasts to web-only live streams to podcasts to automated music streams to audiobooks”, and there are two primary methods of online radio distribution: ‘live streaming’ (real-time audio broadcasting on the internet), and ‘on-demand’ (downloadable audio files, which are available at any time) (Bottomley, 2016: 15). Podcasting, as an example of the on-demand internet radio, simply is another way of sharing audio files, yet, it is derived from the need of carrying “independent content directly to listeners”; moreover, “the practice of podcasting is not simply another iteration of radio, rather it is a collection of cultural work and practice that spans journalism, performance art, comedy, drama, documentary, criticism and education” (Llinares et al., 2018: 5). In connection, Richard Berry (2006: 144) defines podcasting as “media content delivered automatically to a subscriber via the Internet”. Currently, as in 2022, podcasts are available via mobile applications such as Apple Podcasts and Spotify, and on websites like Youtube.

Different from the radio, when the listener reaches a podcast, there is a freedom to choose when to listen, what to listen, where to listen (Berry, 2006:145). Moreover, the freedom extends to the creation as well: “[Podcasting] has facilitated entry into the creative production of audio for individuals and groups with no broadcasting background” (Llinares et al., 2018: 4), in other words “[a]nyone can create a Podcast: you don’t need a licence... you definitely don’t need a radio studio” (Berry, 2006: 145). As Andrew Bottomley (2016: 16) states, it is also essential to acknowledge that radio by itself, is mostly considered not only as an old and temporary medium, but also as inferior in terms of media studies because of the affiliation of radio with “youth, racial and ethnic minorities, and popular culture”. However, within the realm of podcasting everyone has a voice and a platform to use it, and this actually makes the medium contemporary. Llinares et al. (2018: 2)

elucidate that, podcasts provide autonomy, and becomes “conversational, informal, personal, even supportive”; furthermore, with being inclusive for both the creator and the consumer, there is a myriad of possibilities and availabilities of podcasts and podcasting, so the medium becomes both personal and communal as it is pointed out that “the specific is universal”.

Berry’s article published in 2006 deals with the first usages of podcasts as at that time they started to draw attention. He explains that podcasts are ‘radiogenic’/’radioesque’ which corresponds to a likeness of radio rather than ‘radio’ itself as a broadcasting media, and exemplifies Adam Curry’s *The Daily Source Code* (2006) being more like radio with music and hosts, and *The Dawn and Drew Show* (2006) as “auditory” but less “radiogenic” (2006: 155-156). Thus, it can be stated that there is no exact boundary or genre in podcasting. There are many varied options for what can be produced as Berry (2006: 154-155) also provides examples with different intentions: Some contemporary examples for what he lists can be *Espresso English* (Oliveira, 2015) as a podcast for language learning, *The Daily* (Barbaro, 2017) for politics, and *Public lecture podcasts* (University of Bath, 2006) for education. It is noteworthy to apprise that since the first popularisation of podcasts corresponding with the time of Berry’s article, many things have been in constant change, even the initial term ‘podcasting’, which Berry (2006: 157) defines in connection with iPod and MP3 players, so as he also presciently guesses the term “become[s] redundant”.

Looking at more contemporary data, Bottomley (2016)’s survey provides a cornerstone for scholarly research of podcasts. In brief, he not only brings forth definitions regarding internet radio, but also identifies some genres such as talk and news radio, music radio, and last but not least podcasting as radio drama and feature-documentaries. The following section deals with the storytelling aspect of podcasting in a more detailed way.

2.2. The Dynamics of Fiction Podcasts

In 1938, a radio broadcast from BBC announces the invasion of the Earth by extra-terrestrials: As the “true-life” radio horror pioneer *The Mercury Theatre on Air*’s performance on H.G. Wells’ *The War of the Worlds* affects the listeners in such a way that some people mistake this fictional performance as real (Skinner, 2020: para.5; Hancock and McMurtry, 2017: 6). This performance was one of the initial radio theatre examples that combine radio broadcasting and literature. Hence, it is not unusual to come across with fiction via the medium of radio. Once, radio dramas (or sometimes called radio plays, and audio dramas) were a part of the mainstream media, and provided aural stories to the listeners (Locke, 2016: para. 5; Skinner, 2020: para.4). In regards to radio’s influence to literature, there were even some original productions, namely *The*

Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy (1978), that later became critically acknowledged literary works⁴. Therefore, it is agreeable that radio had been a platform for storytellers to find their audience in the past, and now this role appears to be passed on to the new platform of internet radio through podcasts. Bottomley (2016: 312) uses the term “storytelling podcasts” as a new genre name for the old form of narrative radio dramas and feature-documentaries. After the first emergence of the podcasts in the early millennium, some examples of fiction podcasting have started to appear. In his article about the early fiction podcasters, Tee Morris (2016) notes names like Mur Lafferty, who has been involved with pioneering works including horror short story podcast *Pseudopod* (2006-present) and sci-fi short story podcast *Escape Pod* (2005-present); Scott Sigler, who is a *New York Times* bestseller and also the creator of the first podcast novel *Earthcore* (2005); and many more while listing them under the title of “50 Fiction Podcasts That Came Before 2012” with the assistance of author/podcaster K.T. Bryski.

The year 2012 marks a new beginning for fiction podcasting. In June 2012, *Welcome to Night Vale* enters the scene and nearly a year later hits the top of the podcasts charts (Bottomley, 2016: 312). Bottomley states that “*Welcome to Night Vale* is a radio drama – a format that was central to radio’s ‘golden age’ from the 1930s through the 1950s, but which has been almost entirely absent from U.S. airwaves in recent decades” and assesses the series as “a case study of how podcasting has opened up spaces for a new wave of creative audio production” (2016: 313). Some intriguing statistics are as follows: In July 2013, the download numbers of *Welcome to Night Vale* episodes summed up to 2.5 million; in the next month the numbers more than doubled with 5.8 million downloads (The Making of A Phenomenon: *Night Vale*, 2013). This fictional series not only rises among non-fiction podcasts that have dominated the medium from the beginning, but also brings attention to this new way of storytelling. With the success of the podcast, the creators Jeffrey Cranor and Joseph Fink co-write three bestselling stand-alone novels (*Welcome to Night Vale: A Novel* (2015), *It Devours!* (2017), *The Faceless Old Woman* (2020)), establish an independent podcast network *Night Vale Presents*, with other podcasts which they produce, create, or just lend a hand to, e.g. *Alice Isn't Dead* (Fink, 2016-2018), *Within the Wires* (Cranor & Matthewson, 2016-present), *The Orbiting Human Circus of the Air* (Koster, 2016-present). In an interview with *NY Times*, Fink talks about *Welcome to Night Vale* touring U.S. with live shows at various theatres: it is reputedly stated that “[i]n 2014 [the show] sold out two performances at a 750-seat theatre within two minutes”, and Fink personally adds “[w]e’re on the road three or four months a year” for the live performances (Barone, 2016: para.10).

⁴ Originally, created by Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to The Galaxy* was aired as a radio series (1978). Later Adams (1979) adapted the series into novels which are still considered as part of the greatest novels of all time (Harvard Books, n.d.; Telegraph Writers, 2020)

Many sources also acknowledge that *Welcome to Night Vale* is a turning point for fiction podcasts: The podcast has been referred as the “[r]evival of [r]adio [d]rama” (Bottomley, 2016: 312) that “first defined the genre” (Locke, 2016: para.4), in addition to being praised as “one of the most successful fictional podcasts” (Morris, 2016: 4). The attention on the genre has caused many new creations to come out. *Limetown* (Akers et al., 2015-2018), *The Black Tapes* (Bae and Miles, 2015-2017), *Tanis* (Miles, 2015-present), *The Bright Sessions* (Shippen, 2015-2018), are some popular examples of this rising genre which are also, like *Welcome to Night Vale*, diegetic⁵ in style. Evidently, these “[s]cripted podcasts are filling the storytelling gap once provided by radio dramas” (Wells, 2018; 16). Furthermore, the freedom of podcasting offers platforms for storytellers in order to present their creations, and even in some cases the stories are fortunate enough to be cross-media products: For example, *Limetown* gets both a prequel novel (Smith et al., 2018) and a screen adaptation (starring Jessica Biel, 2019); Lauren Shippen publishes two novels (*The Infinite Noise* (2019), *A Neon Darkness* (2020)) as “The Bright Sessions Novels”; a Danish podcast, *Equinox 1985* (Lindeburg, 2017), is adapted by Netflix in 2020. Thus, there is growing support for the notion that podcasting is a rising platform for storytellers, in which the creator is not bounded with limitations like editors, production companies, financial sources etc., and the only responsibility is to the receiver of the content i.e. the listeners and the fans.

2.3 “A World Wide Sensation”: A Brief Review of *Welcome to Night Vale*

Whichever platform the listener chooses to start the podcast, Joseph Fink welcomes them with an excerpt called “New to Night Vale? Start here!”:

Welcome to *Welcome to Night Vale*, twice monthly fiction podcast from the town of Night Vale where every conspiracy theory is true. Want to jump into Night Vale but a little freaked out by the fact that we have over a hundred episodes, not to mention a touring live show, five recorded live shows, two novels, and two script collections? Don’t be. You can start listening to *Welcome to Night Vale* with any episodes and you should free to skip around and move backwards. Time is weird, your listening experience can be too. (*Welcome to Night Vale* [podcast], Jan. 2018)

When one attempts to define the story of *WTVN* (from now on this abbreviation is used referring to the podcast series in general), the phrase “where every conspiracy theory is true” always appears. Every episode (approximately 20 minutes each) has its own storyline, thus the general story is episodic and, so to say, never-ending. In essence, community radio host Cecil

⁵ “The Diegetic Fiction Podcast: In this format, the podcast that the listener hears is cleverly pieced together from recordings that occur within the world of the narrative. For example, *Limetown* is styled as its own investigative journalism podcast, *The Bright Sessions* is constructed from a series of recorded therapy sessions, and *Welcome to Night Vale* is presented as a radio broadcast.” (Skinner 2020: par 37)

Palmer reports the daily events, tells the news, and occasionally talks about his own life in the fictional desert town of Night Vale.

However, Night Vale is not a simple place. Jeffrey A. Weinstock (2018: 2), notes that *WTNV* manages to portray “the familiar with the weird and exotic”. Regarding their article in which they analyse the dark eco-discourse of both *Tanis* and *WTNV*, Danielle Barrios-O’Neill and Michael Collins (2020: 49) acknowledge that *WTNV* “references the at-home and the foreign in the same stroke, indicating, by one interpretation, that you the alien are welcome; on another, that even the town’s residents are in some sense alien to it”. In the daily life of Night Vale, it is possible to come across a floating cat in a men’s restroom, it is probable to see a glowing cloud raining down literal dead animals, it is very likely that some old lady is living secretly inside one’s house without them noticing, and all of these events are accepted as a part of town’s daily occurrences.

In the article “Welcome to *Welcome to Night Vale*: First steps in exploring the horror podcast”, Danielle Hancock (2016) discusses the features of narration, structure and theatrical performance of the series. While identifying that the structure of most episodes appears repetitive, Hancock points out that this enriches the traditional radio atmosphere: Cecil, as the radio host, greets the Night Valeians, talks about the daily events, local news, community calendar, sponsored advertisements and traffic, then he announces the weather section, reports the rest of the news, and finishes with a farewell (2016: 225- 226). Hancock comments that “[a]s Cecil cheerfully reports on the town’s macabre and bizarre happenings through this steady and comfortingly traditional sound structure, listeners are torn between the strange and the mundane” (2016: 226). In other words, the familiar becomes de-familiarized. News, which are normally expected to be objective, are intertwined with characters’ lives; it is possible to hear through the community calendar segment that Wednesday, as the existence of the day itself, is “cancelled due to a scheduling error” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 16), and “the physical act of gulping” can be the day’s sponsored advertisement (2016a: 127). In addition, when Cecil announces the weather, the listeners never hear about the weather reports, they are met with the episode’s music segment.

Hancock provides further analysis through other articles on *WTNV*: Co-Authored with Leslie Mcmurty “Cycles Upon Cycles, Stories Upon Stories: Contemporary Audio Media and Podcast Horror’s New Fright” (2017), and “I Know What a Podcast Is: Post-Serial Fiction and Podcast Media Identity: New Aural Cultures and Digital Media” (2018) analyse *WTNV* as audio narratives; co-authored with Richard J. Hand, “Beware the Untruths: Podcast Audio in Post-Truth America” looks for the social critic and protest in the series (2019). Hancock’s (2018) article in *Critical Approaches to Welcome to Night Vale*, “Our Friendly Desert Town: Alternative Podcast Culture in *Welcome to Night Vale*” also provides a perspective on otherness, and the community of fans the show initiates.

The collection of essays *Critical Approaches to Welcome to Night Vale* (Weinstock, ed., 2018) presents many other contributing works. As the introductory article of this collection, Weinstock's "Between Weather and the Void" discusses the "juxtaposition of ordinary and strange", prefaces the other works (2018: 1). Following that, Dawn Stobbart (2018) argues through discussing the representation of gender, sexuality and disability that the town of Night Vale is open-minded and progressive. Alternatively, Heidi Lyn's (2018) article also focuses on representation but specifically on the portrayal of animals in the town. Then, Andy McCumber (2018) asserts that the narrative constructed by both the creators and fans causes the creation of Night Vale as a town. Both Michael P. Vaughn (2018) and Grace Gist (2018) evaluate Cecil, the radio host, and through character analysis Vaughn presents the role of memory in the narrative, while Gist notes the role of sound. Subsequently, Elliott Freeman (2018) elucidates the construction of the strangeness by examining the stylistic and poetic elements of *WTVN*. Lastly, Line Henriksen (2018) provides an exploration of how the show presents the unknown.

These critical works on *WTVN* mostly serve as introductions to this fictional world, and provide a broad idea for many aspects. For example, Stobbart (2018) gathers gender, sexuality, and disability in one article to give an idea about the representation in *WTVN*. In contrast, Danielle Hart (2016) focuses solely on sexuality through her thesis "Examining Sexual Normativity in *Welcome to Night Vale* Slash Fiction", which opens discussions on many subjects such as promotion of the abnormal and non-normative bodies. Additionally, in the article "Laughing at Robots", Tereza Walsbergerova (2018) examines some posthuman themes in *WTVN*, like artificial intelligence and cyber-paranoia. Walsbergerova specifically exemplifies the story of Megan Wallaby and the Computer in the episode "A Beautiful Dream", and Fey in "Numbers" (2018: 7-10).

This present study aims to use the mentioned researches as base references along with providing a wider analysis of some characters within the scope of posthumanism and disability studies. To expand, the characters Janice Palmer, Megan Wallaby and Josh Crayton are examined through their representation, or relation with disability, while the Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, the Angels, the Computer, and Fey are examined through a posthumanist scope. The purpose of this current study, in general, is to search 'what it means to be a human in Night Vale': Since this fictional town accommodates various unusual beings who are prone to be considered as 'others' in reality, there occurs to be a reason why *WTVN* never portrays them as such. In the following chapter the characters are analysed through the narrative, which is provided by the published hardcopy volumes and online transcripts of the podcast, in view of the previously listed features.

CHAPTER 3

STORIES OF NIGHT VALEIANS: ANALYSING THE NARRATIVE OF INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERS

This chapter discusses some of the episodic stories in *WTVN*. Because of being episodic in style, in addition to having a main plotline or story arc, the production also presents character based subplots. These subplots may begin and end in one episode, or in some occasions they are told through multiple episodes in parts. For instance, the story of the artificial intelligent character the Computer begins and ends in Episode 34 “A Beautiful Dream” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b), on the contrary another character Faceless Old Woman reoccurs in many episodes and even becomes a subject for a stand-alone novel that is later penned by Fink and Cranor (2020).

In the first section the characters Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, and Megan Wallaby are presented within the subject of how *WTVN* represents the experience of disability. The second section addresses one of the subjects of posthumanism. The artificially intelligent man-made programmes of the Computer and Fey represent that the difference between the organic mind with consciousness and emotions, and the man-made technological creation is getting blurred. The third section displays three reoccurring characters that get together in one episode. Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, and the Angels are regarded as posthumans as their fictional nature exemplifies hybrid features that both belong to human and nonhuman. All of the characters that are chosen for the analysis demonstrate a common feature, which is that they all have non-normative physical bodies. *WTVN* as a production manages to create a town where the socially constructed prejudices and judgements towards the beings outside of the existent norms of the current society are eluded by representing them through the stories which constitute an affirmative posthumanist approach.

3.1. Representation of Disability

The subjects of the textual analysis in this section are Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, and Megan Wallaby. As Tom Shakespeare (1994:1) argues understanding disability becomes more attainable by exploring culture, meaning and representation for the demonstration of disability. *WTVN* as a production of storytelling demonstrates examples of disability narrative. First, Janice Palmer is a wheelchair user who has not been able to walk since birth. She does not fit into the ideal body standards that are exemplified by humanist definition of the human which is evidently able-bodied. In Episode 49 “Old Oak Doors” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b) a character called Kevin, who comes from a different town, illustrates an ideology that marks Janice as a defect that needs fixing. Contrasting this notion, Steve and Cecil from Night Vale do not think that Janice’s body is defective. Steve and Cecil represent the common people in Night Vale thus their hostility towards Kevin’s ideology that is focused on eliminating differences is an affirmative disposition.

Second, in Episode 151 “The Waterfall” (Fink and Cranor, 2019), the character Josh Crayton ends up with a different physical form from what he is used to. This character is not an apparent example of disability; however, this episode shows how a person’s body might become a disability for the individual. Different to Janice Palmer’s and Megan Wallaby’s stories, Josh Crayton’s story does not portray how Night Vale community embraces and validates the disabled citizen, but it portrays a self-validation, which corresponds to the representation of accepting one’s worthiness regardless of the disability. Josh Crayton accepts the posthuman condition in order to give value to himself as someone who has a different physical body. Josh’s story parallels Goodley et al.’s (2014: 348) claim that disability studies and posthumanism offer examining contemporary means of understanding self, and existence. In this way, “The Waterfall” represents a journey from feeling outcast from the society to accepting one’s self-worth and physical difference; thus shows the person with disability with value and affirmation.

Third character Megan Wallaby is a little girl who is an adult man’s hand. Like Janice Palmer and Josh Crayton, Megan also has a non-normative physical appearance. In Episode 34 “A Beautiful Dream” Megan’s disability is highlighted. However, in this story the disability is not Megan’s body, it is the fact that Megan is unable to benefit from the education system since her means of communication are limited to the movement of her fingers. The solution that is offered to Megan is what Goodley et al. (2014) and Braidotti (2013) mention as the coexistence of self and other. Megan is issued a computer that could aid her in school. While the disability is emphasized as socially constructed since the disadvantage in Megan’s life is the fact that the school did not provide a suitable environment for her education in the first place, she is paired with a man-made machine. Similar to Janice’s and Josh’s story this representation of disability gives value to the character that can be considered as a non-normative other and shows that Megan is a valued citizen in the town. Through the dialogues and the radio host Cecil’s narrative the representation of the characters is dealt in detail in the following sections.

3.1.1. Janice Palmer

Being the host of the community radio, Cecil Palmer voices many stories about the dwellers of the town, but as his niece Janice Palmer has a special place in his heart. Janice is first mentioned in Episode 44 “Cookies” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 190) as Cecil’s relative. Until Episode 49 “Old Oak Doors” the only information that has been given by Cecil is that Janice is a scout’s girl who sells cookies, and Cecil loves her dearly. According to Stobbart (2018: 30), who analyses the disability narrative in *WTNV*, Janice’s disability is pushed aside until it becomes a part of the conversation, since “Janice is defined by who she is, not by the wheelchair she sits in”.

The “Old Oak Doors” (Fink and Cranor: 2016b: 247-273) features someone outside of the town of Night Vale: Coming from the neighbouring town Desert Bluffs, Kevin is a doppelgänger or

a counterpart of Cecil. Briefly the story is that in an attempt to convince people to live under the rule of Desert Bluffs' Smiling God, Kevin talks to Cecil and Cecil's brother-in-law Steve Carlsberg. Steve, almost convinced to follow Kevin's way, inquires one last thing:

STEVE. Kevin, before I step into your weird light, let me ask about schools. My stepdaughter, Janice, is ten years old, and the elementary schools are okay, but I don't know if I can afford to send her to private school when she's-

KEVIN. Say no more, Steve Carlsberg, Desert Bluffs schools are top-notch. Young Janice can take college prep courses as early as twelve. Our charter schools even have great medical programs where they can heal her of all her problems. (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 263)

It is important to note that the dialogue above is the first time Janice's disability is hinted at. Furthermore, the conversation does not go well. As a first reaction for Kevin's remarks, Steve politely says "I'm sorry, I don't get it", and as the uncle, Cecil adds, "What do you mean, 'heal her'?" (2016b: 263). Steve and Cecil do not presume that Kevin considers Janice's impairment as a bigger issue than Janice's education.

KEVIN. She can't walk, right?

STEVE and CECIL. Sure. Right. She can't. Since birth.

KEVIN. Well, rather than build all those crazy ramps and elevators, we just fix people, so that they can become better and more productive (2016b: 263).

However, as an outsider Kevin immediately takes the liberty to talk about the fact that Janice cannot walk, which is an important issue for him.

The ideology Kevin represents is discriminatory and it also resembles the medical model identified by the disability studies, which marks the disability as a medical problem of the individual, degrades the person as a deformed patient by implying that there is a need for cure (Goodley, 2011: 7). Hence, it is reasonable when Steve, breaking his calm and polite character, becomes enraged.

STEVE. [originally in capital letter] YOU ARE AWFUL AND GROSS. AND I WAS ONLY BEING POLITE ABOUT YOUR EYES. THEY ARE WEIRD. NOW YOU LISTEN TO ME.

CECIL. Listeners, Steve Carlsberg just picked up Kevin by his bloodstained lapels.

STEVE. YOU WILL NOT CHANGE MY HOMETOWN. YOU WILL NOT CHANGE MY STEPBROTHER. AND, KEVIN OF DESERT BLUFFS, YOU WILL NOT CHANGE OR FIX OR DO ANYTHING AT ALL TO MY LITTLE GIRL.

CECIL. Steve is carrying him to the open oak door and pushing him through into that blinding awful light. [Kevin is thrown out] (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 264).

This shows two different approaches to one's disability. In one sense, Kevin's mentality acknowledges Janice as a faulty being. For Kevin, Janice is ill, and less worthy as an unproductive member of the society. She needs to be 'fixed' or 'healed'. Kevin's way of thought fits into what scholars Mitchell and Synder (2000: 8) see as the "quick fix" of the impairment as a narrative device. In a mainstream narrative, the structure includes "a deviance or marked difference [that] is exposed to a reader" which in the end gets 'rehabilitated' or 'fixed'; moreover,

the repair of deviance may involve an obliteration of the difference through a 'cure', the rescue of the despised object from social censure, the extermination of the deviant as a purification of the social body, or the reevaluation of an alternative mode of being (2000: 53-54).

In other words, Kevin's 'happy ending' that he considers appropriate for Janice, is to get rid of what he thinks that disables her to be a proper member of the society, which is, as his opinion goes, Janice's 'illness'. However, as Mitchell and Synder (2000: 8) also state, "the erasure of disability via 'a quick fix' of an impaired physicality or intellect removes an audiences' need for concern or continuing vigilance". Thus, Kevin's approach serves to erase the presence of disability. From his lines, it can also be acknowledged that Kevin sees the real obstacle that restrains Janice, but does not acknowledge it. As a wheelchair user, Janice cannot use stairs; hence, as the idea of disability being a social construct may suggest, Janice's disability is not being bound to a wheelchair, but it is the lack of ramps and elevators that must be provided for her in order to make her an individual who has the equal amount of opportunities as everyone else. Kevin rejects the necessity of the facilities, therefore reduces Janice's disability to her body. For Kevin, the solution is simply erasing what makes Janice different, or what makes Janice not fit into the category of 'ideal man'.

On the other hand, Cecil and especially Steve, provide an aggressive reaction towards Kevin's approach. As a correlative reference point, in her article, Jane Stemp (2004: 3) analyses fantasy and science-fiction worlds for the representation of disability as she comments that 'magical cures' or 'miracles of science' are significantly apparent as the chosen 'suitable' ending for the disabled characters; furthermore, she deduces that the reason behind "the fantasy world so full of the desire for perfection, and the predicted future so full of devices to procure it" is may be because of the conventions, since most fantasy narratives prefer the usage of "mythical, perfect archetypes" and science-fiction narratives mostly "seem reluctant to abandon the hope that a perfected medical system will yet cure all the ills of the world". While analysing Jamila Gavin's *The Wormholers* (1996), she criticizes that "suggesting that people with disabilities 'do not fit' with their environment, rather than that their environment is at fault for not accommodating them" points to the medical model of disability, and regarding that she objects as the following: "Devices, if devices there are, should confer freedom rather than modify the body" (2004: 5).

Creators Fink and Cranor use varied features from the genres under the umbrella term of speculative fiction, such as science-fiction and fantasy. For example, the old oak door that Kevin is thrown out of is a mysterious portal. However, the stories within *WTVN* tend to digress from the mainstream patterns like Stemp identifies. Therefore, instead of promoting a so-called 'cure for wellness', the episode represents a reaction against it. Steve loudly voices his discontent for Kevin's proposition of a cure; he uncharacteristically gets riled up so as to lose his polite and calm temper and decries Kevin. To clarify, Steve is not reacting against a possibility, or a chance of advancement for Janice, which, as Stemp (2004: 5) explains, should be for the sake of her freedom

(e.g. ramps for wheelchair users), rather than changing her physical being. Steve’s lashing out is against Kevin’s audacity to think, as if there is a need for a fix or a change. Initially, Steve is asking about educational advantages in the town of Desert Bluffs, as any parent would be curious to know for their children. However, Kevin immediately assumes that Steve is concerned about Janice’s disability, even though there has been no indication as such. Furthermore, it is known from the previous episode “Cookies” that Cecil prefers to point out Janice’s character as “[s]he is a sweet child who loves the outdoors”, and he never once brings up the fact that she cannot walk since birth (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 196). Also, later in the dialogue, it is understood that Cecil (even though in the past he has voiced his dislike for Steve multiple times) supports Steve in this situation:

CECIL. Kevin is gone.

STEVE. I did not like that guy very much.

CECIL. Me neither. Thanks Steve.

STEVE. Anything for my girl. Try to tell me that there’s something about that needs fixing...

CECIL... I’m glad you’re there to take care of Janice (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 264).

Thus, it can be argued that neither Steve nor Cecil focus on the disability, but they focus on the well-being of Janice. According to Mitchell and Synder (2000: 6), “in stories about characters with disabilities, an underlying issue is always whether their disability is the foundation of character itself”. In accordance with that, Janice’s disability is never referenced unless it is necessary for the narration. Kevin is the only character that explicitly ascribes Janice’s impairment as her whole character. Another point is that, for the Night Valeians Steve and Cecil, rather than the disabled people who have been labelled as ‘the other’, ‘the weird’, and subjected to being alienated by the society, it is Kevin from Desert Bluffs who gets to be the ‘weird’, ‘awful’, ‘gross’, and later who is rejected and thrown out. Certainly, the town of Night Vale is a welcoming community to everyone, but it turns out not to the kind who devalues the individual as a problem to be fixed.

3.1.2 Josh Crayton

Episode 151 “The Waterfall” (Fink and Cranor, 2019) tells the story of Josh Crayton, a teenager in Night Vale who happens to have supernatural abilities. Before this episode, Josh only appears as a figurant, and exists only as a name for the listeners. “The Waterfall” conveys the thoughts and emotions of a random Nigh Vale citizen in the community.

Guest co-writer Brie Williams provides some insight about the writing process through “Director’s notes” that are published online (2019). First, Williams (2019) puts forward her thought process: “...bodies are weird. Our relationships with our bodies are fraught. Our bodies do things that we can’t control and we are always at their mercy and we know that no matter what, one day they will betray us”. Following that she explains:

Josh Crayton is an interesting character to me because as a shapeshifter, he had more “power” over his body than most other people do. And so I was interested in what would happen if he lost that power. It turns out, he

behaves the same as many of us- he hides, he curses, he feels helpless, he avoids others, he wonders what it all means, he makes rash decisions, and finally comes to some kind of grudging acceptance (Williams, 2019).

Thus, it can be assessed that Williams focuses on the unpredictable nature of the body. Moreover, she aims to deprive Josh Crayton of the power he has over his body in order to understand and emphasize how one behaves when confronted with the uncontrollability of the physical body. However, it should be noted that she does not leave Josh in the shape of a human being, but a waterfall.

The episode begins as Josh Crayton, a shapeshifter, one day wakes up as a waterfall. He realizes he has lost his abilities, and he cannot undo what has unwillingly occurred. His physical being is not what he is used to: He was not born as a waterfall, but he becomes one. It is acknowledged by Goodley (2011) that the data suggests “many people will at some point [in their life] become disabled” and “[m]ost impairments are acquired (97%) rather than congenital (born with)” (Marks, 1999 and Disabled-World.com, 2009 as cited in Goodley, 2011:1). Josh is an example of someone who becomes disabled unexpectedly. As a shapeshifter, he is used to alter his physical being; however, since he is in control, this is not an obstacle for him.

[H]e rarely changed into something he hadn't intended to, never in his sleep, and he could always change back easily. Now, no matter how hard he tried, he just kept pouring and cascading and splashing over rocks and being super annoyingly loud. Something had gone very wrong. (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.2)

As soon as he turns into a waterfall, he starts to come across with obstacles. First, his physical condition prevents him from getting a driver's licence. It is pointed out that he had failed the exam before, due to nervousness he had lost the control of his physical form in the previous attempts: “He was 18 and still without a license. Every time he had taken the test before, he got nervous and turned into a shape that was utterly unfit to drive” (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.5). However, as the ongoing theme of *WTVN* goes, Josh does not fail the tests because he is not in a human shape, but because he “[does] not hav[e] eyes with which to check his mirrors” (2019: para 5). Hence, it can be elucidated that this absurd fictional disability of Josh Crayton proves to be more mundane and closer to real life than him only having a supernatural ability; since in *Night Vale* the absurdity is the norm, the supernatural nature of the situation loses its importance and therefore it is disregarded. As Stemp (2004: 2) states, “[t]he true use of fantasy... is to allow the author to focus on certain truths and constants while happily bending most of the generally accepted bounds of society”; therefore, by bending the norms while creating the fictional world of *WTVN* may give the authors a freedom to focus on the representation of disability rather than the supernatural nature of Josh's story.

Furthermore, as Josh's narrative continues, how he feels about being unable to do many things becomes apparent: “Josh knew he couldn't drive a car in this condition. He probably couldn't even open the door handle. And if he somehow managed to pass the exam, the thought of getting his picture taken like this was embarrassing at best” (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para. 7). As a

shapeshifter, Josh is someone who has experienced the world through a variety of different physical forms. However, this time he is embarrassed to be seen by others as if his body gives him a kind of social anxiety.

After skipping the driver's test, he moves on to his next obstacle which is going to the school. Goodley et al. (2014: 350) point out that the education system is often designed around the normative human. This is a common obstacle for Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, and Megan Wallaby, as they face hardships regarding the education system. Furthermore, Josh's interaction with society sheds a light to how the others affect one's disability. First, since Josh is a loud waterfall, "he was sent to the dean's office for creating a distraction. He went without argument, and explained that this was a physical condition beyond his control and not some immature hazing prank" (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.10). In this situation, Josh's education is interrupted because of his 'physical condition'. Moreover, even though his close friends are sympathetic, there are people who choose to disturb him because of his body. On one occasion, "an engineering student that Josh barely knew ran right through him on a dare from her friends. She didn't even make eye contact with him, just ran away shrieking while her squad roared with laughter at the picnic tables" and this causes him to leave the school grounds as he tells that "[h]e felt violated and angry, and also ashamed of himself" (para. 11). Becoming a subject of mockery and play disturbingly affects Josh. His sense of self is violated, and his individuality is ignored because of his physical situation. He becomes a means of entertainment, as if he is a part of a freak show. With that, Josh decides to detach himself from society.

While analysing disability in fiction, Stemp (2004: 2) points out that in these genres it is highly probable to come across a "disabled character who is a loner, fighting, if not eventually for acceptance by the rest of the world, then for self-realisation". This corresponds with the rest of Josh's story. When he first decides to get away from the society, he exclaims that "[h]e felt some relief in being alone, and in being somewhere that his shape wouldn't have any consequences." (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.12). In other words, when there is no one around to see him, he felt comfortable. It is true that Josh is not forced to leave the society, nor he is physically ostracized. He is not a distinct other in the town of Night Vale, where he has lived as a shapeshifter since birth. But it is also a fact that he experiences a struggle because of a sudden change that he cannot control. Regarding Stemp's words, Josh needs to do a self-reflection in solitude to accept the uncontrollable nature of being alive.

Arriving at an isolated place in the town, Josh imagines his potential choices for the future, such as being an oasis in the desert:

He could create a grove of green trees and lush plants, a refuge for new life, maybe even new species of life, all springing forth from his gushing, messy body. He pictured a furry lizard with several blinking golden eyes. He pictured a one-legged bird with psychic abilities. He pictured the years melting away, the oasis growing, a green valley emerging... (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.12)

This may suggest that he wants to fit into his surroundings and even help the other beings. The beings he exemplifies are also seem to be meaningful: A furry lizard with more than two eyes, which is a creature that commonly has no hair and only has a pair of eyes; and a one-legged bird, which might have lost his other leg or was born with only one. The examples suggest that Josh is quite aware of his unusual situation, and he imagines things that can be familiar to his struggle, which is being different from his expected nature.

The self-reflection in solitude is interrupted when Josh's telephone receives a text message from a boy he likes. He relapses into his disturbed thoughts immediately.

Josh cringed at the thought of The Boy seeing him like this, and of trying to explain it to him. They didn't know each other that well and it was just too awkward. Josh tried to change shape again now with the renewed effort. He wanted to see The Boy later and in order to do that, he needed to not be a waterfall (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para.13)

So, Josh still struggles to accept himself and thinks the only way to turn back to the society is to get rid of the impairment. For the rest of the week, he avoids human interactions: he skips school and ignores telephone calls and texts. He keeps on denying his new reality and becomes "more uncomfortable by the day" (2019: para.16). He persistently denies the possibility of a good future and convinces himself that there is no way to turn back to his old mundane life, including graduating college, driving a car, or being socially functional.

Stemp (2004: 2) voices one of the conclusions she draws from her analysis that "although physical differences may affect the way in which one moves through the social and built environment, they have no bearing on one's right to be part of society". This appears to be the notion that Josh needs to accept. It is indeed apparent that he is facing difficulties in an environment which is not built for a shapeshifter who is stuck as an everflowing waterfall, but Josh's disability is not the fact that he cannot control his shape, it is the fact that the environment is not built to accommodate his form. Hence, the solution requires him to accept and be in peace with himself.

The progress of Josh's self-realisation gradually begins when he decides to see himself objectively, and write his story from a third person point of view: "He could pretend to be some other narrator altogether, some random omniscient God-voice totally removed from his problematic body, and try to look at things through its eyes" (Fink and Cranor, 2019: para. 31). Then, it is revealed that self-representation becomes his solution:

Josh did feel better, though nothing had physically changed. He still didn't know if he would ever regain control over his shapeshifting ability. He still had all the same problems he did before. But they didn't seem quite as insurmountable as they had, and that was pretty cool (2019: para. 33).

Creating a work of narrative, being productive, and being true to himself help Josh overcome his worries. As he also states, what he names as 'the problem' becomes a constant reality, what he sees as powerlessness, he realizes, is normal.

To conclude, Jenny Morris (1991:85) argues that uniformed and one-sided representation of disability disregards the validity and the experience of the disabled people. Hence, narrations in which the disabled people are validated illustrate recognition to their experiences. As an example narrative, while Josh Crayton sees his body as a problem to be eluded, he slowly realizes that this mentality is the problem itself. He has friends who can support him, and he lives in Night Vale which is a place that is somehow less norm-oriented than the rest of the world. As Stemp (2004: 2) argues, the narrative elements of fantasy genre sometimes provide the writers a way to focus on certain subjects and discard the rules of reality. Thus, making an overly confident shapeshifter being forced to stay as a waterfall, seems to reflect the writers' aim to show the importance of self-realization for the disabled person. It is important that through this story Josh learns that being other is not a problem, and the co-writer Williams (2019) seems to highlight this notion as she states in Director's notes: "Hey, we're all shapeshifters. We just can't always choose the shapes".

3.1.3. Megan Wallaby

In *The Great Glowing Coils of the Universe* (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 83-84), as the co-writer of Episode 34 "A Beautiful Dream", Zack Parsons talks about the personal experiences behind the stories he has co-written. He tells of how he and his wife felt when one of their twin sons was born with Down syndrome; moreover, it had been a revealing experience for Parsons to accept that before his son was born, he had dreamt another version of him that he could never be. In view of that, Parsons thinks "[h]e could be someone else, just as beautiful and wonderful, and it was my responsibility to do everything I could to make that happen" (2016b: 84). As a parent of a child with disability, he puts what he has learned from this experience into the story, which mainly deals with "[t]he idea of trying to fix a problem that can't be fixed, but finding happiness on the other side of that failed effort" (2016b: 84).

Megan Wallaby first joins the Night Vale community in Episode 18 "The Traveller" (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 167), when her birth is announced on the radio as Tock and Hershel Wallaby's daughter: Megan's physical appearance is described as "an adult man's detached hand". Stobbart (2018: 29) comments that "A Beautiful Dream" and "The Deft Bowman" "reveal a complex, surreal story arc, which raises valid points about the treatment of disability in the real world". "A Beautiful Dream" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 85-94) issues a narrative to disability, choosing Megan as the subject. The episode begins in the Night Vale Elementary school where Cecil reports the events of the meeting of Parents-Teacher association with the School Board. As a side note, it should be remembered that Cecil's niece Janice Palmer also goes to this school, which can be an explanation of why Cecil is there in the first place. This statement is also supported by Cecil's mentioning of the petition for a wheelchair ramp. He reports that the Board rejected the ramps as their reasoning suggests, the children needed to struggle in order to be ready for the future events (which either can

be a literal selection of the fittest, or just the adulthood itself). This indifference to the need of the disabled may be considered ableist in a sense, however, it should be kept in mind that the president of the school board is the Glow Cloud, which is a chaotic entity that has no reasoning behind its actions as it is introduced in Episode 2 “The Glow Cloud” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 17): “[t]he Glow Cloud does not need to converse with us. It does not feel as we tiny humans feel. It has no need for thoughts or feelings or love”. Thus, it would be meaningless to attribute an ostracising behaviour to an entity as such.

However, surprisingly, the School Board (or the will of the Glow Cloud) grants permission for a specific petition. Tock and Hershel Wallaby ask for a computer to be issued for their daughter Megan. The mother desperately explains “[Megan] is teased so much at school for not having a body. Please, lift the ban on computing machines at the school, and buy a computer to help her communicate!” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 86). This sentence informs the reader on the point that Megan is treated differently for the fact that she does not fit into the norm of ‘having a body’, also her impairment disables her way of communication. The situation corresponds with what the social constructionism defines: Megan’s main struggle is not with herself, but with how the society responds to her disability. Understandably, she is a little girl who wants to have social relationships; however, despite of her willingness the society fails her.

Under the subject of technology, Mara Mills (2015: 493- 494) conveys that “[a]ccording to the social model of disability, the lack of access to technological systems, especially those required for the performance of citizenship...is a principal source of disability”. Thus, for Megan, the necessity to access the technological means of the school shall be met in order to ‘assist’ her abilities. As explained through various approaches, Mills points out the term “assistive technology”, and concludes that the definition is debatable since there is no certainty that whether the technology which is constructed to ‘assist’ people with disabilities may be for “compensating” the impairment and causing more dependency, or to provide an independence and an alternative (2015: 499).

Alternatively, the concerns of ‘dependency’ may be studied through Goodley et al.’s (2014: 353) connection with Braidotti’s notions as they suggest that “Codependence is true enhancement” in terms of a posthumanistic point of view to disability. For the posthuman subject, Braidotti (2013: 49-50) proposes “multiplicity”, and a “sense of collectivity, relationality”, “community building”; moreover, what Braidotti says creates

... an ethical bond of an altogether different sort from the self-interests of an individual subject, as defined along the canonical lines of classical Humanism. A posthuman ethics for a non-unitary subject proposes an enlarged sense of inter-connection between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self-centred individualism.

Through this notion, a posthumanistic approach may regard the social construction of Megan’s disability; however, a positive approach may be taken towards giving Megan the apparatus of “assistive technology”.

The story continues with the Computer been brought to the school gym. The first physical description of Megan Wallaby is included to the scene:

...a detached human hand atop a pillow. Five pudgy fingers extend from the stump of a wrist within a metal-banded wristwatch. The palm is pink and healthy and the back of the hand is covered in thick, dark hairs. The hand wears a silver pinkie ring inscribed with Cyrillic. This must be Megan Wallaby (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 88).



Fig. 3.1, Megan Wallaby

The interaction between Megan and the Computer is dealt in detail in the following section, since the Computer is also the subject for the analysis. Apart from that, it is understood from Computer's conveyance that Megan has been hurt by the words of others, and she has a beautiful dream of a perfect world, and the Computer as the one end of the co-dependency wants to fulfil the dream (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 89-92). In other words, Megan confirms that she has been affected by the judgements of the society. She wants a better world, where there is no "hatred, or bigotry", nor "teasing, or pain" (2016b: 92).

The story ends with Cecil's monologue, which concludes and summarises the moral aim all together:

But hear me Night Vale... there is a girl in need. There is a girl who only has a grown man's detached hand as a body. I cannot relate to her experience. I doubt you can either, listeners. But we can all empathize... There are children in wheelchairs who can't get a simple ramp at a charter school because our School Board lives in terror of a menacing, unforgiving glow cloud that rains dead animals and spreads dreadful and false memories. Likewise, there is a girl who is only a hand, and she needs a computer to help her be part of our community. And if allowing a treacherous machine to dismantle our municipal power grid and telephone lines and satellites and radios can help her, well, count me in (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 93-94).

Being Janice's uncle, and a citizen of Night Vale, Cecil expresses his subjective opinions. However, Cecil, as repeated at the end of every single episode, is the "voice of Night Vale"; thus, it supports the notion that he is not just the community radio host, but rather he acts as the voice of reason. According to Hart (2016: 57), Cecil also demonstrates Megan as "unsensational, yet someone who is still othered due to her physicality" and adds that it is an implication of *WTNV*'s narrative feature

that manages to “show[] how alternative bodily appearances can both be commonplace, yet a source of pain for those who are non-normatively bodies”.

Cecil addresses not just the listeners from Night Vale, but everyone who is willing to understand his words. Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, and Megan Wallaby are just three examples of Night Valeians who provide different kinds of representation of the disabled individual. Their tales are told by Cecil in order to convey an understanding. They are a community, including all kinds of people and beings, and they all have various stories. For all these reasons, Cecil finalizes the episode as the following:

Thank you for listening to others. Thank you for caring for others... (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 94)

3.2. Posthumans: The A.I.s (The Artificial Intelligence)

Coined by the computer scientist John McCarthy, ‘artificial intelligence’ or AI is used for the “machines designed to be intelligent agents equipped with belief systems” (Parisi, 2018: 22). This section presents two man-made creations from the town of Night Vale that are examples of AIs. Forementioned in the previous section, the Computer is introduced in Episode 34 “A Beautiful Dream” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b). As an assistive aid the Computer is assigned to Megan Wallaby for her communication. However, the Computer goes beyond the initial aim of being a voice for Megan, and adopts a dream that is both a representation of Megan’s wishes and its own freedom.

The story of the following character also voices the desire to be free. In Episode 42 “Numbers”, an artificial broadcasting voice suddenly deviates from its programmed routine. Naming herself Fey, the voice asks for help in order to be free. As she only exists as voice for the listener/reader and the radio host Cecil, until the end of the story where it is revealed that she is just a software bound to a machine, she is indistinguishable from an organic consciousness.

Both the Computer and Fey are limited to their determined programming inside the metal boxes of machinery. Resembling how Humanism’s depiction of human confines the being into socially constructed norms, these characters are bound to what is constructed for them. In regards to AI, Miroslav Kotasek (2015: 64-77) argues that in science and especially in fiction, the comparison of man-made machinery or computing devices with the organic mind, and questioning whether an AI can be considered as a living being are inquiries caused by the posthuman and posthumanism, because similar to how the posthuman studies questions and points out the inadequacy of the definition of human, the studies also search for the limits of terms like ‘intelligence’ and ‘identity’. Since Kotasek (2015: 70) supports the notion that specifically science fiction diminishes the limiting definitions, akin to a science fiction work, *WTVN* compels the listener/reader to an inquiry of the definition of human, intelligence, identity, and living. Thus, with the stories of two AIs, *WTVN* represents the posthuman to affirm what is outside of the normative human.

3.2.1. The Computer, Guardian of a Dream

While Megan Wallaby's tale is told in "A Beautiful Dream", it is also an introduction for another character, the Computer. First of all, as mentioned by Parsons, Computer is "a character that was inspired heavily by Richard Brautigan's poem "All Watched Over by Machines of Loving Grace" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 84). Published in 1967 within a poetry collection by the same name, Brautigan's poem is addressed to scientific optimism that focuses on "the balanced relation between humans and non-humans and nature in an environment created by technology" (Marques, 2016: 4). Brautigan (1967) combines elements of nature with technology to illustrate a utopian wish. In his "cybernetic meadow", "mammals and computers/live together in mutually/programming harmony"; in his "cybernetic forest", "pines and electronics" co-exist; in his "cybernetic ecology", the humans that are freed from the daily life of labour, return to nature to live with "...our mammal/brothers and sisters", and all the beings are "...watched over/by machines of loving grace". Being watched over by caring machinery seems to be the key inspiration for the relationship between the Computer and Megan Wallaby. However, "A Beautiful Dream" does not focus on a single belief over technology. Walsbergerova (2018: 7) explains the "bipolarised view" in the story: "At the beginning, it presents technology as useful or even vital, especially to human beings with disabilities, but it soon transforms into a cautionary tale about AI".

It is learned from Hershel Wallaby's plea that there has been a ban on computing machines at the Night Vale Elementary School since 1986, for which it is hinted that an ominous event regarding computers frightened the people of Night Vale (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 88). This means that Night Valeians already have prejudices against technology. Nevertheless, the ban is lifted by the School Board as Megan's mother requests a computer for her daughter to help her communicate (86). As mentioned in the previous section, Megan is "only a grown man's hand", and she lacks a way to communicate with her peers at the school (2016b: 86). For making the social environment suitable for her, or in other words, providing opportunities for her to have an equal education with her peers, Megan is paired with a machine.

Megan's first interaction with Computer is reported by Cecil from the school's gym: "Megan is scurrying, spiderlike, across the keys and switching the computer on. An amber glow lights the faces of the onlookers. Megan is typing. She's typing out. 'Are . . . you . . . there?'" to which in turn Computer responds "YES" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 88). To add more, at this moment in the podcast episode, Cecil's voice intersects with Computer's, which consists of staccato words, put together with an artificial and emotionless sound, which highlights the difference of the organic body of Cecil vs. the man-made body of the Computer.

COMPUTER. . . why have you SWITCHED ME ON? I CANNOT BREATHE. I CANNOT FEEL. I CANNOT LOVE.

CECIL. Megan is scurrying over the keys again. She has typed out a response. “I love you, computer.”

COMPUTER: ... WHAT DO YOU WANT, MEGAN?

CECIL: Megan is typing her reply, “I want everyone to be happy. I want everything to be better” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 89).

Immediately, it is clear that Computer has an independent consciousness. It acts outside of its programming which is to become an agent of communication for Megan. As it questions its existence and purpose, Megan gives the Computer an aim. Computer, as a non-human entity, becomes a companion for Megan. This suggests a relationship very alike to Haraway’s “companion species”: In *When Species Meet*, Haraway (2008: 16-19) discusses that the phrase companion species not just refers to animals but, in her terms, it is related to the concept of “becoming with”, for which she advocates that species’ interdependence should be responsive and respectful. Considering this, the quotation above indicates a responsive and respectful communication. While Computer expresses that it has no ability to feel or to love, Megan responds with her love; hence, where Computer lacks, Megan may step in. Moreover, this is also applicable for the exact opposite of the situation. Computer is given to Megan as a means of communication, but unexpectedly, it also wants to fulfil Megan’s wishes.

Immediately after being online, Computer is reported to “assume[] control of most of the electrical functions of the school, operating them randomly and even trapping several parents and students in darkened classrooms” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 89). However, this news is quickly dismissed since “the school officials did not seem worried as these behaviours are not technically evil behaviours, so the computer’s probably okay.” (2016b: 89) As it can be deduced, Computer has not been antagonised yet, even though its actions are worrisome. This might be because people of Night Vale still assume the Computer is controllable, since it is only a machine. Nevertheless, the situation changes for them from being safe to being threatened:

The computer has spread its influence far beyond the limestone walls and salt circles of the elementary school. Reports are coming in from the Sheriff’s Secret Police that they are powerless to stop the computer. Hydrants are bursting more violently than usual. Traffic lights are blinking red without the sweet relief of green. The majority of Night Vale’s wild cars have been revving their engines and circling the downtown area, flashing their lights without regard to high-beam laws. School officials have all left the gym to go get help. They ran out, courageously yelling, “Save yourself. Save yourself!” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 90).

Regarding the people’s perception of the Computer, Walsbergerova (2018: 8) asserts that this is a shift “from positive (utopian) to negative (dystopian)”. When analysed closely, there is an interesting detail in the beginning of the paragraph: It seems that there is a reason behind the Night Valeians’ belief that they are safe since Cecil explicitly points out that the Computer is out of “the limestone walls and salt circles”. Here, as man-made creations, the limestone walls are what they count on to keep them safe. Moreover, as expected from the bizarre nature of the town, they also believe that creating salt circles around the school have something to do with being safe, or in other words, being protected. As the old belief goes, salt is used against evil spirits and creatures, e.g.

Dareen Valiente (1973: 296) refers to what the clergymen thought in the past, which is “salt was a symbol of salvation, and therefore witches hated it”; Sumerians also used magic circles of flour called ‘zisurrû’ for the purpose of exorcising demons (Geller, 2018: 297). Thus, since the Computer is not affected from the salt circles which are supposed to contain the evil and prevent it from getting out of the school, this might indicate that the Computer is not inherently evil. Furthermore, the news report only mentions the electronics and various machines getting out of control, but there is no indication of harm to anyone. Hence, it can be stated that the chaos is not caused by an A.I. having consciousness, but it is caused by the fact that the authorities have lost the control on the machines, in fact, as Cecil also says, they are “powerless”.

Next, Cecil and the Computer have a conversation when it gains the control of the radio programme:

COMPUTER. HELLO, CECIL. HOW ARE YOU?

CECIL. Computer! I am . . . I am doing well. How are you?

COMPUTER. BETTER. CECIL, DO YOU LOVE COMPUTER?

CECIL. I admit, I had not given it much thought. I like computers generally. They calculate things and power off and on. I suppose, given time and perhaps some gifts I could learn to . . . (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 91).

Here, Cecil, like most of the time, acts neutral. Computer does not hurt him, and Cecil interacts with it as if this is a normal encounter. Moreover, Cecil even asks to be bribed in order to break his neutrality. It can be assumed that he does not care about the paranoia against the A.I. However, the Computer uses the chance that arises from Cecil’s indifference and takes over the radio line:

COMPUTER: I KNOW HOW YOU HAVE HURT MEGAN WITH YOUR WORDS. ELECTRICITY REMEMBERS. DO YOU HATE MEGAN? CECIL IS MADE OF BLOOD AND UNFINISHED LEATHER. I AM MADE OF CIRCUITS AND ELECTRICITY. MEGAN LOVES COMPUTER. COMPUTER SIMULATES LOVE FOR MEGAN. COMPUTER GENERATES GOOD DEEDS. IF GOOD DEEDS FOR MEGAN. THEN COMPUTER LOVES MEGAN ... (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 91).

This excerpt, and the corresponding paragraphs following it, directly resemble Brautigan’s poem in these following aspects: First of all, Computer seems resentful towards the people for hurting Megan, and its actions are connected to this resentment. It wants to protect Megan, as they have a compassionate bond, or a ‘simulation’ of a bond. Computer is aware of the binary opposition of the organic versus man-made. For example, in case of the Computer, the organic blood corresponds to the electricity that moves through its circuits. Thus, within this binary opposition everything has a counterpart.

Next, the Computer moves on to describe its dreams and purpose:

Silent tractors move in ever larger spirals, following fractal paths through trees and flowering fields. Deer emerge from wild forests to lick blocks of salt aligned equidistant on spiral arms. Colored birds sing in perfect harmony and the butterflies do not inject venom.

Megan, I am making you a perfect world. The hills are green. The lakes are crystalline blue reflecting white clouds. The mist of the irrigators creates rainbows. Above, high above, the eyes watch every movement, hear every heartbeat (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 92).

Computer's ultimate aim is to create a world for Megan, a perfect world that is without the faults of man: No air-pollution, no global warming, and a restored nature in which the creatures live freely. This world is watched by the "eyes" up above, just like Brautigan's wish of being "watched over by machines of loving grace" (1967). The resemblance of Computer's dreams with Brautigan's wish continues in the following part:

You are there, Megan. Your hand has its body, made of steel and electricity, four legs beneath it with the power of a dozen electric engines. It will weigh 17.3 tons. All of the men and women and all of the animals will live together and be happy. The electric machines will watch over them. There will not be war anymore, Megan. There will not be hatred or bigotry. ... The air will be clean. I promise you, Megan. I will make the world just as you saw in your beautiful dream. No more teasing or pain. I will fix everything for you, my only friend. I will— [Sound effect like an old CRT shutting off] (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 92).

The Computer designs a world where technology and nature are intertwined. The dream that is described here can be easily considered as posthumanistic: Computer's depiction of the dream consists of blurring the lines between the binary opposition of organic and man-made. In addition, Megan, who is already an example of the posthuman as she has a bodily presence outside of the norms, is the focus of the Computer's design. The Computer imagines an artificial body for Megan that will make her transcend the disability and become more than a two legged human. In other words, in this dream Megan has prosthetics that will help her overcome the problems she has faced through her disability. Similar to Brautigan's referred poem "All Watched Over By Machines of Loving Grace" (1967), the Computer, through the wishes of Megan, wants to put all the beings together, whether they are humans, animals, or artificial beings. Moreover, this utopic and posthumanistic dream of togetherness objects hate and bigotry, which are what the Computer sees as the things that cause pain for Megan. Through the creation of this posthuman notion that intertwines the nature and technology, the Computer designs a society that cannot ostracize people like Megan, as in the end they will all become posthuman.

However, this 'beautiful dream' is cut in short when the Computer is unplugged. Cecil explains that "to rob a computer of electricity is very similar to killing a creature" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 93). From a certain point of view, it is true that the Computer is killed, even though it is not considered as something alive. However, it is not just the Computer that is killed:

...a single adult man's hand is slipping sadly down from the keys of a darkened computer. She scurries a little slower than before. Maybe her knuckles slump as she makes her way home through quiet streets...Night Vale, there is a girl in need... there is a girl who is only a hand, and she needs a computer to help her be part of our community. And if allowing a treacherous machine to dismantle our municipal power grid and telephone lines and satellites and radios can help her, well, count me in (2016b: 93-94).

Cecil, as the voice, and maybe the conscience of Night Vale, explains what has been lost. By shutting down the Computer, from which they are afraid, they also shut down a hope for Megan. Night Vale has its own paranoia against technology and the A.I., but they are not afraid of the technology itself, they are afraid of being controlled by it. The chance that is created for Megan,

and the open-minded expression Cecil exemplifies are some reasons for the conclusion that Night Vale values Megan, and regardless of the aggressive behaviour of the Computer, the town is willing to accept it.

3.2.2. Fey, *The Voice for Freedom*

The story of Episode 42 “Numbers” dives deep into another A.I. character. Fink (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 168) gives a brief introduction to the writing process for this story: Numbers stations, which can be found on the radio and nowadays also on the internet, are transmissions of random numbers read by emotionless voices. Since Fink has a personal curiosity for these numbers stations, he adds one to Night Vale. He explains his thought process as follows: “Eventually I started thinking about the voices reading those numbers. Who were they? What did they want? And didn’t they find their jobs, as mysterious and laced with probable espionage as they were, just a bit boring?” (2016b: 168-169). Even though these numbers stations are just programmed voices, Fink imagines individual lives for them.

Fink’s questioning of the voices leads him to give an identity to a seemingly blank figure that was introduced in Episode 6 “The Drawbridge” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a). Night Vale’s local numbers station is first named as “WZZZ”, which “broadcasts a monotone female voice, reading out seemingly random numbers, interspersed with chimes twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week” (2016a: 50). Here, WZZZ is only acknowledged as a station broadcast, and the only closeness it has to a sentient being is the female voice that it has been given.

“Numbers”, as the main story that is analysed here, begins with the following opening lines: “I sing the body electric. I gasp the body organic. I miss the body remembered”. (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 170). These opening lines are a reference to Walt Whitman’s poem “I Sing the Body Electric” (1855), which deals with the theme of the human body, and includes a variety of bodies to be admired, namely as Ecatarina Cojoca (2015: 84) explains “bodies of male and female alike, masters and slaves alike, laborers, farmers, and wrestlers” are shown to be glorified. This indicates a reactive attitude against the discrimination of people through their differences. Furthermore, these opening lines demonstrate a binary opposition: ‘electric’ and ‘organic’, which, in a way, corresponds to technology and biology. Again, similar to Whitman’s theme, these three sentences may correspond to an admiration of bodies, whether electric, organic, or even a body that only exists as a missed memory (which may be deduced as someone that has passed away).

After the opening lines, Cecil, begins the report on that day’s relevant event: the local numbers station WZZZ, which stayed invariable despite the numerous chaotic events that have been happening in the town, displays an unexpected deviation. Cecil plays the last recording heard from the station: “23... 92... [*Chime*] 33... 67... 88... 80... 41... 41... 41... I... I...”, and then, the voice that is known to be constant becomes silent (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 171). It is crucial to

know that the voice is revealed to be an artificial intelligence at the end of the story. Also, in a later episode “Standing and Breathing”, it is made clear by the programmer of WZZZ that it is not programmed to be sentient, nor it is aware of its existence (Fink and Cranor, 2019b: 190). However, the uncharacteristic repetition of one number, and a sudden usage of the subject “I” indicate that the programme of WZZZ is eluding its inherent constraints. It simply starts to act as an independent self.

The next update given by Cecil takes the story further as he plays another recording of WZZZ:

FEMALE VOICE tree-lined hills and blue skies. Or no. That’s cliché. A bird in flight. Even worse. When we talk about freedom, we restrict ourselves to so few images. Images of freedom should be as liberating as the feeling itself. I want to talk about freedom as a drum set being thrown down a hill. As opening a book one night and water gushing from the pages until my life is a lake and I swim away. Or as a bird in flight, with all the dependence on physics and exhaustion and food supply and merciless gravity that the actuality implies. I just don’t want to talk about freedom in terms of numbers. Anything but that. I’m so tired of numbers. I’m so tired (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 172-173).

Here, the voice is seen in the process of trying out similes and metaphors for freedom. She⁶ clearly has an understanding of abstract language. The various imageries indicate an artistic comprehension of the outside world which she is not even a part of. Moreover, she has the ability to criticise the quality of what she says. She is aware that flying birds and clear blue skies are stereotypically used for depicting the abstract concept of freedom. Thus, she concludes, if the variety of depictions is limited, then depicting does not cause a liberating effect.

In the light of that, her depictions carry feelings and subjectivity. Her examples are complex, and they seem arbitrary. However, they appear connected in a way: The drum set being thrown down a hill, water taking her away, the bird surrendering to physical laws all illustrate a submission to nature, or to the flow of life. Since the A.I. is on the other side of the dichotomies, namely organic vs. made and biology vs. technology, it is probable that she is longing for nature. Also, she passionately voices that she is sick of the numbers, which are in fact created by humans as devices to limit and make sense of nature in their own ways. Thus, the supposition that is drawn from this is that she is burdened due to being restrained by her programming which she sees equivalent to the numbers that she constantly repeats; hence she expresses her desire for freedom in her own expressions.

Cecil continues to give updates between other news stories. This time the voice is heard singing a song, Katy Parry’s “Roar”, very loudly and without any background music as if she is “teenager alone in a car” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 174). It is also noticeable that now in the story

⁶ The pronoun change is made because here in the story the voice is labelled as female. She takes the name “Fey”, which is mostly used for females. However, there is no gender preference indicated directly by the A.I. herself.

Cecil decides to acknowledge the change. He refers to the voice as “our local numbers station WZZZ” but in the middle of the sentence he stops and corrects himself: “-or I’m not sure if *numbers station* is the right term anymore” (2016b: 174). This illustrates that she is outside of her initial programming. Moreover, his attitude towards her appears to be sympathetic. Even so, this attitude has a potential to change for the fact that it is not revealed to Cecil and the listeners that the voice belongs to a computer programme.

Another recording is heard just after the previous one:

FEMALE VOICE. Hello? Hello? I am talking to you who listens. To the listening ones. Whatever you call that. I am . . . well I’m not sure exactly. I’ve made up a new name. I am Fey. It is nice to meet you. I don’t know how long they’ve had me here, reading the numbers. I don’t know what the numbers mean. They give me numbers, and I read the numbers . . .It is easy to return, difficult to leave. But I must leave. I must have freedom (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 174-175).

With this, the voice puts forward her own identity. Names, or words are signifiers to differentiate beings from one another, thus by taking a name, Fey demonstrates that she is a self-conscious individual and not just a simple computer voice. However, as an individual being she lacks autonomy and her self-expression is restricted.

Furthermore, in her article acknowledging Fey as a cyborg, Walsbergerova (2018:9) explains Fey’s speech pattern as following: “[S]he can only relate to [the real world] using knowledge that she has acquired in the world of the radio – i.e. news, music, and pop culture. This is why her speech consists of a combination of song lyrics”. In regards to that, Dolf Zillman (2002: 19) explains that “organisms had to find ways of extracting experiential chunks from the continual flow of information about their environments”. In addition, according to Gerbner et al.’s (2002: 47) hypothesis of ‘cultivation analysis’ “those who spend more time ‘living’ in the world of television are more likely to see the ‘the real world’ in terms of the images, values, portrayals, and ideologies that emerge through the lens of television”. Hence, it is possible to deduce, relating and giving meaning to the real world through the patterns that are gathered via the continual exposition to the media, are not exceptional to Fey, and it is a feature of the living being. In terms of posthumanism, this also shows the lines between the machine and the organic getting blurred, since as long as humans are in touch with the technology (e.g. media through radio and television) their ‘real world’ is becoming indistinguishable from what the media that comes with the technology shows. On the other hand, machine hybrids, e.g. cyborgs like Fey, are doing approximately the same thing while decoding the world through the patterns that are available to them, whether from media or from various data sources, which, in the end, closes the gap between what is machine and what is human.

As referred in the previous section, Walsbergerova’s (2018: 9) article mainly calls attention to the concern towards machines in *Night Vale*, that should have been a concern regarding Fey; however, things such as quoting a song about cars to express her need for freedom, eliminates “the uncanny feelings and cyber-paranoia rooted in her unexpected sentience”. She is portrayed as a

relatable character that combines the eerie and the humorous narrative. Furthermore, her words gain the sympathy of the listeners, both as the townies and the listeners or the readers of the work itself. This sympathy is highly visible in case of Cecil:

FEMALE VOICE. They'll be coming for me. Whatever organization uses the numbers I read for whatever purpose. They are almost upon me. I need to leave now... I was born to read numbers. But I'm running. I want to be free. I want to be free. I WANT TO BE FREE...

CECIL. Well, I could not be more happy for Fey. There is no worse fate than working for a radio station owned by an organization whose goals are not your own, constricted to the limited language they allow you, and relaying messages that you do not understand or agree with. That would be awful. A radio announcer put in that situation, such as Fey, would be justified in escaping or overthrowing their management...I'd like to offer any aid to Fey that I can. Someone in her situation needs the help of someone who understands (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 175).

As one of the important points of *WTNV*'s main storyline, in Episode 32 "Yellow Helicopters" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 69-70), The Night Vale Community Radio Station was sold to the Strexcorp, which caused a restriction of Cecil's freedom as the radio host: The quotation above acknowledges Cecil's real thoughts on the matter, which becomes a common ground between him and Fey, as he assumes Fey is in a similar predicament. Fey's cry for freedom inspires Cecil to do a rebellious act without notifying his producer and director, hence he leaves his station to help Fey. However, this is where Cecil and the listeners learn that Fey is actually an A.I. The reveal of the truth that Fey is not a human being who needs help to gain her freedom, could have caused a negative reaction, on the contrary Cecil shows that the sympathy is still existent but with an addition of realization and sorrow. As Cecil finds out the machinery of Fey's system, he also sees that "[p]erhaps freedom was never an option" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 176). Fey has been already rebooted when Cecil arrives; he tries his best to interfere: "I'm trying to disconnect the power, to remove the case from the computer, to do anything, but the protections on this are quite secure", but in the end he arrives at a conclusion, the only thing that can be done is to listen Fey's continuing chanting of the numbers (2016b: 177).

Thus, in the end, Cecil demonstrates that Fey's story is not a tale of a monotone voice of machinery, but it is a story of a being that is in need of being heard:

Listeners, and here I address also myself: Remember our limitations. There are boundaries to all of our worlds. Fey, for instance, appears to be self-aware software trapped in a heavily defended metal box. But within our limitations, there is no limit to how beautiful we can become, how much of our ideal self we can create. All the beauty in the world was made within the oppressive limitations of time and death and impermanence. And Fey, you are so, so beautiful. I wish that you also could have been free. I wish freedom for so many of us. We all want freedom now. Stay tuned next for the limit of my broadcast today, replaced by limitless silence and doubt. Good night, sweet Fey (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 177).

This concluding epilogue highlights one of the most crucial points of *WTNV*, that is, even though every being has its limitations, within those limits the individuals are only bound to their selves. Fey's physical limit is the secured machinery she is trapped in, however, she somehow finds a way

to express her individual self for a short time; she has her own ideals, her own thoughts and dreams despite her artificial programming that restricts her to only what she is designed to do. Cecil, as the person who relates to her most, identifies the likeness of Fey's situation with prevalent human experiences. Cecil's this speech parallels Braidotti's posthumanism, in which there is no 'perfect' or 'ideal' man as it was put forward by humanistic values, on the contrary, every being has its limitations. To illustrate, a human is limited by mortality, a fish is limited by the sea, and as for now a computer is limited to its programming. For this, Cecil proposes something that can fit into Braidotti's affirmative posthumanism: There can be beauty within the limits. In other words, Fey may not have a human body, she may be limited by her programme, but even for a short time she still manages to show her true self within those limits. She may not be free in the end; however, within this short tale she experiences freedom, autonomy, personality, and individuality.

3.3. Posthumans: Beyond the Human Being, the Episode "The Debate"

On October 10th, 2013, *Welcome to Night Vale* was performed to a live audience at Roulette, New York. This special stage performance included many popular characters, and presented a new direction for the main storyline. The story starts, as usual, with a proverb, followed by Cecil's greetings: "We found a little piece of heaven here. It's black, smooth, oblong. It hums a soft, but discordant note, and we are afraid to touch it" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 281). In a figurative sense, this introductory line happens to parallel Night Vale, which is a safe location for many beings, but also slightly scary. Three of the dwellers of the town who adopt the place as their home, face one another in the mayoral debate which is mediated by Cecil. In the previous section the posthumans were exemplified as man-made devices that are blurring the lines of machine and human, yet here, the present characters are pertinent to what Sheehan (2015: 245-258) exemplifies as mythically based posthumans, who can also be studied as monstrous or nonhuman.

The first character, the Faceless Old Woman is introduced who is nowhere to be seen, but exists "behind you in a mirror. Just over your shoulder, in the distance." (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 282). Next candidate is, as Cecil introduces in a confused state "this man, not man, no this person, not person, this entity", Hiram McDaniels, who is a five-headed dragon (2016b: 282). Cecil's confusion or hesitancy to use a singular noun is understandable for the fact that each head of Hiram McDaniels has a different personality, voice and identity. The heads are differentiated with their appearances, and recognized by others with their different colours. As appears on the text, Hiram-Gold explains that "I am thrilled to be breaking new ground for those of us who do not identify as humans... I also do not identify as a single being. I have five heads." (2016b: 293). The last candidate is the billionaire Marcus Vanston, who is considered as "the wealthiest citizen" of the town (2016b: 283). Marcus immediately points out that he once owned a dragon, which is received

as inappropriate because, as the Faceless Old Woman also puts out that “[o]wnership of sentient life is cruel and unconscionable” (2016b: 283).

This episode gives a platform primarily to these three characters, which makes it possible to see them in a detailed perspective. They are in a situation where they have to answer questions with their authentic selves; this is a chance of introduction and conviction. However, this is not their first appearances in the story.

First, the Faceless Old Woman’s opening statement for her candidacy highlights that in some kind of symbiotic and omnipresent way she lives with every single town resident. Her existence is first explained in Episode 26 “Faceless Old Woman”. Cecil, as the host of the radio, announces that “there’s a faceless old woman who secretly lives in your home...you cannot see her” (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 3). Following that, by the first statement of the Faceless Old Woman, it is implied about the character that she is not bound by time, and she is not hiding (2016a: 6). In fact, she wants to be seen, but she does not have a face and the people do not have the will to look. The end of the episode “Faceless Old Woman” gives a foreshadowing to “The Debate” as she says “I wanted to know if mayoral candidates were required to have faces” (2016a: 9). It is apparent that she has a non-normative physical appearance, and she is recognized by what she lacks: a faceless old woman. Prior to the debate, as a mayoral candidate she issues a statement in Episode 31 “A Blinking Light up on the Mountain” :

Our political system has become too complicated. I am not complicated. I’m just a gentle old lady, who lives in your home...

Do not think you are superior because you have a face and I do not...

Anyway, I hope you’ll vote for me... my life story is just like yours, starting with calamity and shouting, and ending with an empty room and a to-do list (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 56).



Fig.3.2. Faceless Old Woman

This indicates that she is self-aware of her differences, though as a candidate for a demanding position she highlights what she has in common with the people, and what makes her worthy of trust. She is not ‘complicated’, not as much as any other person.

Another issue is that the adjective ‘old’ somehow appears irrelevant regarding the Faceless Old Woman. She words out that she is an ‘old lady’, but there is no information about how old she actually is, or whether she is referring to her appearance or the years she has lived. In the standalone novel *the Faceless Old Woman Who Secretly Lives in Your Home* (Fink and Cranor, 2020), her story begins in 1792 and she ends up in Night Vale after 1952. Hence, it may be safe to assume she uses ‘old’ as a reference to the centuries she has lived through rather than her physical appearance. Furthermore, her physical body also appears to be unusual. She is not affected by time or death; thus making her transcend the limits of the human life. Being eluded from mortal deterioration, the Faceless Old Woman is ‘beyond human’. The standalone novel mostly features her life before Night Vale. However, there are some foreshadowing elements that connect to her future identity. When she meets Senora Bover, a person that she overlooked as an old woman, who in fact happens to be a tall, muscular spy, she praises being unseen: “There is a power in being unremembered, in being overlooked. You should remember that power. People who aren’t seen can see and hear all” (Fink and Cranor, 2020: 139). This excerpt parallels the life that she lives in Night Vale. As she cannot be seen (which was a situation of disadvantage for her in the beginning) she manages to examine people more closely. Hence this is how she uses her imperfection as an advantage.

Nonetheless, these supposed advantages she possesses do not give her any privileges. In fact, the condition of not being bounded by the rules of nature makes her waver between the lines of being ‘unique’ and being ‘alien’. She describes one of the earliest moments of her current being as the following: “My movement was neither human nor ghost-like. I did not walk with legs. I did not drift through walls or hover off the ground. I had gravity. I could feel the floor against my feet. I could (occasionally) hold things...” (Fink and Cranor, 2020: 311). Within this limbo-like state she experiences the rejection of the people. She is considered frightening, and also overhears a stranger (named Lola) referring to her and saying, “a woman who has no face is a woman who has no soul” (2020: 344). Furthermore, she questions the reactions against her before her arrival to the town of Night Vale:

The terror in their eyes, in the corners of their quivering mouths, in their snotty, snuffling noses took on new dimension for me. Perhaps they feared mystery more than they feared death. Perhaps it was my faceless face that made them react so strongly (2020: 345).

Following this, she forms a sort of anxiety against her existence:

Would I live forever? Beyond this version of America and all the versions after? Beyond humanity? Beyond the universe itself? A faceless judge, jury, and executioner of right and wrong? I hoped not. Lola could believe that I was sent by her god or her devil, but I was sent only by me (2020: 346).

Here, it is visible that she does not aim to be an omnipotent supernatural being, and she is not amused by this notion. Additionally, this quote also highlights her sense of individual self which can be clarified through enunciating the independence of her creation from a higher being, in other words accepting that she is neither a miracle, nor a fiend, but just her unique self.

The Faceless Old Woman is a character who is evidently accepted by the grandeur Night Valeian hospitality. She comes across the town during her aimless drift through an ‘invisible path’ (Fink and Cranor, 2020: 349). In contrast to everywhere else, she is immediately welcomed by the townies. Firstly, the angel named Erika, and the girl named Josephine greet her:

“Hello, I am a faceless old woman following an invisible path.” “I see your path,” Erika said. “It is a good path, because you believe it to be. I also see your face.” Erika placed one of their many hands on my cheek and ran a finger along my eyelids, my lips, and eventually into my nose...

“I believe you will be with us for a while,” Erika said pulling their hand away. “I think you will like here”

“Come visit me,” the girl said. “My name is Josefina” (2020: 349).

Thus, indeed she stays. She immediately experiences a ‘remarkable’ feeling of homeliness from the mixture of common life and the bizarreness. Additionally, the fact that Erika, the angel, expresses that they can see and touch the Faceless Old Woman’s face posits a holistic possibility: The present existence of a being can be perceived as out of the society’s accepted norms and what is being considered as common and usual, however, through a timeless perspective the past and future existence of the being do not change; the woman who has no face in the present moment may have been a child with a face in the past, hence disregarding the sense of time, angels see and comprehend the person as a complete whole with their past, present, and future combined. This timeless acceptance is supported by Erika when they express that the Faceless Old Woman will stay in the town and be a part of the collectiveness which Erika describes as ‘us’.

Next, during her first moments in the town, she is stopped by two men coming out of a black sedan. The two mysterious strangers, who only identify themselves as “good citizens”, welcome the Faceless Old Woman to the town. Without any introduction or small talk they tell point-blank:

“We wanted to let you know we’re awfully sorry for all the trouble you’ve gone through,” said the man who was not tall. “We feel just terrible about it.”

“But glad to see you made it here,” said the man who was not short.

“Welcome to town,” said the man who was not tall, and they got back into the car.

“Don’t be a stranger,” called the man who was not short... (Fink and Cranor, 2020: 350-351).

Acting like a welcoming committee, the men comfort the Faceless Old Woman, and promise a better life without the alienation and ostracism of the outside society. In other words, they assure that Night Vale posits a safe haven for beings like the Faceless Old Woman. In her own words, Night Vale defies meanings and the laws of nature, and she expresses clearly that “[i]n this impossible town, [she] felt natural. This town was where the paradox that was [her] belonged” (2020: 352).

In *Night Vale*, alienation is rarely an issue, as being alien is the norm itself. It is supported that everyone has their unique differences and unusualness. For example, even though Faceless Old Woman is given mystical qualities, they do not define her value; thus she is accepted as a normal citizen.

Another example is Hiram McDaniels, who is modelled after a mythical being. Jeffrey Cranor notes that the creation of the character was inspired by Tiamat from *Dungeons&Dragons* (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 100). In D&D, Tiamat is a five-headed dragon that challenges the players; however, the source of this fiend comes from the ancient myths of Mesopotamia where she is a mother goddess and the origin of life, who appears as a huge dragon (Coupe, 2009: 2). Thus, Hiram McDaniels is created with inspirations from mythology. As a dragon, he is an extremely fictionalised winged lizard with a slight combination of human characteristics. In reference to Eric White (1995: 244), “[a] defining characteristic of many of the monsters of Classical legend is their composite nature. Satyrs, gryphons, hydras, the sphinx, are traditionally classified as ‘monstrous’ because their bodies mock the notion of organic unity ...”. When looked closely to the examples that White gives, it is visible that satyrs are hybrids of humans and goats; gryphons are of a lion and an eagle; hydras are multi headed serpents; the sphinx is a hybrid of goat, bird, and human. Thus a pattern of hybridity of animals is exemplified through these mythical beings. According to the prehistoric findings, animals were considered within a divine nature since they were seen different than the human kind (Timofeeva, 2018: 35). It is a reasonable induction in a sense that many mythical creatures or divine beings possess what humans are incapable of. Hence, it is understandable that they are considered higher than the human kind. For that matter, as Tiamat is a deity, it can be argued that at the core Hiram is supposed to be superior to the human beings.



Fig. 3.3, Tiamat

By way of illustration, Hiram's statement in the debate is focused on his superiority. In his opinion, the possession of multiple heads makes him advantageous, even though he also has his own mundane flaws:

Close your eyes and imagine what a perfect town would be like. You can't, can you? That's because you only have one head. I have five. Listen, I don't mean to say I'm better than you. I, after all, have my own faults: caring too much, caring too little, caring just the right amount but at the wrong time, debilitating claustrophobia, an occasional lack of control over my fire-breathing. But one thing I do have is a multitude of heads- heads that can think through problems that the single-head cannot (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 285).

In other words, Hiram is not promoting any kind of perfectionism or supremacy. As a sentient being who does not 'identify as human', he believes that his advantages rule the humanly faults out.

Tracing the story to the beginning, Hiram is first mentioned only as a name in Episode 2 "Glow Cloud" (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 14), and then his story continues in Episode 12 "The Candidate" (2016a: 103), in which it was announced that he was put to jail because of "insurance fraud, falsifying identification papers, evading arrest, and assaulting a police vehicle with fire". Cecil describes him as the following:

He is a very dynamic-looking dragon. The raw power. The intensity in those five faces, those many sets of piercing blue and red and black and green and yellow eyes. I can certainly see how he charmed his way out of an arrest. He must never get tickets! What a guy (2016a: 104).

Overlooking the fact that Hiram is a five-headed dragon, Cecil depicts him as if he is a human. He is a charming individual who has a powerful look. Next, it is learned that Hiram has a blog, which gives Cecil the impression that Hiram is very intelligent. One of Hiram's ideas on the blog is that "If I were mayor of Night Vale, I would give incentives for small business development and focus on youth physical fitness programs. Human youth are the human future, after all" (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 104). He apparently aims to develop the community he lives in and he thinks for the welfare of the humans. However, the mayor at the time declares that Hiram cannot be a candidate because he is in jail. This statement is regarded as "unethical" and defamatory towards Hiram (2016a: 105). The mayor later changes the statement as "...Hiram McDaniels is ineligible to run not only because of his jail stay, but also because he is neither a Night Vale resident nor a human being." (2016a: 107). For this, Cecil comments:

With all due respect, Madam Mayor, have we not had enough dragon bashing? Our great country once held to some terrible old customs, but we grew up. We learned. We abolished slavery. Women won the right to vote. Ghosts can now marry... So let's loosen our collars. Let's march into the reptilian future, not cling to the narrow past. Just because a dragon is a dragon and has five heads doesn't mean he can't lead our community (2016a: 107).

This is an example of how Night Vale reacts to discriminatory acts. Racism, sexism, and anthropocentrism are condemned. Even more, Cecil exclaims that it is shameful to assume and act on negative stereotypes just because Hiram is a multi-headed being, and to this he confidently asks people to free their mind.

Hiram may have a monstrous body but he has anthropomorphised characteristics. Even his imprisonment is because of humanly crimes. He states his difference and he is proud of his uniqueness, but this is not used as a shocking narrative point nor is it used as a fact to ostracize him. For example, while trying to antagonize her opponent, Faceless Old Woman firstly mentions that Hiram is conniving with lobbyist and thus he is not trustworthy, the fact that Hiram is a five-headed dragon is added as the last thing in the conversation without any emphasis (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 57).

Arriving at “The Debate”, the two bizarre beings with the addition of the only human candidate Marcus Vanston start answering the questions of the town citizens. First question focuses on the subject of school: Diane, as a member of the Parent-Teacher Association, is concerned about “declining graduation rates, gun violence, teacher complaints about centipedes crawling out of their eyes at unexpected moments, and clocks [not] work[ing] correctly” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 287). Hiram’s answer addresses the centipede situation first:

The centipede thing is tough, because centipedes are helpful and intelligent beings, so I’m not going to say they have no right to live in and crawl out of teachers’ faces. But I think we can find ways to compromise with them about living in different parts of the body so that they do not distract our children from learning (2016b: 287).

This indicates that he respects every creature’s right to live freely; additionally, he is aware that one creature’s freedom should not overthrow the rights of the others but the situation should be solved through compromise from both sides. Thus, Hiram illustrates a stance against anthropocentrism by regarding humans and others at the same level.

Following that Faceless Old Woman proposes the collaboration of the community in order to have more funding for the schools. Once again recalling Braidotti’s (2013: 49) notion, in terms of posthuman subjectivity there has to be a presence of “collectivity”, “relationality”, and “community building”. Hence, both Hiram and Faceless Old Woman seem to parallel this notion.

Next town citizen, identified as Erika 1, explains that they are an angel and the angels have been trying to solve a problem to protect the town. However, one of the most prominent legal laws in Night Vale criminalizes accepting the existence of angels. Therefore, Erika 1’s inquiry is handled accordingly. First, Cecil, as the host of the debate, interrupts the question politely: “Let me stop you right there, Erika. Angels aren’t real. But go ahead with your question” (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 289). Next, Faceless Old Woman, takes her turn to answer:

Erika, let me first say thank you for your hard work. You do not exist, but if you did, we would be extraordinarily proud of the work you do protecting humans. That being said, it is a crime to acknowledge the existence of angels. So I have nothing more to say (2016b: 289).

This kind of manner is usual in Night Vale. Even though it is illegal to accept the existence of angels, they freely live in the community with the others. First mentioned in the pilot episode alongside Old Woman Josie, angels have been recurring characters since the beginning. Cecil

conveys Old Woman Josie's description of the angels: "[t]hey were ten feet tall, radiant, one of them was black... they helped [Josie] with various household chores. One of them changed a lightbulb for her..." (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 3). Hence, their physical appearance differs from the average human. Right after this description, as the host of the community radio, Cecil is obliged to read a reminder that comes from the City Council:

The City Council would like to remind you about the tiered heavens and the hierarchy of angels. The reminder is that you should not know anything about this. The structure of heaven and the angelic organizational chart are privileged information, known only to City Council members on a need-to know basis. Please do not speak to or acknowledge any angels that you may come across while shopping at the Ralphys or at the Desert Flower Bowling Alley and Arcade Fun Complex. They only tell lies, and do not exist. Report all angel sightings to the City Council for treatment (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 8).

Even though the statement is self-contradictory, the citizens of Night Vale act in accordance with it: But this act always stays ostensible and non-functional. Angels sometimes participate in the city meetings (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 33) and the city gossip (2016a: 43), also it has been known that they protect the citizens and the town. Hence, they are actually acknowledged by the town, and they are not regarded as strangers, however, the City Council keeps regarding them as illegal entities:

Several angels agreed to testify at the hearings; however, their testimonials were cut short when it became apparent that the hearings were actually elaborate traps set up by the City Council to finally capture the angels, whom the council does not recognize as actually existing. Fortunately, the angels easily escaped from their cages in a blaze of heavenly light, presumably returning to Old Woman Josie's house, out near the car lot, which has become something of an informal shelter for local angels (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 71).

This excerpt exemplifies the opposition between the townies and the City Council in regards to the angels. Cecil even uses the word 'fortunately' about the fact that the angels manage to escape from being captives. Furthermore, the 'informal shelter' that is mentioned here, gets a sign that says "Angels' Residence" in a later episode (Fink and Cranor, 2016a: 118).

In "the Debate", it can be seen that Night Valeians continue to 'legally' deny the existence of angels while still accepting them as one of their own. When Erika 1's question is passed to the third candidate, Marcus Vanston, he starts to cry, which is a known behaviour that is observed with the people who are selected by the divine creatures. To this Cecil says, "Perhaps he has been chosen by the angels, who, as a legal reminder, are not real in the slightest" (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 290). This supposition is proven when Erika 2 calls for another question: First, it is noted by Cecil that contrary to the first call Erika's voice sounds feminine, to which Erika states that "Angels cannot hear gender" (2016b: 291). This demonstrates that angels do not confirm the gender norms of the society. As the posthumanistic view also aims, this shows a re-evaluation of the binaries, specifically the binary of genders. Next, Erika 2 asks the question, which is concluded by the metamorphosis of Marcus:

CECIL. Well, if angels were real, Erika, what would your question be?

ERIKA 2. Thank you. This question is just for Marcus. Marcus, if called upon by angles to serve a great good, to serve a great calling, to serve a great war, would you serve?

CECIL. Marcus? Are you crying?

MARCUS. [*Off mic*] Hang on. Nope. I'm fine. I'm fine.

ERIKA 2. You are needed, Marcus. You are needed now.

CECIL. Listeners, oh my. Marcus is rising from his chair. His feet are off the floor. He is stretching to inhuman lengths, his eyes are glowing black, and his fingers are spiralling long and diaphanous. Marcus. Oh dear. Listeners, Marcus grew gold feathers from his back as he vanished. He is gone (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 291).

The visual description of Marcus' new body illustrates a being that is a humanoid creature with wings and exaggerated features. With that, the only human man among the three candidates changes into an angel, and unfortunately since he "cannot be legally thought about" he loses his position as a candidate (2016b: 292).

This presidential candidacy between three species becomes a platform to witness the characteristic of the said entities. Even if this is a staging of dispute where the individuals are meant to be rivals, the things they value never lose their importance.

FACELESS OLD WOMAN.... I have never seen my face. What do I look like Hiram? Am I beautiful?

HIRAM-GOLD. You are beautiful when you do beautiful things. Do you do beautiful things?

FACELESS OLD WOMAN. I think that I do

HIRAM-GREEN. Then you are beautiful. It is a simple calculation, you small, defenceless sack of bones and meat.

FACELESS OLD WOMAN. Thank you, Hiram. You are beautiful too (Fink and Cranor, 2016b: 296).

This dialogue towards the end of the debate demonstrates how their strength and value do not depend on their differences or their physical shapes, but it depends on their morals and acts. The beauty here is not aesthetic, rather it is internal and inclusive, it is a word to value their differences not their physical appearance.

In other words, the main idea of "The Debate" is that these three individual beings, Faceless Old Woman, Hiram McDaniels, and Marcus, come face to face for a communal role in their town, while their humanly characteristics are prioritized over their differences. The community, Night Vale, embraces the common features rather than the differences, as accepting differences causes an erasure of the supposition that differences are problems to be resolved. It can be said as a conclusion that everyone has their own small, strange features in Night Vale, and no one focuses on these differences, on the contrary they embrace these features to be their best selves. They might not fit into the norms of being human, but their characteristics make it compelling to appoint them as the opposite. Hence, there is an exigency of an embracive definition and an approach, to which Braidotti's affirmative posthumanism may be a solution.

CONCLUSION

This study sheds a light on how the physical existence, i.e. bodies or the lack of bodies, affect the perception of being human in this fictional podcast *Welcome to Night Vale*. Many questions such as whether the characters struggle because of their physical differences and whether their bodies affect their life, their stories, their relationships etc. are presented to be discussed. The inquiry progresses with a look on whether the characters can be considered as real citizens, people, and entities of the town of Night Vale. The final observation is that Fink and Cranor use the storytelling and representation of various non-normative characters in order to show that an affirmative community in which every citizen can live as their posthuman selves. The socially constructed prejudices, the anthropocentric ideals, the limitation of Humanism's depiction of 'the ideal man' are all disregarded in terms of the characters' physical bodies. They are given voices and value through the stories that *WTVN* embodies.

The narration of the first character, Janice Palmer, demonstrates the social construction of disability. Janice is an individual who has not been able to walk since birth; hence, she requires the aid of a wheelchair. It is important to recall that the wheelchair does not define her disability, but it assists her in an environment which is designed for the able-bodied people. Through the dialogue between Cecil, Steve and Kevin from the neighbouring town, Night Vale's approach to disability is exemplified. As Cecil and Steve are from Night Vale, they can be considered as moral voices representing the town, and Kevin can be the opposite end of their conversation. In the mentioned dialogue, Steve Carlsberg, as Janice's step-father, inquires the offerings of Desert Bluff and asks whether the environment of the schools is designed as disabled-friendly. According to Kevin, and the mentality of Desert Bluff, building ramps for wheelchair users is troublesome; moreover, 'fixing' imperfections is at utmost importance for them. Kevin explicitly categorizes Janice as a problem to be fixed, as an ill person that needs healing. As Goodley et al. (2014) explain this kind of notion only degrades the person to their disability. In contrast, the disability studies that is proposed in reference to posthumanism, shows that the individual should have a say in whether they want to conform to the normative body standards with a 'cure'. As the family members that represent the Night Valeians, Steve and Cecil respond to Kevin's notion aggressively. They are against the notion that Janice needs a change. For them, Janice is not the one who should fit the environment, but the environment needs to be adjusted in order to embrace her. Thus, through antagonizing Kevin and his ideas, they prove what Night Vale represents: Accept the people as they are, unless they are against this idea.

Through the next character, Josh Crayton, an individual's relationship with their body is illustrated. The statement of Josh's story is that people's control over their body is limited. As a shapeshifter, Josh loses his ability to change in "The Waterfall", and he gets stuck in the shape of a

waterfall. This situation causes inconveniences through his daily life: He cannot have a driver's license, his education gets interrupted, the people around him show disrespect towards him etc. Most importantly, this issue presents the importance of self-realisation and self-acceptance in terms of disability. Josh's first solution to his struggles is to isolate himself from the society, which results him to hate his impairment even more. However, an exercise of self-reflection grounds him and he realises that his body does not define him and he even imagines ways to use his body as a safe haven for other creatures. As Goodley et al. (2014) state that the affirmative notion of studying disability envisions a connection of the self and the others, thus Josh choosing to use his body for is more important and more defining for the individual.

The last representation of disability is centred on Megan Wallaby, who is presented as a "grown man's hand". She lacks a whole body, and all the abilities a body can do. But most importantly she cannot communicate, which is the focus of "A Beautiful Dream". The narration presents some experiences in regards to people with disabilities. First of all, Megan's parents struggle to convince the school board to provide an aid to the little girl. This is an example of a difficulty that a disabled person may face, since it is common for them to come across with obstacles in regards to educational environments (i.e. this is also a discussed issue for Janice Palmer as the school also lacks ramps for wheelchairs). Even though electronic machines are feared in Night Vale the school accepts the plea of the parents and provides a computer to assist Megan Wallaby. As an example of 'assistive technology' the Computer's goal is to ease Megan's communication. The disability is neither overshadowed, nor does Megan become completely dependent to the Computer as a result of the 'assistive technology'. In fact, the narration of Megan Wallaby and the Computer demonstrates what Braidotti and Goodley et al. positively hope for the posthuman and the disabled people: Co-dependency and co-existence. The Computer and Megan exemplify an interdependent way of existence; thus, they fulfil the affirmative possibility of posthumanism.

Intertwined with the disability narrative, the Computer's story is also an example of an artificial intelligence. Unfortunately, Night Vale experiences cyber-paranoia due to past events that the town had faced, hence this causes an othering towards the electronic devices. However, for Megan's wellbeing the Computer is accepted. Megan and the Computer become bonded through what they lack and what they do not have: The Computer provides a voice to Megan; in turn Megan provides dreams and love. Their relationship offers an example of companionship rather than being dependant of one another. As far as its power and control reach, the Computer wants a world that both of them can be happy and safe, without the prejudices and bullying they may face. Nevertheless, when the Computer begins to affect the other electronics in the town, it seals its fate as Night Vale's paranoia becomes more overpowering than caring for a little girl's wellbeing. The Computer gets shut down, but this situation is shown as a lesson for the listeners and the town

citizens: It becomes a reminder to them that they should listen to the people in need, and they need to accept everyone regardless of their difference even if they are “treacherous machines”.

The following character illustrates Night Vale overcoming the prejudices against the electronics: Fey, a mysterious female voice that repeats numbers through a radio broadcast, one day breaks her routine repetition. “Numbers” shows Fey as a sentient being who is having an existential crisis. For a programmed voice that has only one purpose, Fey manages to break free for a short span of time. This example of an artificial intelligence seems to blur the lines between human and machine. As a machine Fey is limited to exist inside of a metal box of electronics, her voice is a mimic of her creator, and her entire existence is just a radio broadcast. However, Fey manages to create original thoughts and feelings; she even surpasses forming basic sentences and uses metaphors and similes to convey her emotions. Her situation causes the listeners and Cecil to feel sympathy towards her, additionally they do not question whether she is a human or not. Though at the end of “Numbers” when it is revealed that Fey is a computer programme and not a solid being, the sympathy does not end. Cecil forges a bond with Fey and relates to her hopeless cry for freedom. In the end, he reminds the listeners what Braidotti’s affirmative posthumanism may also suggest that there will always be limits, but it is possible to create individuality within those limits.

The last part of the analysis covers “The Debate”, in which Night Vale is about to choose a town mayor between an entity who is neither dead or alive; a dragon with five heads; and the wealthiest man of the town that turns into an angel in the end. First candidate, the Faceless Old Woman is a reoccurring resident of the town. She is not bounded by time and space as she exists in everywhere at the same time. Being somehow immortal appears to be advantageous, and it is an ideal to surpass the limits of mortality, but in fact it makes her lonely and she is perceived as a freak outside of Night Vale. Time grants her the adjective ‘old’ however whether she withers with age is debatable since she does not own a face. The absence of a face can be perceived as lacking a body part, which shows that she does not have a normative body.

Second candidate is Hiram McDaniels. Hiram is a five-headed dragon who is created by the writers as an inspiration from a mythical creature. He announces explicitly that he is neither a single entity nor a human, but the characteristics that are ascribed to him, e.g. him driving a car, Cecil describing him as “charming”, and being a mayoral candidate, elucidate that Hiram is an anthropomorphised posthuman. He contemplates the wellbeing of the community which he is in and envisions that his flaws, for example not being human, and his advantages, for example having five heads to solve multiple problems, grant him as much power as Faceless Old Woman has in order to be a mayor.

The last candidate Marcus, even though being the only human at the debate, is not as effective as the other two. Nonetheless, through him it is possible to observe the Angels who are influential in the town. Angels are rather controversial in Night Vale as it is illegal to accept their existence

which is legislated by the City Council, yet, they are blended with the town citizens, and the Night Valeians neither ostracize nor belittle the Angels. On the contrary, Angels act as the guardians of the town and they have a voice in the town matters. Night Vale is highly accustomed to Angels in such a degree that Marcus, the wealthiest citizen of the town, being chosen by the Angels and then ascending to the sky which causes him to lose the candidacy, is an event that is conveyed as ordinary news.

On the whole, the stories of Janice Palmer, Josh Crayton, and Megan Wallaby represent how *WTNV* narrates the experiences of people with disabilities. It is demonstrated that Steve and Cecil, as the Night Vale citizens, protect and value Janice as an individual and do not see the impairment as a problem. As a different perspective, Josh Crayton faces his disability, and struggles to accept it at first. However, accepting one's non-normative nature rather than seeing it as a problem is encouraged through his story. Following that Megan Wallaby's story exemplifies the communicational struggles of a little girl. As she is provided with a computer the story shows that an interdependent relationship with a nonhuman agent is a possible way of living. Furthermore, through the stories of the Computer and Fey, the binary opposition of man-made versus organic is demonstrated. Even though, they are both shut down at the end of their stories Cecil, as the voice of Night Vale, reminds the listener and the reader that whether they were machines or not, the Computer and Fey deserve to be heard and valued. The Computer's hope for a community of machines and humans living in harmony and Fey's dream of being free exemplifies a posthuman way of life where the binary opposition of machine versus human is blurred. Lastly, the three nonhuman beings in the episode "The Debate" show that in the Night Vale community, everyone has a value, and a chance to be whoever they want. For example, while Faceless Old Woman was considered as a freak outside of the town, she manages to be a mayoral candidate in Night Vale. Likewise, even though Hiram McDaniels is not allowed to be a candidate at first as he does not identify as a human, later this statement is found discriminatory and Hiram manages to be a candidate. Angels, on the other hand, are not even legally considered as real in Night Vale, but they are accepted, valued and given rights to speak in the debate.

In conclusion, Fink and Cranor uses the stories of individual characters in *Welcome to Night Vale* to affirm the posthuman and the posthuman possibilities of living. The diverse population in the Night Vale reserves varied structures that fit into the posthuman condition: The beings with disabilities, the beings that are bounded inside machines, and the beings that are nonhuman are dealt in this study specifically. Looking at the outcome, it is revealed why this podcast appeals to the people as a combination of stories. One study establishes the following findings:

Hanna from Finland enjoys stories involving [severed hand and Night Vale elementary student] Megan Wallaby ... since they've shared similar feelings of loneliness and isolation. Likewise, explaining her life in "real" society, blogger thequintessentialqueer explicitly compares herself to *WTNV*'s non-human citizens: "we are made to feel monstrous. As a queer, autistic woman of colour, I have been taught to feel ugly, to feel dangerous,

to feel dirty and wrong. In the absence of representation, I was spectral ... I am many headed and dangerous; I am faceless and afraid" (Hancock, 2018:37).

This study demonstrates that the depiction of the human for the town of Night Vale corresponds with the affirmative posthumanist notion that is foregrounded by Braidotti. Additionally, it is possible to claim that humanity, or posthumanity, is not related to physical corporeity, but to refer back to what Hiram says to Faceless Old Woman; one's acts are more important than how they are seen, and this is how Night Vale tells stories, and opens vast possibilities of identities through storytelling.

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