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Black Speculations:

Embodying Geography and Re-Visioning the Future in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy

Master's thesis in English Literature

Supervisor: Hanna Musiol

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Abstract

This project focuses on N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy and examines the way she narrates flesh and land in her speculative fiction. Jemisin utilizes Afrofuturist neo-slave narrative to challenge past and present racial hierarchies to imagine paths towards racial abolition. Framed by Katherine McKittrick's and Christina Sharpe's work on literature, black feminist geographies and the aftermath of slavery, this thesis examines how past histories are embedded in flesh and land. Jemisin, I argue, confronts such racialized geographies of domination and imagines future liberation. Chapter one, "'Speakable' Lands: Black Geography and Past/Present Speculations", provides a theoretical framework and explores specific geographies of domination and liberation to create spaces for overcoming. Chapter two, "Non/Being: Embodying the Past in the Governed Borders of Humanness," explores how past histories produce flesh and land embodiments. The thesis concludes with reflecting on how Jemisin re-vision the future.

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Introduction

“When I come back, though, it’s like... it’s like some of the earth comes with me [...],” writes N. K. Jemisin in the first novel of the *Broken Earth* trilogy (TFS 117). A sense of corporeal entanglement between flesh and land emerges; a suggestion of a mutual, material and political alteration resulting from interactions between bodies and the environment. This flesh and land proximity is often found in diasporic literature. Katherine McKittrick observes that, “[...] geography is always human and that humanness is always geographic” (*Demonic Grounds* xi).¹² She defines Black geographies as “[...] “*the terrain* of political struggle itself,” or *where* the imperative of a perspective of struggle takes place” (*Demonic Grounds* 6, emphasis in original). In her diasporic poetry, Dionne Brand highlights the intertwined nature of coloniality, diaspora, and geography coupled with current anthropogenic landscapes. These showcase how humanness is shaped by the flesh and land discourse and its proximity to the nonhuman. Therefore, mapping geographies of flesh and land may prove beneficial in uncovering certain truths concerning the malleable and temporal state of black being.

Authors writing about black diaspora often evoke flesh and land as a device to uncover something about Blackness and black being in the aftermath of slavery. African American author N. K. Jemisin is one of those authors. She is a recent recipient of the MacArthur Fellows Genius Grant, and the first author to win a Hugo award for best novel for three consecutive years and for each novel in a series. Her works contain elaborate social and political commentary regarding current issues fused with fantastical elements. The trilogy is a speculative fiction neo-slave narrative and consists of the novels *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017).³ The novels grapple with themes such as structural oppression and slavery, environmental destruction, diaspora and dispossession, motherhood, kinship, and identity. Jemisin has applied Afrofuturism as a political and aesthetical mode of inquiry to address and examine African American concerns about the past and present. Accordingly, she has provided a space for envisioning futurity beyond the wake of slavery. With the help of fantastical elements, Jemisin declares flesh and land as embodied sites for grappling with subjugation and liberation.

Speculative fiction neo-slave narratives use literary devices which fuse and reject traditional notions of what constitutes the real, and through these disrupt “[...] temporality and

¹ McKittrick notes this about Dionne Brand’s diasporic poetry.

² Diasporic literature discusses works about people living outside of their ancestral homes while still maintaining some connection with it.

³ Will also be referred to as TFS, TOG, and TSS.

narrativity [that] are designed to convey certain truths about slavery that are inaccessible through the discipline of history” (Shalk 37). While appearing in the same tradition of black speculative writing, neo-slave narratives focus its attention on the past, while Afrofuturism focuses on the future. However, both acknowledge the past’s influence on the present. Indeed, they deem it paramount for establishing black speculations of the future. Overlooked aspects of the past and present can therefore be thoroughly examined and resolved through these lenses. In the troubling history of science fiction and fantasy, Afrofuturism articulates a response to the recurring erasure of black and brown bodies. As such, the Afrofuturist political mode arguably appears as a decolonizing tool: an antithesis which centers black stories by examining and recovering the prehistory of enslaved Africans. Kodwo Eshun argued that black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism should create spaces for recovering knowledges and histories, thereby manufacture tools for rewriting the cultural and political climate perpetuating structural racism, oppression, and the enslavement of black people (Anderson and Jones viii). In the *Broken Earth* trilogy, Jemisin utilizes Afrofuturism to engage with colonial histories of slavery. As a result, pathways for imagining counter-futures and exploring coloniality’s ramifications on black bodies and being are forged. This highlights the inherent decolonizing capacities in black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism.

Black speculation invites various frameworks to produce spaces for thinking about identities shaped by historical and generational trauma. For instance, black histories are highly geographical because black histories are stories of diaspora. Therefore, geography could disrupt temporality and narrativity, to uncover and convey truths about slavery. Moreover, colonial practices such as the first act of enslavement, the first rape, and the first act of territorial theft, indicates nature has never been external to human bodies (LeMenager 227). Within permeable temporal and spatial boundaries, issues such as traditional realms of identity and context, space and time, are treated as malleable (Morgan 20). This suggests that geography embeds violent histories and trauma, and through interactions transfer these between flesh and land. Katherine McKittrick explains that black diasporic histories and geographies are challenging to track and map because the center of these places were the transatlantic slave trade and plantations (and its attendant geographies) (*On Plantations* 948). Furthermore, these spaces predicated on practices of violence and profited from the erasure of a black sense of place (948). Thus, applying McKittrick’s theory to Jemisin’s trilogy, this thesis argues that Black geographies embeds and

reveal colonial histories when engaged with, consequently transforming flesh and land due to their proximity in colonialism and diaspora.

The idea of geographies containing black, diasporic and colonial histories further highlights a possibility for intrinsic temporality. Christina Sharpe draws on the wake to illustrate what it means to live in the aftermath of slavery. The wake and its connotations address the ways in which past atrocities continue shaping the present lives of (previously) enslaved black people. Sharpe notes that the means and approaches of black subjugation may have changed, but the structures of that subjugation persist (12). This point suggests that the past is not simply history. Accordingly, this thesis argues that pastness is a position currently occupying the present, creating a past/present singularity of slavery from which escape proves nearly impossible: “Time doesn’t matter. The earthquake is my body, the cracks, it’s me!” (128). Evidently, Katherine McKittrick’s and Christina Sharpe’s work on literature, black geographies, and the wake of slavery serve as primary frameworks for examining Jemisin’s speculative world.

Accordingly, this thesis asks: how can the present be emancipated from pastness? To what degree do interactions between flesh and land provoke alterations? And what purpose does examining past histories hold regarding imagining futurities? In the *Broken Earth* trilogy, Jemisin observes that her character’s oppression is akin to the oppression of the environment; that past colonial and racial hierarchies indeed shape flesh and land in the present; that flesh and land become spaces of subjugation and liberation; and that uncovering and examining past geographies, structures, and traumas provide the tools for reforging new futures. These interconnected issues and questions are what molds this thesis. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore the ways in which N. K. Jemisin employs flesh and land in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, and by what means these embodiments provide tools for imagining futures beyond the wake of slavery.

This thesis is divided into two chapters, “‘Speakable’ Lands: Black Geographic Stories and Past/Present Speculations” and “Non/Being: Embodying the Past in the Governed Borders of Humanness.” Chapter one introduces the complex plot of the trilogy and its representation of structural racism and oppression, environmental destruction, and identity. Thereon I present neo-slave narratives and Afrofuturism as conduits for Jemisin’s storytelling. Then I establish the theoretical framework built on geographies and pastness available through black studies and postcolonial theories by Christina Sharpe and Katherine McKittrick. Next, I analyze Syl Anagist,

the Fulcrum, Meov, and Castrima as critical landscapes, and I argue that these have shaped and been shaped by colonial practices and the encompassing presence of the past. Elucidating the histories contained in these geographies will showcase geography's connection to black non/being. Chapter two examines the ways in which Jemisin presents flesh and land proximities. First, I focus on the role of geologic language as processes of dehumanization and tools of oppression. Moreover, it will examine how these have influenced the characters' identities. Then, I analyze and illustrate how Jemisin narrates pastness and land on her character's bodies. Specifically, this chapter will showcase how Jemisin imagines flesh and land as bearers of the wake of slavery. The chapter will then discuss the ways in which engaging with the past may provide new possibilities for re-visioning the future.

Chapter 1. 'Speakable' Lands:
Black Geographies and Past/Present Speculations

A body emerges from a crystal: “The body that the geode contained lies facedown amid the rocks, naked, his flesh dry but still heaving in apparent exhaustion” (TFS 13). N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy brims with scenes revealing the entanglements and inseparability between flesh and land. This mutual alteration stems from interactions between bodies and their environment, and vice versa. The notion of some inherent similarity of this sort is common in black diasporic fictions.⁴ But what role does space, specifically Black geographies, play when addressing it in the context of flesh? Drawing on Brand, Katherine McKittrick notes that a house is only as safe as flesh, illustrating that black stories are geographic stories (*Demonic Grounds* xi). And like a house, personal and historical histories can be contained within these geographies. Jemisin demonstrates that the destruction of environment and the subjugated people called orogenes are as equal in their classification as they are in their oppression. Orogenes are human but also not; they can draw power from, and manipulate, the earth. It is therefore flesh and land can be viewed as inseparable, and these geographies become contested spaces on which orogenes exist on the threshold of life and death. Racist paradigms of the past and their ongoing hierarchal patters are accentuated in geographies in the diaspora, McKittrick explains (xii). Christina Sharpe concurs and demonstrates how the “[...] means and modes of black subjection may have changed, but the fact and structure of that subjection remain” (12). It is for this reason exploring geographies might reveal something about Blackness and being. Geographies can serve as historically contextual spaces for exploring and they can emphasize the lasting effects of colonial violences and its perpetual presence in the present. Moreover, Sharpe observes how living in the aftermath of slavery and colonialism is what living in the wake looks like. She applies notions of the wake and its encompassing meanings to address the effects and affects the past has had in shaping the present lives of black people.

The *Broken Earth* trilogy includes *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017), and unfolds the story of a future society plagued by geological instability and technological hubris caused by a human-induced climate change, whose survival depends upon the subjugation of orogenes: a people able to control the geological environment through inherited magical abilities. To convey this story, while commenting upon black space and bodies existing in perpetual structural oppression and environmental destruction, Jemisin combines neo-slave narrative techniques with Afrofuturist political and aesthetical modes of

⁴ For instance, this can be seen in Dionne Brand’s and Fred Moten’s writings.

expression and inquiry as her vehicle, both of which prominent in black speculative fictions. The two terms derive from, and say something, about the social and cultural conditions of the time of the novels production. Ashraf H. A. Rushdy explains that authors of neo-slave narratives “[...] raise questions concerning the possibility for subjective knowledge within a predetermined form of writing, especially as regards the construction and dismantling of “racial” identity” (7). By asking questions about and demonstrating the process through which historical subjects constitute themselves by employing or revising sets of ideologically charged textual structures, Rushdy’s ideas align with Sharpe’s theory of wake work and McKittrick’s Black feminist geography by drawing on the past to examine the present. Likewise, Afrofuturism draws on the past in examining the present but differs as Afrofuturism concerns itself with ‘things to come’.⁵ Deriving from science fiction, Afrofuturism responds to the erasure of black bodies and spaces in mainstream and popular science fiction and fantasy, an issue Jemisin is deeply concerned with in her works. Thus, while the neo-slave narrative reclaims and retells stories of slavery whilst addressing the idea of race being a social construct, the political and aesthetic mode of Afrofuturism provide additional spaces wherein such issues can be explored in depth. Utopian and liberatory worlds, advanced technocultures, and a break with patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist ideologies. All of these have contributed to (upholding) the subjugation of black people, are some possibilities offered by exploring Black geographies and bodies.

Indeed, the common thread connecting these theories is their focus on the connections between the past and the present, hence, the future as well. McKittrick and Sharpe manage to illustrate how retrieving and retelling stories from the past contextualizes the present and therefore produce spaces for re-visioning the future. By focusing on how the past has influenced the present whilst likewise contributing to uphold racist and oppressive structures, the insights they provide help in uncovering how the wake, which contains black bodies and spaces in the present, is created and the role geography holds. Claiming geography holds a central function in black diasporic literature, this chapter contend that geographies are archives for past and present histories, and therefore seeks to unpack Black geographies as it is represented in the *Broken Earth* trilogy with the goal of unpacking its role in perpetuating subjugation while simultaneously offering spaces for liberation. This chapter is separated into two sections: The first section will first present the trilogy and its main plots in detail whilst also pointing to some

⁵ Collected from Alonda Nelson’s definition of Afrofuturism (Anderson and Jones viii).

literary techniques used; thereafter I will delve into how Jemisin uses Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives as conduits for telling geographic stories, showcasing how Katherine McKittrick's and Christina Sharpe's theoretical approaches are significant here. The second section will analyze some of the central geographies in the trilogy. By employing a theoretical lens based on Katherine McKittrick's theory of Black geographies and Christina Sharpe's theory of the wake, the analysis will elucidate what histories these geographies contain in terms of its connection with Blackness and black space. The analysis will lay the foundation for exploring flesh and land as affected by their proximity, and how these spaces might help in re/shaping the future in the following chapter.

Speculative Fictions of the Wake

“How can we prepare for the future if we won’t acknowledge the past?”

- N. K. Jemisin (TSS 216)

Speculative fiction is defined by the ways it deconstructs and challenges societal and cultural structures. The genre might prove particularly helpful in providing the reader with a space for engaging with abstract and complex ideas, and thus encourage the reader to extend their thinking beyond that which is normalized. Petal Samuel notes that specifically Black women’s speculative fiction are underused archives of intersectional theory with capabilities for articulating “[...] the power of these speculative worlds to shape the contemporary political imagination” (Samuel). Therefore, speculative fiction alongside the political mode of Afrofuturism will provide the necessary tools for uncovering and challenging societal and cultural structures that disproportionately affects black spaces and the black body because Afrofuturism centers them. By carefully examining the three novels in Jemisin’s trilogy in relation to the socio-political and historical contexts of their place and time of production, they intricately reveal how interconnected race (and the body) and place is, and thus highlighting the multiple levels of racialization and oppression occurring. Robert D. Bullard notes just how intimate race and place is as he explains that “[...] place is racialized with benefits, resources, and opportunities unevenly distributed across the urban landscape” (4). He goes on explaining that racialized space even affects the air African Americans breathe as black Americans often live in segregated communities located close to dangerous air polluting facilities (4-5). Katherine McKittrick concurs as she observes how Blackness in the Americas is indeed connected to spaces of social, environmental, and infrastructural decay (*On Plantations* 951). She draws on histories and geographies beyond colonialism and plantations such as industrial polluted residential areas, urban crisis, and declining property values, among others (951). Therefore, following synopsis is greatly detailed because the issues which relates to Blackness and space, and flesh and land, are portrayed in the manner of which Jemisin observes and understands the world. Because of the novels being written in the speculative fiction genre and this genre mirrors societal and cultural structures, it likewise portrays the complexities of these structures as

representations of our society. Thus, to gain a nuanced and in-depth picture of how Jemisin re-imagines (and challenges) said structures, the following section will relay the trilogy.⁶

The *Broken Earth* trilogy consists of the novels *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017). As mentioned in the introduction, the novels deal with large themes such as, but not limited to, structural oppression and environmental destruction. In this trilogy, N. K. Jemisin has created a society plagued by geological instability and technological hubris caused by a human-induced climate change. Society's survival depends upon the subjugation of Orogenes, a people with the ability to control the geological environment through inherited magical abilities. Throughout the books, we learn, first in fragments and then all at once, that humanity has angered Father Earth by driving his child, the moon, out of orbit. The consequences have been destructive climate events such as earthquakes, tsunamis, and continental realignment. There is only one habitable continent for humanity left: a super-continent named the Stillness: "[...] a land of quiet and bitter irony" (TFS 2). Every now and then, seismic activity and other large-scale environmental alterations might set off a Fifth season, an extended winter which can last from six months to several years. Immediately, the shortened and concise synopsis declares its focus on (post)coloniality while alluding to issues relating to the environment, Blackness, and structural racism.

The Stillness is populated by Stills (humans), Orogenes (humans with magic, sometimes addressed through the derogatory term Rogga), and Guardians (those who protect, and protect against, orogenes). Additionally, the land is also inhabited by the wildly unknown yet mysterious and almost mythological beings Stone eaters (previously Tuners, a race of bioengineered humans). Orogenes and stone eaters represent new ways of imagining the human. While they do not inherently take on the role of Blackness or the black body, their allusion to the black body is accentuated through their position in society and their proximity to the environment. Furthermore, each novel in the trilogy tells the story through multiple points of view which are narrated by the stone eater Hoa. Importantly, because the narrator is an active participant in the story and therefore controls both its direction and presentation, each novel also contains so-called 'interludes' in which Hoa reflects upon what he has recounted thus far. This functions as a way for Hoa to offer the addressee sympathies as Essun relearns her own story. The decision to tell

⁶ I will do so while drawing on Kathleen Murphy's own synopsis as I found hers to be narratively sound and to the point. See Murphy, Kathleen in Works Cited.

this trilogy through multiple perspectives serves a critical purpose. For one, it helps the reader engage with the complexities of larger issues when experiencing them through a multitude of characters. Secondly, it functions as a narrative technique to illustrate the fragmented and malleable nature of identities when living in perpetual structural violence and showcases how such an environment might change whole groups of people. Moreover, having multiple characters helps enrich the fictional world through different ways of being in it and through the possibility of diversifying it. Since Jemisin's trilogy offers such a rich and complex insight into issues relating to living in what Christina Sharpe identified as the wake (of slavery), the following sections will delve into a deeper detail of each novel as a way of providing a general overview and understanding of the fictional world before the coming analysis.

The first novel *The Fifth Season*, follows Essun and what is revealed to be her former identities in her journey from being Damaya, a feral rogga child; to Syenite, an Imperial orogene trained at the Fulcrum; and lastly to Essun, an orogene mother in hiding trying to pass as a human. This fragmented presentation of identities separated into individual chapters indicate that themes of identity and transformation are central to the plot. Damaya and Syenite's stories are told in third person perspective and detail Essun's past, while Essun's perspective is told in the present but through the second person perspective. All the characters are the focalizers of their respective chapters but are narrated by Hoa, a stone eater who befriends Essun in the first novel. This means that each individual story presents a dual perspective in which we become acquainted with the characters' story with the added eyes of Hoa and the knowledges he carries with him. The novel primarily follows Essun as she sets out on a mission to find her daughter Nassun whom her husband has kidnapped after killing their son Uche when discovering he was an orogene. The complementary chapters of Damaya and Syenite revolve around how Essun came to be the person she is presently. In the second novel in the trilogy, *The Obelisk Gate*, we get the added perspectives of Essun's daughter Nassun and her former Guardian Schaffa alongside Essun, thus providing world views and experiences beyond what we already know. This novel shows Essun after having found shelter in Castrima and being given the impossible task of ending the fifth seasons, believing this will stop environmental and structural violence. Nassun travels with her father to the Found Moon comm to find the cure for orogeny. Schaffa, after having contracted a head injury, finds his loyalties shifted from Father Earth to that of the orogenes, and specifically Nassun, as she enters his new comm. The finale of the trilogy happens

in *The Stone Sky*. The final novel follows the perspectives of Essun, Nassun, and Hoa. Essun has mastered orogeny and can harness the power of the obelisks (deadciv artifacts from a previous civilization containing immense power).⁷ After saving the people of Castrima from being murdered, she finds herself partly turned to stone and whenever she uses her orogeny, her body further transforms to stone. She nonetheless continues trying to end the Fifth seasons in hope that doing so will create a future where her daughter can be free. However, Nassun has seen the evils of the world and, with the help of Schaffa, has decided the world cannot be saved, only destroyed. The two main characters are positioned at odds with each other in a way that showcases the many manifestations historical and generational trauma can have on the mind and body.

In addition to Essun' and Nassun's perspectives, *The Stone Sky* offers greater insight into how the Stillness became a geologically unstable and violent landscape. Akin to Damaya's and Syenite's stories contextualize Essun's life does Hoa's recount of his past contextualize both his life and the entirety of the Stillness. Hoa details what he calls the end of the world in six chapters counting down from five to zero. Here, he provides a detailed account of the personal and historical past which showcases the practices which lead to the oppressive and climate disastrous land. In a city called Syl Anagist, described as the greatest city to ever exist, the readers learn that the highly advanced, biotechnological utopia was in the process of creating the Plutonic Machine. This machine would harness a magical resource from the earth and then generate immense power to self-sufficiently fuel the city through a network of obelisks. Hoa refers to this network as webs of life, while ultimately underlining the utopian stance of the city: "life, you see, is sacred in Syl Anagist" (TSS 4). However, it is revealed that the sacredness of life is not equally distributed. Hoa and the other stone eaters of the Stillness were created in this city with the purpose of launching these obelisks. In the past, stone eaters were originally called Tuners and they were a genetically bioengineered race of humans grown with all necessary knowledge embedded in their design. This way of storytelling showcases that multiple perspectives centralized alongside temporal consideration illustrates the importance of the past in black speculative fiction. It not only adds to the worldbuilding, but also helps the reader understand the complexities of the presented world and its inhabitants, thereby providing the reader with a nuanced and complex picture.

⁷ Deadciv artifacts refer to artifacts deriving from dead civilizations - namely, Syl Anagist.

The structure of this society is built on what Stonelore teaches. Stonelore are several tablets that contain the collective history of the Stillness, but most of all it is a survival guide for how to survive the Fifth seasons. Furthermore, Stonelore teaches that orogenes use their magic (orogeny) by drawing energy from the earth and from matter, and that they are uncontrollably violent and cruel beings that kill instinctively. Stonelore deems orogenes as less than human and they are treated as such (TFS 234). This is what justified the creation of the Fulcrum, a military facility to which orogenes would be sent (if they were not murdered first) to be trained and thus used for the greater good; a tactic which furthers their enslavement. Another immediately important notion for understanding the coming analysis, is that orogenes are the descendants of stone eaters (tuners). Specifically, the first tuner Kelenli. Kelenli's role in this story is not elaborated upon until the last novel, through which we learn that she was the first successful bioengineered creation for the coming Plutonic Machine project. Moreover, she performs the role of the first storyteller, or Lorist. Hers is one of many characters whose story is directly linked with real events from the time of slavery and after the emancipation of black people. Christina Sharpe shows how the black girl Phillis Wheatley, named after the ship they bought her from, became an experiment where her owners/parents allowed and encouraged her to “develop”: “[...] to become the first Black human being to be published in America” (43). Similarly, Kelenli grew up in a “normal” family believing she was but an ordinary Sylanagistine girl, to see if she could become human (TSS 207). She explains to the other tuners it was believed that if she were raised decent, she might turn out decent - even natural: “And so my every achievement was counted a Sylanagistine success, while my every failure or display of poor behavior was seen as proof of genetic degeneracy” (207). Her story in particular is important to have in mind because she is the first link between the subjugation of orogenes and of the environment in this fictional world, and our current society from which Jemisin has drawn inspiration. Furthermore, it provides insight into the colonial practices of dehumanization first used regarding Kelenli, and then to all her descendants. Before delving further into an analysis, the coming section will present the literary theories of Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives and theories by Katherine McKittrick and Christina Sharpe. These will complexify and substantiate the trilogy and the chapter's analysis.

Ytasha Womack identifies Afrofuturism as, “[t]he audacity of hope, the bold declaration to believe, and clarity of vision for a better life and world are the seeds to personal growth,

revolutionized societies, and life-changing technologies” (42). The term was coined and popularized by Mark Dery in the early 1990s, but Afrofuturism as a cultural aesthetic has existed for far longer. In his article “Afrofuturism has Always Looking Forward,” Taylor Crumpton suggests that Afrofuturism was birthed “[...] from the minds of enslaved Africans who prayed for their lives and the lives of their descendants along the horrific Middle Passage” (Crumpton). Afrofuturism describes an aesthetic and political mode of black expression which is largely found in both academic discourse and in the sphere of popular culture. In a roundtable session celebrating 25 years of speculative fiction, Tiffany E. Barber describes Afrofuturism as a “[...] speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of the twentieth-century technoculture - and, more generally, African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future” (136). Arguably more political in this definition, Kodwo Eshun notes that, “Afrofuturism may be characterized as a program for recovering the histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and as a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable of intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (Anderson and Jones viii).⁸⁹

What becomes clear is that Afrofuturism equally details an ideology and political mode of thinking as well as an aesthetic which is defined by, and underline, the themes of black speculation and liberation. It is through eradicating white supremacy and the re-examination of the past and present that make way for technologically advanced and just futures for Black communities.¹⁰ This will become clearer throughout the thesis. At any rate, newer scholarship and discourse are redefining contemporary Afrofuturism as the mode which naturally evolves

⁸ Additionally, Alonda Nelson broadly interprets Afrofuturism as the voices of African American people telling other stories about technology, culture, and things to come (Anderson and Jones viii).

⁹ While the mode of Afrofuturism has been embraced by scholars and writes across fields, all of whom have taken it and reshaped it to fit into evolving societal and political norms, some have met it with skepticism. André Carrington argues that Dery frames African American expressive culture through the notion that it appears preoccupied with the past, as opposed to the future, as a causality of racial oppression (23). Further, by invoking this eradication of African American pasts as being a potential obstacle of Afrofuturism, Carrington claims that Dery is simply adhering to the narrative which provided African Americans with the term futurism to begin with (23).

¹⁰ André Carrington criticizes current definitions as he instead identifies Afrofuturism as one of four examples within speculative fiction of Blackness which has been significant in the struggle of interpreting Blackness, instead of it being the encompassing one (22-23). Alongside Afrofuturism, he identifies surrealism, Otherhood, and haunting.¹⁰ By recognizing the impossibility of nuance in detailing and exploring the black experience in the diaspora, Carrington showcases the interconnectedness of all four examples, instead of focusing primarily on Afrofuturism in and of itself.

with current technologies and politics, as well as its prominent role in popular culture through musical artists such as Janelle Monáe, the HBO series *Lovecraft Country* (2020), and comic books such as *Black Panther*. Not to mention the explosion of black speculative fiction literature the last few decades. Moreover, the last several years have seen numerous academic books and journals dedicated to the exploration of the topic that further indicates a growing interest which seems unlikely to decrease anytime soon.¹¹

Taking into consideration and applying the many understanding of Afrofuturism as detailed above, it seems to provide a way of thinking about black bodies and identity as the term also suggests malleability within temporal boundaries and permeable spatiality (Morgan 20). This is what scholar Danielle Fuentes Morgan suggests, adding that: “[...] the term itself is malleable because it treats these traditional realms of time and space, of identity and context, as malleable - it practices what it preaches” (20). This malleability and temporality are particularly relevant to keep in mind when analyzing the role of stone eaters and orogenes in the trilogy, which will occur in the next chapter. So, if Afrofuturism provide ways of thinking about black identity, then the Afrofuturist neo-slave narrative takes on the role of the conduit for reclaiming and retelling those stories. Both appear in same tradition of black speculative fiction, sharing in speculations of the past and future but not simultaneously. Therefore, combining them might offer new possibilities to understand the overarching presence of pastness. Slave narratives have historically detailed the misery and horror of slavery with focus upon the experience of slavery as experienced by the enslaved. The neo-slave narrative in contrast focuses less on the experience of slavery, but rather on the personhood and humanity of the enslaved as its goal, thereby humanizing them as a result (21). Slave narratives contributed considerably towards the later emancipation of slaves, showcasing the power of the literary mode in societal and cultural discourse. The last decades have seen the increased rise of neo-slave narratives, and particularly Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives by authors such as Tomi Adeyemi, Nalo Hopkinson, and N. K. Jemisin (amongst several others).¹² This speaks to both an increased demand in stories

¹¹ For further reading, read Alexander Weheliye’s *Phonographies: Grooves in Sonic Afro-Modernity* (2005), Marlene Barr’s *Afrofuturity Females: Black Writers Chart Science Fiction Newest New-Wave Trajectory* (2008), Sandra Jackson’s and Julie Moody-Freeman’s *The Black Imagination: Science Fiction, Futurism and the Speculative* (2011), Ytasha Womack’s *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013); including scholars and writers Kodwo Eshun, Alondra Nelson, Samuel Delaney, Toni Morrison, Sylvia Wynter, Lisa Yaszek, among others.

¹² Succeeded by authors such as Samuel R. Delaney, Octavia Butler, and W.E.B. Du Bois.

previously denied the same platform as other popularized stories and the explosion of Black writers claiming and creating spaces for such stories to be told, showing Afrofuturism in action. Because of the shared interest in black personhood, Afrofuturist and neo-slave narratives offer new modes for thinking about slavery as unavoidable in African American storytelling and illustrate how it can be incorporated into storytelling in new manners. Morgan argues that reparative justice is offered by Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives through foreknowledge which widens historical slave narratives (21). This is an element that opens a space for Black communities to heal from generational trauma while also pointing to the many ways these communities are still oppressed under present law, government, and societal structure. Ultimately, Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives acknowledges the influence exerted by the past concerning black futurity and identity.

In many ways, Afrofuturist stories are a response to the erasure of black bodies and spaces in mainstream and popular science fiction and fantasy. It seeks therefore to destroy current science fiction tropes to highlight and complicate issues in representations of Blackness and racial difference (Barber 137). Considering science fiction's troubling past of erasure, and with the focus on technological advancements of bodies, what was presented as racial and technological progress has instead inspired "[...] problematic visions of raceless, placeless, genderless and bodiless futures" (136). But Lisa Yaszek explains that the genre not only reclaims the past, but also grasps and reclaims the history of the future (qtd. in Barber 137). This is in line with Jemisin's storytelling. She considers racism in the past and present, on a structural and individual level, and reimagines futurities in which marginalized peoples' bodies are centralized. While using Afrofuturism as a political mode to tackle questions regarding racism, oppression, and dehumanization, she unfolds these in worlds similar, yet different, to ours. Thereby, possibilities for reconsidering the past to understanding the present and exploring the ways in which we can reach a just future arise. Conceivably, the present visualized in this trilogy serves as a cautionary tale of what the future might look like if current society - specifically, the western parts of the world - do not act against the pressing issues of growing political unrest and climate change.

In her short story collection *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* (2018), Jemisin explains in the introduction that "science fiction *claimed* to be the fiction of the future, but it still mostly celebrated the faces and voices and stories of the past" (vii, original emphasis). In the essay that

inspired her short story collection, she further recounts how she realized that black and brown bodies were missing, perhaps even purposefully excluded, from science fiction and fantasy narrative futurities (“How Long ‘til Black Future Month”). Guarded by the gatekeepers of these beloved genres, authors glorifying the voices and faces of the past hid behind the promise of an advanced future for all humankind. In an interview in the Paris Review, she points out that these advanced futures always seemed to end up as these “shiny, happy, utopian futures” (Bereola). Existing within science fiction, Afrofuturism can be said to be an antithesis mode because it forcefully lunges black bodies to the center, both in terms of authors and writers, readers, and through worldbuilding and characters. Walter Mosely mirrors this claim unintentionally and without making claims specifically to Afrofuturism, but rather explains that “[b]lack people have been cut off from their African ancestry by the scythe of slavery and from an American heritage by being excluded from history. For us, science fiction offers an alternative where that which deviates from the norm is the norm” (Thomas 405).

Black speculative fictions certainly consider the past in a multitude of stories. Much of the reason may be that considerations of the past fuel the visions we can, should, and will have of the future - as Jemisin illustrates with this trilogy. Furthermore, I would argue that Afrofuturism is a decolonizing project because decolonization is about reclaiming the past and taking back what was taken. Jemisin does this in the series, as well as several of her short stories such as “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2016) and “Emergency Skin” (2019). Again, where Afrofuturism is a decolonizing project, science fiction must therefore be the antithesis as a colonialist project in the overall scope of postcolonialism. Presumably, most science fiction readers are familiar with common tropes such as either invading or being invaded by aliens, traveling to distant worlds, and returning and/or becoming a “colonial hero,” as Jessica Langer calls them (3). This parallel between science fiction and colonial projects is perhaps the oldest debated in literary postcolonial discourse, but nonetheless important to recognize as one addresses Afrofuturist storytelling. Afrofuturist storytelling is black storytelling, and black storytelling is one of diaspora and flesh/land boundaries. Applying modes of Afrofuturism discussed above as lenses for exploring Black geographies will contribute to unpack how the Stillness has been shaped by pastness’ manifestation in the present. Further, it will uncover what this means in way of exploring futures focused on black liberation.

Geographies of Dominion and Spaces for Overcoming

“[...] Some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don’t lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place” (TSS 7).

Black stories often relate to the diaspora, and the diaspora is always geographical. Therefore, stories emerging from the black diaspora often appear intimately alongside neo-slave narratives with notions of land and geography as overarching themes. For this reason, geography is essential when it comes to looking at and understanding black experiences of being in and knowing the world. Accordingly, I want to look at the role of land and geography in the *Broken Earth* trilogy and the significance in shaping the Stillness and its Othered people, as well as how it was shaped in return. Black diaspora also connects black histories with colonial histories through mappings, conquests, and explorations, all of which are ultimately connected through space and place (McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds* x). By looking at the relationship between Black populations and geography, Katherine McKittrick explains that it allows us to “[...] engage with a narrative that locates and draws on black histories and black subjects in order to make visible social lives which are often displaced, rendered ungeographic” (x). McKittrick furthermore discusses Dionne Brand’s interpretation of geography as being always human and likewise humanness is always geographic through blood and bones, your land, seas, and planet, which ultimately rendered the surrounding environment ‘speaking’ (ix). In other words, geography has the possibility to speak for itself, which is comparable with how Jemisin created Father Earth by way of giving the environment autonomy.

In this series, the geographical past embedding black histories has become embodied and personified through the stone eaters and, to some degree, the orogenes. Namely, where the land holds the histories of its people, the people likewise hold the histories of the land. And this entanglement of flesh and land makes black histories immediately reachable, or ‘speaking’, for orogenes living in the present: their bodies carrying the potential for remembering, and healing from their fractured selves and histories. Additionally, they can make use of the reachable past to forge pathways for orogenes to cross from the periphery of unknown landscapes into the center. The manifestation of flesh and land in Jemisin’s work illustrates the connectedness between geography, diaspora, and colonial pasts with notions of identity, subjectivity, and trauma.

Concretely, bodies forged by geographies in the *Broken Earth* trilogy highlight how the Stillness is violent but holds the potential for liberation. Moreover, it shows how the Stillness is itself a body, capable of wearing the scars of colonial violence; further, that the consequences of colonial practices still contribute to the shaping of orogene (black) bodies and land. Mirroring colonial practices, Jemisin's world also detail the similarities between the subjugation of land and of the body. While the body is also considered a space, I want to continue by exploring the Stillness, geography, and diaspora. Specifically, I want map landscapes within this supercontinent to reveal how Jemisin presents the complexities of identity when affected by violent and oppressive geographies.

Geography has a pivotal role in colonial histories through mappings, conquests, and explorations, explains McKittrick (*Demonic Grounds* x). Significantly, each novel begins with a map of the Stillness. Maps in science fiction and fantasy is nothing new and is frequently employed to help visualize the wide and complex world created by the author. The map of the Stillness showcases a supercontinent consisting of a maximal and a minimal plate making up its entirety. The continent itself contains various mountain formations, deserts, lakes, and islands on the periphery. The north is called Nomidlats which contains the Arctics. It appears to be quite deserted on the map, but we know Jiya and Nassun travel to the Arctics to locate the Found Moon comm, where the cure to orogeny supposedly lies. The south, then, is the Somidlats. This is where most of the known, or valued, cities appear to be located. We see Tirimo (Essun's comm), Yumenes (the largest city on the continent), and Allia in proximity to one another, with Meov beyond the coastline. While studying the map, it becomes apparent that significant sites pivotal to orogene's lives, such as the Fulcrum and Castrima, are omitted. Jemisin's way of mapping known landscapes highlight how maps are as unreliable as the crust of Father Earth. As a literary tool and analytical lens, maps can help to provide insight into the plot of the story indirectly, thus forcing critical engagements. Maps are broadly defined by the International Cartographic Association as [...] a symbolized image of geographical reality, representing selected features or characteristics, resulting from the creative effort of its author's execution of choices, and is designed for use when spatial relationships are of primary relevance" (Zähringer 38). Zähringer offers further insight as he notes that this definition showcases that maps do not show the world as it is, but rather, maps showcase the world as a 'symbolized image'; they do not imitate the world, maps develop the conventional signs which we have come to accept as

representing that which they can never truly show (38). Therefore, the map of the Stillness can be viewed as a territory of omissions which highlight the pattern of structural oppression so prominent in her series. Jemisin is literally mapping violence.

McKittrick explains that “[b]lack diasporic histories and geographies are difficult to track and cartographically map” (*On Plantations* 948). Indeed, black diaspora is scattered across the world, often manifesting itself in spaces dedicated to suffering and erasure. By placing maps in the beginning of each novel, Jemisin showcases the difficulty of mapping black diasporic histories while simultaneously attempting to. When approaching a map, Zähringer additionally addresses four dimensions necessary for dealing with them. He first points to the necessity to remember that maps are creators of space attempting to construct projections that appear close to reality, and that they contribute to creating specific views of the world, not limited to geographically, politically, ethically, and socially (38). Additionally, and what I see as particularly valuable in terms of the effect of maps in this series, is that maps are by no means objective, but rather always shaped by “[...] an authorial process of creation, selection, and omission” (38). This might point to both Jemisin as the author or the leadership of the Stillness. “[E]very map shows one thing, but therefore not another, and represents the world in one way, and as a consequence not in another” (38).¹³ Thus, the locations central to the lives of orogenes, whether sites of subjugation or sites for revolution, are overall omitted. Additionally, the map also showcases a line traveling from one side of the continent to the other, seen to cross the city of Yumenes, which is identified as the rift caused by Alabaster in the beginning of *The Fifth Season*. If maps are creators of space, then this could mean that the act of cartography begins, ends, and solidifies the same day as the end of the world begins for the last time since the map appears like this in all three novels.

If comparing the Stillness with the transatlantic slave ships of the Middle passage with the current state of emergency in the US for black bodies, then one can argue that the solidification of the map is a representation of the singularity of slavery orogenes are experiencing in the Stillness. Sharpe describes slavery as “[...] a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond” (106). Taking this into consideration while adding that singularities here contain both the past and the present, the map uncovers several things about the Stillness. For one, the singularity of

¹³ Brotton quoted in Raphael Zähringer text.

slavery is a constant on this continent, for orogenes and stills alike. Further, the map disrupts the established spaces of oppression and violence, creating a possibility of revolution. It begs the questions of how the systems designed to unmake the black body could be the ones to in turn save them. I believe that solidifying the map in place visually represents how the disruption produced a new space where past systems have been physically dismantled. In the moments leading up to the rupture, Alabaster shares that “[...] the first stonelore was actually written in stone [...] so that it couldn’t be changed to suit fashion or politics. So it couldn’t wear away” (TFS 4). This line showcases that history and maps, although appearing unchanging, instead is malleable and changes as societies evolve. Secondly, even though orogenes have not experienced emancipation, as emancipation indicates autonomy and the status of human, I would argue that when Alabaster destroys both the imperial city Yumenes and the orogene military-like facility of the Fulcrum while also creating a rift across the supercontinent, he executes the beginnings of emancipation through this newly created space.

Monique S. Johnson has contributed to the body of work which focuses on the intersections of race and spatial imaginary. Evoking Amoo-Adare’s framework for critical spatial literacy, Johnson deconstructs the ways in which Black women’s experience intersect with space (258). The theory “[...] asserts that spatial configurations communicate power, and dictate how space and women of color are constructed within these environments” (258). This is highly relevant for this thesis because, as Johnson explains, the perception of self is impacted when power is exerted over the physical environment, and particularly regarding how we reconcile who we are and who we will become (258). This point is one that Jemisin explores through numerous perspectives. It is through the characters’ interactions with the surrounding environment that their selves evolve both mentally and physically.¹⁴ Nevertheless, applying notions of critical spatial theory like Johnson has done, will further draw into focus just how prevalent geography and land is in the formation of identity. Furthermore, it will emphasize what kind of futurities can and are imagined through its a/effects. By focusing on the roles of the imperial city of Syl Anagist, the Fulcrum, Meov, and Castrima, it will become clear where the intersections between geography, race, and flesh lie. Moreover, the manner of which geography plays a role in the production of black ways of being in the world. The totality of the super-

¹⁴ As will be thoroughly demonstrated in chapter two.

continent can be deemed as a violent geography but places such as Meov and Castrima challenge the violence through spaces of resistance and kinship.

The spaces forced upon orogenes are directly linked with the violences thrust upon black lives in the US. Jemisin has made it clear that she has written this trilogy through the lens of how she sees and experiences the world. Therefore, the connections between the violence of the Stillness mirrors the violence bleeding from our current world. The trilogy not only point to environmental destruction caused by colonialist practices, but also to how socio-political, economic, cultural, and historical structures are upholding and perpetuating ideologies stemming from colonialism. It thus highlights the multi-levelled ways in which the planet is broken by addressing this issue politically, socially, and aesthetically. As such, it follows to first look at the Imperial city of the past: Syl Anagist. Syl Anagist is one of the most significant geographies because its place in the past contains the historical tools for contextualizing the present. I want to invoke Christina Sharpe's theory of 'the wake' here, and while its entirety is important, I will be focusing on specific elements of it. Sharpe theorizes the wake as: "living [in the wake] means living the history and present of terror, from slavery to the present, as the ground of our everyday Black existence [...]" (15). The wake further addresses living the historically and geographically dis/continuous. (15). This is despite the always present and endlessly reinvigorated brutality in and on Black bodies, while the terror appearing on those bodies is simultaneously erased (15). Indeed, the wake investigates and highlights the aftermath of slavery on black bodies, while additionally showcasing how the same body became the carriers and the embodiment of the terror. Seen through the lens of Afrofuturism, the wake likewise draws on the past in a manner put nicely by Sharpe: "the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present" (9). Syl Anagist is the past that continuously rupture the present, even though it was physically destroyed by Hoa (much like Alabaster did in Yumenes and the Fulcrum). As Jemisin writes, "How can we prepare for the future if we won't acknowledge the past?" (TSS 216). In many ways, Syl Anagist represents the ships of the transatlantic slave trade that left waves of violence in its wake, whereas the Stillness and the current lives of orogenes and stone eaters consequently have become the geographical and fleshy embodiments of that terror.

The end of the world, Hoa recounts, occurs in Syl Anagist. Its fall is directly linked to the equal subjugation of Father Earth and tuners as both take a stance against their oppressors. The reader is presented with the Imperial city in detail in *The Stone Sky* as Hoa details his own story

to Essun. This way of relaying the past in turn contextualizes the present for the reader to take part in. In six chapters, Hoa counts down to the Shattering which caused the tuners to transform into stone eaters, flung the moon out of orbit, and shattered the earth, ensuing the Fifth seasons. Syn Anagist is described as a highly biotechnologically advanced city whose inhabitants have “[...] mastered the forces of matter and its composition; they have shaped life itself to fit their whims; they have so explored the mysteries of the sky that they’ve grown bored with it and turned their attention back toward the ground beneath their feet” (TSS 3). The architecture has integrated elements of nature within the walls and structures of the city; vehicles crawl on legs like massive arthropods, while others float inches above ground; plants and flowers in the gardens have been biologically modified for aesthetical purposes. The city has been designed to be its own ecosystem, providing the Sylanagistines with all their needs and wants through biologically altered environments. In the center of the city stands an obelisk, and all paths lead here. Hoa tells Essun that through ‘webs of life’, the people ‘feed’ the city and are ‘fed’ in return (4). Thus, the city appears as a large network, a community, and a utopia of self-sufficiency which benefits all inhabitants. However, I suggest that Syl Anagist instead represents a society in the late stages of Capitalism, which also doubles as what Nancy Leong called ‘racial capitalism’. The reason for this lies in the literal commodification of life accentuated through feeding and being fed by the city. Leong describes racial capitalism as “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (2152). The retrieval of value-based resources is central in ideology-based capitalism, and it appears that the last resource to be commodified therefore has become life: both Father Earth’s life (earth was not believed to be sentient) and the Niess.

The threshold between flesh and land become visibly blurred as Hoa continues relaying his story. Jemisin has re-imagined the colonialist practices and histories experienced by enslaved black peoples during the transatlantic slave trade and plantation era here. Thereby, she not only contextualizes the imperialist history of the Stillness, but additionally considers its proximity to the colonialist history of the US by indirectly (or directly) juxtaposing them. This exemplifies what I stated above regarding science fiction being able to explore and present complex ideas for the reader to grapple with through various perspectives and situations. Syl Anagist reinforces how the same issues and questions present themselves across historical periods: it is the same story that replays, except with new technologies and processes in that particular period (Saunders

qtd. in Sharpe 5). The Capitalist ideology of Syl Anagist still persists thousands of years after its fall, reinforced in Yumenes and the Fulcrum, thereby illustrating Sharpe's idea of the wake wherein black bodies exist in the singularity of slavery. The Imperial city thrives because they have commodified literal life under the guise of the slogan *All Life is Sacred*.¹⁵ They managed this by colonizing and assimilating the other large cities of that time, all becoming one large city, and thereon began processes of dehumanization to justify the extraction of resources from the Niess.¹⁶ Alongside life, the other resource was magic. This is where Jemisin merges science fiction with fantasy, having both advanced technologies and magic coexisting, thus creating a space for exploring newer and complex stories previously now granted that space. This type of genre-bending is often found in Afrofuturist literature (and other Afrofuturist modes) showcasing just how necessary new modes for storytelling is when telling stories of the diaspora and the Black experience. The magic in this trilogy can arguably be compared with the manifestation of life, or some sort of life-force. Sylanagistines discovered that magic extracted from the earth could work as an energy source to power the city, but that to utilize it fully, the Niess were needed as they held a direct connection with the magic and the land it derived from. As a result, Sylanagistines began the process of dehumanization which ended in the Niess being integrated into the city's architecture and therefore land. This further highlights the connections between land and flesh for marginalized peoples, and how their material existence becomes one of blurred thresholds.

This threshold is most visibly blurred in the briar patch, a place where the half dead, half alive bodies of the Niess are scattered alongside 'decommissioned' tuners. Hoa describes the briar patch as such,

"Back when we were newly decanted, still learning how to use the language that had been written into our brains during the growth phase, one of the conductors told us a story about where we would be sent if we became unable to work for some reason. That was when there were fourteen of us. We would be retired, she said, to a place where we could still serve the project indirectly. "It's peaceful there," the conductor said. I remember it clearly. She smiled as she said it. "You'll see" (TSS 262-263).

¹⁵ This slogan alludes to the anti-BLM slogan "All Lives Matter" which criticize and delegitimize black (and BIPOC) communities' experiences with structural and personal racism by "unifying humanity." In reality, it erases lived experiences and facts, and can be compared to how science fiction has historically erased race, and how Syl Anagist promotes the sacredness of all life *except* the subjugated.

¹⁶ Chapter 2 will explore in detail the process of dehumanization of the Niess and how this played into the justification for exploiting and enslaving them.

The paragraph immediately underlines the rendering to nonhuman tool by Hoa describing himself as ‘decanted’ and being ‘grown’. Moreover, allusions to nonhumanness are reinforced when including the notion of being ‘decommissioned’ (TSS 46). These are technical terms which solidify the reality of being reduced to tools; to instruments; to a product or property which no longer functions as desired. When learning the purpose of the briar patch, the paragraph becomes more threatening because while retirement might suggest the reward of freedom from work, the paragraph instead points out that the tuners will be decommissioned at some point and that they will continue serving the project. The Niess and decommissioned tuners in the briar patch are connected to vines which connect Father Earth to the Niess and tuners, and then to the obelisks. Then, the decommissioned are made to serve as conduits, batteries, and made part of the structure, thus ensuing for the continuous flow of magic which keeps the city alive. And because the tuners are the bioengineered descendants of the Niess, they, too, have the inherent connection to magic.

The briar patch is a space in which “[t]he slave [...] is rendered as matter, recognized through an inhuman property relation” (Yusoff 6). Saidiya Hartmann refers to this as fungibility: a commodity with properties but lacking in subjective will or agency (6). The decommissioned continue serving their master while existing on the threshold of life and death, simultaneously kept artificially alive for their inherent connection to the magic of the earth. “It is not a kindness that you are kept so dull,” Kelenli tells the tuners (TSS 100). This dullness is expressed through the lives of the tuners as they have been denied knowledge and life beyond the purpose for their creation. Further expressed through the decommissioned as they have been denied bodily autonomy and freedom after their usefulness expires. Sharpe identifies transubstantiation, a process which might be understood as the making of bodies into flesh, and then into fungible commodities while still retaining the appearance of flesh and blood, as one of many ways black bodies configurate and take form (30). In this context, it points to the literal process of transforming people into fleshy commodities. By fleshy commodities, I mean that transubstantiation showcases how the Fulcrum becomes a space in which orogenes begin and finish their transformation into a commodity. The practices upheld by the ideology of colonization and capitalism through the briar patch is echoed in the Fulcrum and its node stations. The Fulcrum is a military-like base to which orogene children are brought to keep them from harming others and being harmed themselves. It is here orogenes officially transform from

subjects into fungible beings through enhancing their assumed inherent connection with the environment. They still retain their flesh as they are taught how to be useful in society without falling into their presumed teleological destiny of monstrosity. McKittrick points out that diasporic geographies are emphasized by “[...] racist paradigms of the past and their ongoing hierarchal patterns” (*Demonic Grounds* xii). A point, I believe, is demonstrated in the Fulcrum. Orogenes are given new purpose in the Fulcrum, a purpose which is based on their usefulness and on the fear projected upon them, while at the same time being denied the full status of human; just like the tuners thousands of years before them.

In the wake, Sharpe observes, “[...] the past that is not past reappears, always to rapture the present” (9). The Fulcrum serves as the representation of the continuous reappearance of the past, always readily available in the present. The Fulcrum, as mentioned above, is where orogene children are brought upon their discovery. When discovering one’s status as an orogene, the future becomes limited to three options notwithstanding: either they are murdered by the stills in their comm; or they are reported to the Fulcrum and the Guardians for retrieval before news of their uncovering spreads; or they remain hidden and become so-called ‘feral roggas’. Either option leaves orogenes with limited possibilities for life, but the Fulcrum appears to offer fabricated freedom, or in line with what McKittrick calls ‘the shape of mystery’. The shape of mystery demonstrates the ways in which freedom is conceptualized in those who have never been free (McKittrick 39). Damaya was born to Still parents who sent her away to the Fulcrum when they discovered what she was (it is always ‘what’ in these circumstances.) She was assigned a Guardian, Schaffa, as all Imperial orogenes are. Their job is to ensure orogenes do their job, as well as make sure the orogenes do not go rogue nor gain too much power. As a Fulcrum orogene, Damaya must “[...] be always polite and professional. [...] must project confidence and expertise whenever they are in public. [...] must never show anger because it makes the stills nervous” (TFS 63). Stripped of both humanity and agency, by rising in rank, an orogene may have some privacy and autonomy returned to them. Syenite is driven by the promise of regaining some of the control over her own life. Despite having internalized her own inferiority and monstrosity as imposed on her by the Fulcrum, she very much encapsulates the shape of mystery.

Many of the practices that orogenes are subjected to at the Fulcrum echoes practices previously found in plantations. Indeed, considering what Damaya learns of how she must

present herself to stills both enforces her Otherness while pointing to the ways her (allowed) existence is completely designed around the lives of stills. Concerning the female body and its treatment in plantations, the Fulcrum also forces female and male orogenes to breed with other powerful orogenes for the purpose of producing “pure” orogenes. Syenite meets Alabaster for the first time as she is assigned to breed with him with the promise of gaining more independence. This practice ensured enslaved women in plantations were routinely raped in order to produce new offspring for the purpose of producing more laborers. In the process, the female body becomes commodified on multiple levels. Sharpe makes a compelling observation regarding Black women and the Middle Passage, comparing the womb of Black women to the latter. She observes that “[...] the womb [turns into] a factory producing blackness as abjection much like the slave ship’s hold and the prison, turning the birth canal into another domestic Middle Passage with Black mothers [...] ushering their children into their condition; their non/status, their non/being-ness” (74). The raping of orogenes is another condition of living in the singularity of slavery. The node stations are an extension of the Fulcrum’s power which could also represent what Sharpe observed about ushering children into a condition of non/status.

If the Fulcrum is the past of Syl Anagist manifested in the present, then the node stations are the equivalence of the briar patches. The node stations are locally based Fulcrums which house one orogene to quell earthquakes in the areas that Imperial orogenes cannot reach. The scare tactic is the same: if you fail to do as your job entails or if you become too powerful or uncontrollable, then you will be sent to work at the node stations. However, like the briar patches, orogenes are not aware of what truly happens in these stations. In Syenite’s first meeting with this place, she marvels at the setup of wire-chairs provided so that the orogenes do not get bedsores, how several tubes are attached to the orogene for pushing medication and food and for removing excrements, cloth available for wiping drool, and so on. But she sees the bigger picture, too: “The node maintainer: a child, kept like this for what must have been months or years” (TFS 140). Alabaster describes the procedure orogene children go through where their ‘sessapinae’ are cut to remove self-control, but to continue allowing its instinctive use (140-141). In a detached manner, he finishes: “From there, it’s easy [...] Drug away the infections and so forth, keep him alive enough to function, and you’ve got the one thing even the Fulcrum can’t provide: a reliable, harmless, completely beneficial source of orogeny” (141-142). The similarities with the briar patches are unmistakable. The wires and tubes on the bodies of these

children parallel the vines entangled in the Niess, who were also kept in a state of non/beingness. Not only do past and present converge in the Fulcrum and the node stations through infantilizing orogenes, but bringing back Sharpe notion of the womb, the children in the node stations are also sold to local citizens who “paid for the privilege”: but since the child is not a child, but a non/being, it is not frowned upon. Again, this echoes plantation practices where slave owners would justify sexual assault because the victim was not categorized as fully human.

McKittrick makes an intriguing point as she explains that our current landscapes are haunted and developed by old and new hierarchies of humanness (*Demonic Grounds* xvii). The Stillness is, and in particular the Fulcrum, indeed haunted by these hierarchies. McKittrick’s point here highlights the immense power the past has in structuring the present, and this power is exemplified in the Fulcrum, as detailed above. She further suggests that if human categorization of the past was spatialized, “[...] in ships and on plantations, in homes, communities, nations, islands, and regions, it also evidences the ways in which some of the impressions of transatlantic slavery leak into the future” (xvii). I would argue that the landscapes are not alone in being haunted by these hierarchies. Indeed, the bodies of orogenes and stone eaters embody the practices in their flesh and in their subjectivity. The subjugation of Father Earth and the environment mirror the practices oppressing orogenes later. This demonstrates how the Stillness and the Fulcrum are reinforcing (racial) hierarchies presently. Jemisin makes clear the intersections where flesh meets land through these actions. As Fred Moten wrote, “the man who clothes me in my skin is gonna write on me” (Moten). This quotation hints at some ways in which black bodies can be haunted and developed by old and new hierarchies.

Meov and Castrima exemplify what McKittrick relays about liberatory spaces: “[...] where slavery exists, there is no place that is wholly liberatory” (*Demonic Grounds* 44). Both places offer a space for reflection on liberation, but their demonstration of liberatory spaces illustrate two important things. Meov produces a space for contemplation, whereas Castrima forces active action. Their existence challenges the racial hierarchy molding the Stillness, but the main difference lies in that Meov does not actively work towards dismantling the racial hierarchies and structures, it merely challenges through existence. Castrima, on the other hand, works actively to dismantle those hierarchies. Meov is the first place Syenite experiences self-governance and a taste of emancipation. It is an island located on the periphery of human geography, believed to be uninhabitable because of its close proximity to tectonic plates and

therefore in constant danger of tsunamis. In many ways, it is through its very existence a liberatory geography for orogenes because its existence challenges all known and perpetuated knowledge taught in Stonelore, which it achieves on multiple levels. In addition, it manages to remain hidden. Stonelore teaches that islands are uninhabitable to humanity because of geological instabilities, which to a degree rejects orogenes the status of human because orogenes can, in fact, live in locations of geologic instability. Meov exists as a possible landscape because of orogenes' abilities to control geological events; therefore, under the leadership of a feral orogene, Meov has existed for decades. It begs the question of whether this information was kept out of Stonelore to maintain the inhumanness of orogenes as well as deter them from thinking beyond what Stonelore teaches. In dehumanizing processes, maintenance is required to keep the oppressed 'in check'. One way of doing this is to perpetuate the idea that orogenes cannot work together to the point of this becoming the internalized norm in stills and orogenes alike: "orogenes cannot work together. It's been proven [...]," Syenite claims (TFS 129). But proven by whom? It is this claim orogenes are taught at the Fulcrum, and it is what the rest of the population are taught by Stonelore. This can be compared to what Pratt described as contact zones, describing spaces where cultures clash, often in asymmetrical relations of power (34). In these clashes, it is the dominant culture that decides what the subordinate culture can express and retain of their own culture. If applied to the Stillness, this means the dominant culture (Yumenes and the Fulcrum) are in control of what orogenes learn about their own history and powers, thereby upholding beliefs which contribute to orogenes not believing they can exist without the dominant culture.

The existence of Meov clashes with the knowledge perpetuated by the Fulcrum, which promptly plants a seed of doubt in Syenite as she observes this other culture thriving beyond the grasp of those in power. Not only does a whole society reside here, but they are led by the feral orogene, Innon. As Alabaster informs: "They don't kill their roggas, here. They put them in charge" (TFS 296). McKittrick explains that geographies of domination, such as transatlantic slavery and beyond, contain both "[...] the making and the contestation of old and new social hierarchies," as I referenced above (*Demonic Grounds* xix). She further suggests that if "[...] these hierarchies are spatial expressions of racism and sexism, the interrogations and remappings provided by black diaspora populations can incite new, or different, and perhaps more just, geographic stories" (xix). Meov, as a space, is the proof of inaccuracies taught as truth by the

dominant culture to, and about, the subordinate. A truth that, when acquired, ultimately results in revolution.

Meov proves to be a transformative geography where readers are presented with a visualization of what happens when the body and mind of a former slave experiences unshackled freedom. Meov becomes the space in which Syenite is forced to not only question her own internalized inferiority but unpack it as well. Syenite goes through the process McKittrick refers to as ‘the shape of mystery’, as I described above: she is able to compare freedoms she believed she was receiving as an imperial orogene with living of the periphery of those (invisible) shackles. Her inward journey showcases how deeply ingrained the source of her internalized inferiority sits to the point of missing the Fulcrum because every orogene there knew her for what she was: “I could at least be myself [in the Fulcrum]. I didn’t have to hide what I am,” (TFS 347). When referring to herself as “what I am,” it becomes apparent that she views herself through the eyes of her oppressors and through the context of (racial) histories and hierarchies. It simultaneously hints at an identity crisis in which when given the opportunity to exist outside oppressive hierarchies, this incites rage because she does not know who she is beyond these structures. However, in Meov, the ‘quaintness’ of her oppression is challenged, and she is forced to view herself outside of the lens of her oppressors. Furthermore, when this mindset is challenged by Alabaster in a place where there is room for reflection, Syenite responds with anger as such a reflection would result in accepting she would always have the non/status of a slave: “Not that she hadn’t known it before: that she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body” (348). However, while Meov is inhabited by both orogenes and stills, it is a small community thriving outside the infiltrating forces of racial hierarchies and dehumanizing practices. Therefore, it still differs from Castrima.

As I argued above, Meov is a place of resistance without actively resisting. Meov can be said to represent a utopia of black futurity where orogenes and stills live peacefully in communities long after racial and sexual hierarchies have succumbed, thus no longer infiltrating the inhabitants’ ideologies and infrastructures. Immediately, this landscape appears to follow Afrofuturist imaginations of a future where black people can thrive and evolve in revolutionized societies with possibilities for personal growth, following what Womack identified as being elements of Afrofuturism (42). However, when viewing Meov through an Afrofuturist lens, I

would instead argue that Meov represents a space, identified by Eshun, within which critical work for constructing tools capable of interfering with and within the political systems may be undertaken (Anderson and Jones viii). During their time on Meov, Syenite begins expressing wishes to change the broken world she is currently sheltered from. An important conversation follows which I believe showcases what I have been arguing:

“You’re always restless. What are you looking for?” She shakes her head. “I don’t know.” But she thinks, almost but not quite subconsciously: *A way to change things. Because this is not right.* He’s always good at guessing her thoughts. “You can’t make anything better,” he says, heavily. “The world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over again, there’s no changing it” (TFS 371, emphasis in original).

The paragraph cited here is important for two reasons: first, Syenite and Alabaster appears to have changed during their time on Meov. Syenite has become who Alabaster used to be as she showcases an inclination for change after having time to process her life as a slave, whereas Alabaster has become comfortable. Secondly, this scene foreshadows the event which opens the trilogy where Alabaster creates the rift across the Stillness and destroys the architectural symbols of structural oppression. It also serves to represent the dismantling of said structures. However, this future utopia provided in Meov is disrupted as reality seemingly locates Syenite, Alabaster, and their son Corundom, thus becoming a short-lived dream. It underlines the idea that no matter where enslaved people escape, as long as those old and new hierarchies are in place, they will always locate you and infect your environment. What follows in terms of liberatory spaces is Castrima, which seems to offer a realistic space of resistance since Castrima exists within the governed borders of known landscapes, therefore showcasing active resisting, as opposed to Meov.

As seen with Syl Anagist and in Meov, notions of utopia are not uncommon in Jemisin’s works. The short stories “Emergency Skin” (2019) and “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” (2018) both contain utopian-like worlds, but they have not simply come to be out of nowhere. Another element following these worlds, is the fight it took to create such a society alongside what it takes to maintain it.¹⁷ “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” is Jemisin’s response to Ursula Le Guin’s “The Ones Who Walk Away From Omelas” (1973), an allegorical short story, which directly

¹⁷ “Emergency Skin” (2019) is part of the Amazon novella series *Amazon Original Stories: Forward*. “The Ones Who Stay and Fight” appears in Jemisin’s short story collection *How Long ‘til Black Future Month*.

addresses the reader and presents them with a city of perfect utopia. However, the citizens of this city are familiarized with the horrendous secret of why the city is thriving, which is because of the suffering of one child. The citizens may then choose to stay in Omelas with this knowledge, or they may choose to leave. This philosophical dilemma forces the reader to reflect upon the nature of utopias, showcasing the nuances within any human society in the process. Jemisin, however, was not impressed by those who chose to leave. In her response, she begins the story in the same manner as she describes the beauty of the city Um-Helat, while also directly involving the reader. Interestingly, her city differs as Um-Helat exists in a parallel world to ours, seemingly perfected through much struggle. And that is the key element which differs from Le Guin's story: For Jemisin, the right decision is not to leave, but rather to stay and fight against the evil. While her methods of solving the issue might be up for an additional philosophical debate, it still speaks to an element found in many of her stories; namely, the struggle for justice and freedom and the importance of upholding it. This is once again what can be found in the series. Meov exists beyond known borders in a kind of vacuum where the struggles of inequality and racism cannot physically reach. Therefore, Meov is a utopia which is unattainable without someone suffering. Castrima represents a geography for attainable justice and equality through resistance and revolution. The reason is that it showcases the nuances of such a struggle amongst different peoples, and presents the reader with the tools for imagining how marginalized peoples are affected by structural violence and how one may work together to dismantle it.

In the underground city of Castrima, stills and orogenes live in a community together. This is another geography which directly challenges the teachings of Stonelore and is omitted from maps. Castrima is led by the orogene woman Ykka, alongside a stone eater, stills, and other orogenes. While this distribution in power does not negate structural oppression that encompasses Castrima's surrounding environment, this geography nonetheless offers possibilities for actively imagining and planning for a revolution. The destruction of Syl Anagist was a revolution, and the liberatory spaces of Meov offered room for imagining revolution. These points illustrate how Audre Lorde believed revolution was not a one-time event (45). Following from previous revolutionary events, Castrima becomes equipped with the tools, as Eshun argued, to incite a revolution and dismantle the infrastructures of oppression from the inside. Furthermore, Castrima reveals two important aspects regarding black space and futurity: The most significant discovery made about Castrima is that the mechanisms that makes it livable

run on orogeny (TFS 342). This is significant because it mirrors Meov in that this landscape is only habitable because of the existence of orogenes; specifically, Meov is only habitable because orogenes can quell earthquakes. It highlights the necessity of orogenes in surviving the Stillness and its geologic instability. This is further confirmed in the Fulcrum, a space where this necessity is reduced to something which can be harnessed and retrieved (evident in the node stations). The difference is that in Castrima, orogenes know and are taught their worth as human beings, compared with their state of non/being-ness in the Fulcrum.

Audre Lorde observes that “without community there is no liberation” (18). Moreover, she advocates for the importance of embracing differences amongst people, because only within “[...] that interdependency of different strengths, acknowledged and equal, can the power to seek new ways of being in the world generate, as well as the courage and sustenance to act where there are no charters” (18). What Lorde proposes is visualized in Castrima through the way Ykka creates and expands the community she leads. Applying her orogeny to draw other orogenes (and stone eaters) towards her, Ykka also subverts past beliefs that orogeny is inherently destructive, instead showcasing the many nuances of this power which the Fulcrum never allowed orogenes to understand (TFS 336-337). This manner of creating a community echoes Octavia Butler’s second novel in the science fiction *Patternist* series, *Mind of My Mind* (1977). The series details secret histories stemming from the ancient Egyptian period to a future that involves telepathic mind control and an extraterrestrial plague.¹⁸ In *Mind of My Mind*, we meet Mary, a woman bred for the purpose of being part of a new race of people with telepathic abilities. She is revealed to have immense power beyond what was expected, and as she transcends, she unknowingly creates an entangled pattern connecting her with other telepaths. While unwilling at first, a community is formed with Mary at its center, or Fulcrum, if you will. Similarly, Ykka uses her orogeny to form connections with surrounding orogenes, drawing them towards her, and in the process showcases the importance of kinship and communities when forging paths for new futures. Additionally, Monique S. Johnson points out that the power that lies in communities faced with any type of oppression is that kinship is built on the understanding that the person next to you has experiences which mirrors your own (258). Moreover, drawing on P. H. Collins, she observes that oppression is indeed real and tangible to the oppressed, and that it threatens to both quell individual and collective power as well as destroy the essence of self: “[...] Solidarity creates

¹⁸ As described by Goodreads: <https://www.goodreads.com/series/55489-patternmaster>

space for overcoming. It stimulates an inner knowing that recognizes the strength and power in the collective story to not only change external circumstance, but to evolve an entire community's self" (258).

The space for overcoming, which Castrima represents, is exemplified through Essun's and Alabaster interactions as he slowly transforms to stone after creating the rift.¹⁹ Essun re-experiences the violence against her own children when she sees orogene children in Castrima about to be struck. This results in Essun, instinctively, reaching for her orogeny to kill the Still responsible. While she is overcome with traumatic memories regarding her own past and the murder of her own children, what stops her from decimating Castrima in grief is Alabaster using his orogeny. In doing this, he completes his transformation to stone brought on by creating the rift and, in Essun's eyes, dies - another death on her hands. However, in the events leading up to this, Alabaster and Essun have reacquainted themselves with each other as he tries teaching Essun how to grasp for and control the obelisks. In this time, they reflect on their past, on their separation, their child's death and their lover's death, to which Essun "[...] reverberate with his grief and [her] own" (TOG 160). They both bear crippling guilt, now no longer endured alone. What Castrima offers then, as opposed to Meov, is a space for both unpacking and confronting the past because it has provided the tools for it through solidarity and kinship. Thus, Alabaster death can be argued to represent him finishing his task of himself being a space for Essun to engage with the traumas safely, thereby providing her with the strength to go forth without the heavy weight of the past shackling her to the land.

As seen throughout this chapter, past and present structures are deeply entangled, indicating that the past is not-so-distant, but rather creates and upholds the singularity of slavery in the present. As Morgan claims, the reassertion of humanity through the Afrofuturist mode and neo-slave narratology depicts that the past is, in fact, not even the past (31). Accordingly, pastness adamantly controls the present, perpetuating structural violence which has historically subjugated orogenes and the environment, as argued by Sharpe above. How, then, can the present be released from the grips of pastness? Through the lens of McKittrick and Sharpe alongside Afrofuturism I have argued and illustrated in this chapter that pastness needs to be

¹⁹ Meov could also be said to represent a space for overcoming, however those living in Meov have never felt racist paradigms, colonial practices and oppression on their bodies and therefore cannot fully offer understanding and solidarity in the same way Castrima might.

directly engaged with and thereon unpacked. Alabaster physically destroyed the Fulcrum, the node stations, and Yumenes in a similar manner as the tuners destroyed Syl Anagist before him, in an act of dismantling; Meov and Castrima providing liberatory spaces for untangling deep-rooted historical and generational trauma, while providing kinship and a community of like-minded people; these are the conditions in the singularity that is slavery which makes way for abolishing old and new racial hierarchies. Jemisin has through her application of the past to consider the present illustrated the importance of kinship and community in acts of revolution and coping with trauma; how oppressed and diasporic bodies are deeply connected with land; and has done what Morgan observed in works by Octavia Butler and Amiri Baraka, namely illustrated that when,

“[...] neo-slave narratives are engaged through Afrofuturism, they reestablish slavery not as an overdetermining facet of black life, but instead as an inescapable reality of black existence within the national imaginary. Indeed, [...] there can be no black futurity without necessarily acknowledging slavery’s impact and continued reach” (32).

Moving slightly away from the focus on Black geography and space, and towards bodies and flesh, the following chapter will take into consideration what this chapter has established. Specifically, I will delve into the ways in which pastness manifests on the bodies of significant characters in the *Broken Earth* trilogy.

Chapter 2. Non/Being:
Embodying the Past in the Governed Borders of
Humanness

“All that you touch, you change. All that you change, changes you.

The only lasting truth is change”

- Octavia Butler, *Parable of the Sower*.

Fred Moten writes that, “for a long, long time I’ve / been wearing this other planet like a scar on me.”²⁰ Dionne Brand observed connections between humanness and geography in her poetry, and N. K. Jemisin further blurs the boundaries between flesh and land by personifying the Earth and creating characters who exist on its threshold.²¹ Indeed, diasporic stories are stories of flesh and land. Katherine McKittrick observes that the interaction between spatial organization and Black experiences in the diaspora, past and present, are bound tightly in two interconnected ways: “[...] black historical and contemporary subjects have not only contributed to the strenuous physical production of space and place in the diaspora ([...] slave labor, indentured labor, and racially and sexually differentiated labor economics), they also have an investment in the meanings and making of place [...]” (*Demonic Grounds* 12). This emphasizes what chapter one argued: that geographies contain histories of violence and that it showcases pastness as a position that exists deep within the present, encompassing and shaping the present from the crust of the earth’s skin and deep into the marrow of his bones. It begs the question: in what ways and to what extent does interactions between the body and the environment go about altering one another and what purpose does it serve in terms of engaging with past histories and visualizing futures beyond the past/present? The proximity of flesh and land in Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* trilogy is exemplified through the abilities orogenes and stone eaters possess: their ability to grasp the earth, to merge with it, and embody it; Additionally, through the ways flesh and land have been racialized and subjugated through dehumanizing, colonial practices. Scholars Katherine McKittrick, Christina Sharpe, and Kathryn Yusoff recognizes the similarities between how language regarding landscape often coincide with the language used to address flesh in their respective works.²² Therefore, these theorists are crucial for framing this chapter.

²⁰ Retrieved at <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poems/53481/there-is-religious-tattooing>

²¹ See the quote by Brand in the thesis introduction.

²² See Katherine McKittrick’s *Demonic Grounds: Black Women and the Cartographies of Struggle* (2006); Christina Sharpe’s *Monstrous Intimacies: Making Post-Slavery Subjects* (2009) and *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016); Kathryn Yusoff’s *A Billion Black Anthropocenes or None* (2018).

Aforementioned, Jemisin explores the notion of these proximities in the speculative fiction genre. In Speculative fictions, genre-bending has become common practice. For contemporary Black authors, genre-bending has become integral to reframe the past by “[...] opening up a unique set of imaginative possibilities through which to imagine slavery differently” (Wickman 393). In Jemisin’s exploration of slavery, systemic oppression, and environmental destruction, she combines narrative elements from science fiction, fantasy, and climate fiction, which contribute to complicate and contextualize the past in the present.²³ Doubtless, it has assisted the reader in grappling with these larger ideas. Re/telling stories from black diaspora has required new ways of storytelling and because diaspora is a direct result of colonization, storytelling of this kind must occur outside the frame perpetuating dehumanization, slavery, and colonialism. Telling stories of revolution and liberation cannot occur in the same framework which caused oppression. This highlights the reason for Black authors to implement elements which are recognizable from Afrofuturism in their works. In addition, Jemisin showcases how multi-leveled usage of language (on the metadiegetic and extradiegetic level) might serve as tools of oppression, while additionally holding the key for liberation.²⁴ Isiah Lavender III notes “[l]anguage that can be easily understood in mundane fiction may signify something entirely different and unrelated in sf” (30). For this reason, Jemisin has made use of the opportunities granted in speculative fictions by employing elements deriving from neo-slave narratives and Afrofuturism and fused them with techniques such as second-person narration, fragmentation, and geologic language, imagery, and symbolism as narrative tools of speculation. These aim to explore processes of dehumanization through flesh and land proximities underscored through the usage of language and transformation. Additionally, she has reframed those very techniques as a way of engaging with the past and reclaiming the past histories of violence and trauma for which to forge new futures beyond the bond of governed humanness.

This chapter aims to explore and analyze the ways in which Jemisin illustrates flesh and land proximities, thereby also demonstrate their role in engaging with past/present geographies. Building on the discoveries made in the previous chapter, I will showcase how Jemisin visualizes

²³ E.g., As seen through how she merges technology and magic, and its immediate connection with the climate. I believe it serves to illustrate the interconnected and multi-leveled ways black people in the US experience oppression, making it the preferable choice to unpack in genres that genre-bend.

²⁴ The metadiegetic level is part of the diegesis within which stories are embedded in one another, often described as stories within stories where the diegetic narrator tells the story. The extradiegetic level is external to the diegesis.

the manifestation of past histories through bodily transformations by specifically examining language and symbolism. First, I will utilize theories by McKittrick and Sharpe to argue that flesh and land boundaries primarily occur through geologic language and re-namings as tools of dehumanization and oppression. To do this, I will address how Jemisin present processes of colonial dehumanization through language on multiple levels of the narrative. Moreover, how this influences the character's identities. Then, I will showcase how Jemisin illustrates manifestations of pastness and land on the character's flesh. This will make known the effects of bearing the aftermath of slavery in one's body and mind. The chapter will end with a short reflection on how these bodily manifestations of land might provide spaces for re forging futurities.

Geologic Language and Becoming a Non/Being

Mark Rifkin identifies globalizing discourses on race as generating the conditions that makes way for “humanization/dehumanization”, which undergirds “both the conquest of the New World and the African slave trade” (20). It often comes down to classificatory processes in which black people were moved to the space of Otherness, the space where reclassifications occurred. While orogenes are not directly synonymous with black people, it is clear through their dehumanizing treatment, that Jemisin created them for the purpose of representing the experience of being black in the US. As previously stated, several spaces fit the description of generating conditions for dehumanization and reclassifications, two of which being Syl Anagist and the Fulcrum. However, before diving into processes of dehumanization in the trilogy, I will first explore representations of identity through the choice of writing the protagonist’s story in second person narration. Exploring the notion of identity and looking at Jemisin’s choice of narrative techniques is crucial because the decision of how to convey stories come from a conscious choice about regarding how best to convey a story. Therefore, the choice of technique may reveal something about the state of the character(s) and identity is important when trying to understand black non/being in the singularity of slavery. The choice of how to narrate the story is a deliberate one and must be addressed.

The most prevalent choice of narrative perspectives for literary storytelling are the first person and third person narration, and Jemisin employs both alongside second person narration. Of course, all three perspectives have their benefits and limits: First person narration might offer the detailed and rich inner life of the protagonist, but it can also restrict the readers experience because the story takes place in a world we are only permitted to view through the eyes of the protagonist. This is where third person narration differs as this technique proves beneficial for constructing immense and complex worlds which the reader may experience outside the characters point of view. Whereas first person perspective might obscure much of the world in which they exist, third person perspectives might make the reader feel alienated from the characters. An author might solve this by including several perspectives in their books, as Jemisin and multiple other fantasy authors have done.²⁵ By having multiple characters and alternating perspectives, Jemisin constructs a complex world perfect for exploring the

²⁵ This happens across genre, but most frequently seen in science fiction and fantasy.

overarching themes of racism and slavery, environmental destruction, and identity. As for second person narration, I would argue it places the reader directly inside the story, often taking the place of the addressee and/or protagonist. Kim Wickman explains that “[s]econd person is a distinctive narrative approach that highlights fragmentation, identification, and communication” (396). This makes it a favorable technique for exploring (black) identity formation in the past/present singularity of slavery as it concurrently dominates geographies and minds.

By employing second person narration, the reader is forced into the perspective of the protagonist Essun. As already established, *The Fifth Season* is told through the perspectives of Damaya, Syenite, and Essun: all of whom are revealed to be Essun at various stages in her life. Damaya and Syenite’s perspective are told through third-person narration. The only first person perspective available in any of the novels in the trilogy is narrated by Hoa. He takes on the role of Speaker, whereas Essun and the reader both take on the roles of the Addressee; and together they take on the project of “[...] not only remembering but also piecing together a self that has been fragmented by the trauma of slavery” (Wickham 396). The different versions of Essun are presented at critical moments in terms of her construction of a self. All perspectives consider a particular traumatic event (Damaya being rejected by her family, denied human status, and sent to the Fulcrum; and Syenite’s struggle with grasping for bodily autonomy, forced to have a child, only to have to kill her child to prevent him becoming enslaved), all of which overlap and converge towards the end of the first novel. Told through a different narrative perspective, this separation and individual consideration of Essun’s previous personas helps the reader contextualize Essun’s past and concurrently showcase how the past is not separate from the present in the wake. In addition, Patricia Saunders observes that, “[...] the same set of questions and issues are presenting themselves to us across these historical periods. It is the same story that is telling itself, but through the different technologies and processes [read: perspectives] of that particular period” (Saunders qtd. in Sharpe 5). Thus, these narrative choices help the reader understand how living in the wake has shaped Essun. As for Essun’s perspective, the choice of narrating her story through the second person makes narratological sense in that her persona is fragmented due to trauma. Accordingly, the novels seek to illustrate that she is in the process of transforming and re/membering her past contributes to shape the person she transforms into.

The decision to utilize second person narration is for the reader to fully grasp Essun’s fragmented persona and her journey of piecing together the shattered pieces. I would argue that

this technique fits with this purpose as the “you” address places the reader inside the story. This forces the reader to intimately experience what Essun has and is experiencing - with the added benefit of outward commentary from our narrator. The reader is located on the extradiegetic and metadiegetic level of the narration, meaning the reader takes up a temporal and spatial place inside and outside the story. The result produces a simultaneous intimate and detached perspective, making it a favorable way of both highlighting the presence of, and narrate, trauma. By comparing first- and second person narration, second person arguably forces the reader, not through an “I”, but through a “you”, to intimately re/experience the world, thus opening a space for critically assessing the surrounding environment. Furthermore, as Wickham points out, the effect of the “you” address is to “[...] offer imaginative access to joint actions and shared experiences, analogous to the social context of cognition to our everyday social interactions” (396). It indeed immerses the reader deeper into Essun’s story. Moreover, I would argue that Jemisin’s choice of employing all narrative perspectives to recount this story has offered a larger space for imaginative access to those joint actions and shared experiences. By this I mean that the complexity enriches what discoveries may be uncovered through speculation. Consequently, the reader becomes personally involved through the “you” address and the other perspectives further expand upon the shared experiences to showcase the interconnected lives of the characters in the diaspora. As a result, it not only pieces together Essun’s fragmented persona, but also the collective history arguably as fragmented as Father Earth’s surface. The reader experiences the story in the present alongside Essun as she goes through her transformation into a stone eater. This process, on the narratological level, happens at the end of *The Stone Sky*; however, in the linear chronology of the story, it occurs at the beginning and the end. This makes the trilogy a frame narrative containing all the shattered pieces of personal and collective histories in the geography, respectively.

The addressee and the reader are first greeted in the prologue of *The Fifth Season* titled “You are here.” Immediately there is a connection with maps and mappings, and an effort to contextualize Essun’s and our presence in the story. These mappings situate us inside and outside the story; although we do not know where on the map “here” is, only that we are situated somewhere with Essun and Hoa. Additional effects of telling a story through the second person perspective, is that we become acquainted with just how fluctuating identity is. In *The Stone Sky*, Hoa explains to Essun that he has “reassembled the raw arcanic substance of [her] being” and

“reactivated the lattice that should have preserved the critical essence of who [she] is” (396). Furthermore, he recounts that he has told her this story to retain as much as possible of who she was. This is not to force her new self into any particular shape, but to provide her with the tools to shape herself and her future from this moment on: “It’s just that you need to know where you’ve come from to know where you’re going” (397). This passage therefore underlines the fluidity of identity, while also speaking to Dionne Brands observation of living in the wake of slavery as transforming the flesh into object (Sharpe 32). Jemisin shows how engaging with the past, as Essun does through the narrator’s story, might provide the freedom of shaping oneself in one’s own image. Therefore, the mapping and piecing together of fragmented identities occurring here showcases the power which can stem from embodying one’s past and accepting its influence. As mentioned above, Essun’s fragmented identity indicates a past brimming with traumatic events, which Jemisin highlights through separating her previous personas (Damaya and Syenite) into different narrative chapters - presenting Essun as being detached from herself. By retelling her story, Essun is reassembled; and a space for coming to terms with the past that subsequently was and is shaping her new hardened, but fluid, flesh was provided. Essun becomes the embodiment of the black diasporic experience in the wake, her new shape carrying the past as she ventures towards the future.

While considering the fluidity of identity and the overarching themes of slavery, colonialism, and dehumanization which shape this trilogy, I want to quickly re-highlight some of the notions of race and racism I have pointed out throughout this thesis as it specifically relates to exploring non/being and the human. The way race and racism are represented in literature and culture tend to reveal underlying beliefs and harmful stereotypes which accompany these discourses in the larger public, often highlighting either misrepresentation or complete erasure of black and brown bodies. While orogenes are not directly synonymous with black people, there are clear similarities that emerge when outlining enslavement of orogenes that resonate to that of the enslaved black person. If looking at Lavender III’s exploration of race and racism through sentient machines in science fiction, I argue that orogenes take on the role of cyborgs and/or androids he observes, because all of these represent the Other and Otherness. He explains that “[t]he severity of discrimination against [orogenes], is clearly a human fear that manifests racism based on a paranoid belief that machines [read: orogenes] could replace men” (Lavender III 27). In Science fiction and Fantasy, Blackness and black bodies become intermediate with Alien and

Other; seemingly influenced by the reduction to subhuman in much of political and historical discourse.

Alexander G. Weheliye argues that understanding racialization as a conglomerate of sociopolitical relations which determines the level of humanity in full humans, not-quite-humans, and non-humans, instead of as biological or cultural characterizations, then “[...] Blackness designates a changing system of unequal power structures that apportion and delimit which humans can lay claim to full human status and which humans cannot (3). An example of this could be how Jemisin makes use of language as it appears in the metadiegetic level of the *Stillness*, and further through narrative techniques such as the usage of second person narration and symbolic language. Additionally, the action Weheliye describes in many ways details the colonial practices which took place in *Syl Anagist* and *the Fulcrum*. *Lavender III* suggests that the stylized language(s) of science fiction which describes events that have not happened “[...] can obscure racist meaning in any text because the images created by sf authors often mask the presence of race and racism” (30). Furthermore, he explains that the distorted language used in science fiction introduce new opportunities to explore race and racism within the genre (31). I argue that this is what Jemisin has done: by using language that highlights the proximity of flesh and land - geologic language that is - she simultaneously demonstrates how such a language might be a tool of oppression and a tool for liberation. In addition, we know Jemisin was influenced by her observation of the treatment of black bodies in the US, therefore the connections between orogenes, stone eaters, and black peoples in the trilogy is not unfounded but rather suggests the relevance of addressing race and racism. By doing this, the reader experiences dehumanization on multiple levels within and outside the story.

The ways we see ourselves and who we choose to identify with are important expressions of human agency, observes Bev Wilson (263). Speaking from her own experience, she argues that individual agency and the complexities of racial identity become subservient to racialization based on traditional categories and imposed by outside forces (264). Taking into account Johnson’s points in the previous chapter about the impact of spatial imaginary on black identities, Wilson expands on this by further complexifying racial and spatial identities as heavily impacted by forces outside one’s body later affecting the inside. In terms of racial and spatial identity and their markers, what stands out in Jemisin’s descriptions is how the stone eater Hoa and the Guardian Schaffa are presented when we first meet them. Orogenes such as

Alabaster and Essun do not bear any physical markers which might reveal their status in as non/being. As for stone eaters and Guardians, their personal and historical identity are visibly carried on their bodies. Schaffa is described as “paper-pale” with long, flat hair, both of which indicates Arctic descent, however, his hair color being heavy black like Eastern Coasters despite its flatness: “[n]othing about him makes racial sense,” Damaya determines (TFS 29). What is most striking about Schaffa is his eyes: they are silvery-white, an eye color deriving from stories and Stonelore, almost mythological in its existence; “[...] rare, and always an ill omen” (29). While Guardians ride on the top of the social hierarchy, their bodies (and powers) still denote Otherness. When Essun first meets Hoa, he appears to be a child either too small for his age or has “a manner too old for his body” (106). He is lighter-skinned, logically hailing from the Antartics. Noticeably, Hoa has ice-white eyes which makes him look not-quite-human, “[...] but then people with icewhite eyes rarely do” (107). Icewhite eyes are a trait found in descendents of the Thniess people (TSS 208-209).²⁶ While desired in the present for their ability to cause fear, in Syl Anagist icewhite eyes were stigmatized as they indicated your heritage could be traced to colonized people occupying the space of non/being. Sylanagistines colonized the Niess people, and while they fought back, they “[...] responded like any living thing under threat - with diaspora, sending whatever was left of themselves flying forth to take root and perhaps survive where it could” (209). Niess became scattered across the continent, becoming “[...] part of every land, every people, blending in among the rest and adapting to local customs” (209). The fate of the Niess echoes the imperialist violence Africans were subjected to, thus the Niess and their history overtly represent the enslavement of African people, as argued above.

It appears that stone eaters and Guardians in large part are deeply connected with sites of violence as stone eaters are bioengineered descendants of the Niess and Guardians are created by Father Earth. Additionally, they indeed showcase what Wilson suggested in regards of becoming subservient to racial categories imposed by outside forces (here Sylanagistine’s and Stonelore). Then, what follows is the role and act of dehumanization as inflicted upon tuners (stone eaters) and orogenes. This naturally follows because the racialization Wilson and Weheliye addressed was imposed as tools for perpetuating dehumanization; a practice which makes justifying subjugation easier and thus impact the formation of identity for those succumbing to this process. The most prevalent step in dehumanization is reducing bodily autonomy to object, property, and

²⁶ More commonly referred to as Niess because Sylanagistine’s struggled with pronouncing their name.

landscape ready for colonizing. Saidiya Hartmann argued that “[...] the slave is the essential subject as object, an object to whom anything can be done. The first step in this process of dehumanization is the metamorphosis of human into inhuman thing” (Yusoff 69):

“Perhaps it began with whispers that white Niess irises gave them poor eyesight and perverse inclinations, and that split Niess tongues could not speak truth. That sort of sneering happens, cultural bullying, but things got worse. It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different, somehow - more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized - and that this was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not *as* human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all” (TSS 210).

It is a grim and detached recounting of the process which resulted in mass murder and enslavement. Recounted by Hoa, it functions as way of contextualizing the history of their enslavement in the present. Jemisin mirrors how Blackness (proximity to the Niess and land) became the identificatory element for Otherness or not-quite-humanness in the racial hierarchy of unequal power in the Niespeople, then the tuners, and finally, orogenes. As Ferrández San Miguel points out, “Sylanagistines, it appears, felt the need to emphasise the Niess’s inferiority, their otherness, the better to oppress them” (10). It is here science fiction might offer a space where that which deviates from the norm can become the norm, as Walter Mosely desires, as a way of reclaiming and retrieving bodily autonomy. Those spaces of retrieval are, as argued in the previous chapter, Meov and Castrima as both places occupy the periphery of the governed border of accepted humanness. Meov and Castrima are spaces where Syenite/Essun and Alabaster gained a sense of peoplehood, which Hoa describes as a course of action occurring when a person comes to the understanding that people cannot be possession (TSS 50). Additionally, it is what happens to the tuners when they discovered the shattered half-dead bodies of their ancestors in the briar patches. These realizations proved powerful because they resulted in revolutions. What this then indicates is that dehumanization is a crucial tool in colonization: first, it justifies oppression since those affected are not considered human; and secondly, occurring at the end of its process, those affected will have internalized their inhumanity and inferior status to the degree of discarding the notion of them holding the power to change the future. The usage of language holds a central role in upholding dehumanization after it has become entrenched in the mantle of society as a way of perpetuating the normalization of categorizing people into distinct groupings of human and not-quite-human, as Weheliye observed. For Jemisin, that is the implementation of derogatory language which here appears through the term “Rogga.”

Derogatory language of this kind is first explored through Damaya when she, to her dismay, realizes that she is one of those roggas everybody hates: “It has never occurred to her that roggas - she stops herself. She. *She* is a rogga. [...] It’s a bad word she’s not supposed to say, even though the grown-ups toss it around freely, and suddenly it seems uglier than it already did” (TFS 89). She then decides it is better to call them orogenes, while reflecting upon the terribleness of knowing how many orogenes can kill, and so easily: “But then, she supposes that is why people hate them. Her. That is why people hate *her*” (89). Several things happen in this short passage. Damaya, like all children in the Stillness, has grown up surrounded by a language which harms a specific group of people for their assumed Otherness deriving from inherited genes. There is a sudden realization that she realizes she falls within this category of non/beingness. The way Jemisin emphasizes this realization is through making the pronouns cursive while appearing in shortened sentences in the overall passage: “She. *She* is a rogga [...] Her. That’s why people hate *her*” (89). It draws the attention directly to her, the experiencer, and forces the reader to have this realization alongside Damaya. There is also a repetition as if trying to convince herself of this new fact: *She* is a rogga and people hate *her* for it. A disbelief, perhaps, of being categorized as something evil, something Other, without there being the full vocabulary to fully reflect upon this emotion. This awareness of being different to other children also frames the passage. She begins what at first seems to be a longer sentence, which abruptly falters as she understands. Moreover, it is a realization that also causes confliction regarding her own identity because she does not necessarily view herself as monstrous before she knows she is a rogga, which illustrates the blurred line which separates humans from non-humans in racial categorizations.

Coming to terms with this forced, new-found identity is shown as difficult, and it echoes from the reality black children go through this realization in their young lives. In the deeply personal and reflective book addressed to his son, Ta-Nehisi Coates writes of a similar experience. It appears to be an experience which cannot be fully explained in words, but rather through emotional awareness. Coates explains how, as a child, he knew that his “[...] portion of the American galaxy, where bodies were enslaved by a tenacious gravity, was black and that the other, liberated portion was not [...] and [he] felt this a cosmic injustice, [...] which infused an abiding, irrepressible desire to unshackle [his] body and achieve the velocity to escape” (20-21). As a father, he identified this realization in his son when the killer of Michael Brown was loosed,

whereas his son's reaction was to leave the room, to escape the situation: "And that cut me because, for all our differing worlds, at your age my feeling was exactly the same. And I recall that even then I had not yet begun to imagine the perils that tangle us" (21). It is a privilege to possess a body whose properties have no negative connotations influenced by your history, your past, present and future. While Damaya is taken away, whereas Coates and his son desires to leave but cannot, there is a similarity in that Damaya becomes determined to escape the shackles of subjugation to regain self-governance, as seen through her motivations as an Imperial orogene at the Fulcrum. Additionally, it later fuels her rebellious nature and susceptibility to seeds of revolution planted by Alabaster.

As made clear above, Jemisin has created a world where language has become a means of oppression. Again, this is one of many ways where the author comments upon real sociopolitical structures, often without making it immediately noticeable. There are interesting connections between geologic language and the presentation of orogenes and stone eaters to the reader on the metadiegetic level. Moritz Ingwersen observes that Jemisin persistently "[...] employs literary registers that align human and geologic affect," drawing on Kathryn Yusoff's "geologic life" (81). This observation underlines the ongoing claim of material closeness between flesh and land represented through interactions between specific characters and the geography. Kathryn Yusoff notes that the similarities between the ways in which the language used regarding landscape, property, and possession often coincide with the language used to address flesh and enslaved people: "the collective functioning of geologic languages coded - inhuman, property, value, possession - as categories moves across territory, relation, and flesh" (4). She then identifies the process of how language was and is used to racialize both bodies and land, explaining that through the designation of geologic or inhuman life, rendering nonbeings in colonial extractive practices "[...] demonstrates what Christina Sharpe (2009) calls the "monstrous intimacy" of the subjective powers of geology, where gold shows up as bodies and bodies are the surplus of mineralogic extraction" (5).

The occurrence of geologic language in the Stillness highlights this monstrous intimacy where bodies and land are rendered equal in their non/status and non/being-ness. In the Fulcrum, orogene children must choose a new name when (if) they earn their first ring.²⁷ In Damaya's last

²⁷ Rings are earned through tests to see at what level they can control their orogeny. There are total of 10 rings a orogene can earn, but most earn five or less.

chapter, we get a closer look at how subjugation is internalized as understanding one's inferiority in the racial hierarchy. She reminds herself that while the Fulcrum is filled with children, the Fulcrum is not a school; "Friends do not exist [...] Grits are not children. Orogenes are not people. Weapons have no need of friends" (TFS 297). Not only has Damaya internalized inferiority, but also that she is a mere tool. One of the most significant acts of identity formation which showcases monstrous intimacy is when grits become Imperial orogenes after passing the first ring test and thereupon renamed. Damaya becomes Syenite, the name of a type of igneous rock. The practice of providing new names to Imperial orogenes echoes the practice of enslavers renaming their slaves. The connection between orogenes and landscape is further emphasized through the act of renaming, especially as the new names categorize the transformation to Imperial orogene as having ties with stone, enforcing the transformation to object. It becomes a forced change in identity for Damaya. McKittrick notes that "[...] naming place is also an [...] act of naming the self and self-histories" (*Demonic Grounds* xxii) Extending this to the naming of enslaved orogenes, I would argue that renaming functions as a means of forcing a new self and the labeler's history upon the bodies that now have gone through an "emptying" as Brand recognized above. Furthermore, Kim Wickham adds to this that by concurrently "[...] renaming orogenes and establishing an institutional system under which they operate, the state, here represented by Yumenes and the Fulcrum, seeks to monopolize both the physical and symbolic force [...]" whereas the latter, he adds, refers to the "power to name, to identify, to categorize, to state what is what and who is who" (401). Alabaster, alongside Syenite, also bears a name with ties to a type of rock. The links between orogenes and stone not only highlights the process of dehumanization but also points to the way Jemisin uses flesh and land proximities to address how outward forces influences the construction of an identity when growing up enslaved.

Drawing on the relevance of geologic activity in the lives of the inhabitants of the Stillness, geologic language has been placed on orogenes and stone eaters as a way of accentuating their nonhumanness, but also as way for them to understand and recount their own experiences of being. The trilogy showcases the violence of language on numerous occasions, seen above in the renaming of orogenes to signify their status as objects. But the violence is also prevalent through the sheer lack of a language. Language is central to identity formation, particularly as it is often connected with one's cultural heritage and is used to assert one's place in the world. Jemisin demonstrates this on numerous occasions as her characters cannot find the

words to express their emotions and experiences. Her usage of language showcases the violence of omitting language while simultaneously providing stone eaters and orogenes with language without making it immediately clear. Geological language is most prominent when referencing the stone eaters, as illustrated when Essun “sesses” the movement of a stone eater without seeing it, explaining it felt like “[...] a mountain shifting towards you” (TFS 202); or Hoa feeling the tension of his fellow tuner Remwha “[...] like a fault line poised to slip (TSS 250).²⁸ Notably are also the ways certain descriptions shift when Alabaster and Essun start transforming into stone themselves: “Alabaster’s eyes shift to follow as you sit, like a stone eater’s,” Hoa explains, accentuating his non/being-ness while also foreshadowing his later transformation into a stone eater. As for Essun, after destroying the army surrounding Castrima, she wakes to find her arm turned to stone. Her reaction is somewhat detached as she explores her arm: “But the mole, which once sat in the middle of your forearm like a tiny black target, is gone. [...] The keloid scar from where you once fell is impossible to feel anymore, though it should be slightly raised compared to the skin around it. That level of definition has vanished into a texture that is gritty and dense, like unpolished sandstone” (TSS 17). As seen, geologic language is used to perpetuate the nonhumanness of orogenes as a way of justifying further oppression. However, orogenes and stone eaters also use this language more prominently as they transform or take the shape of that which more closely resembles stone, in the process reclaiming the language.

Transgressing the lack of permission to speak their minds, the tuners bypassed this by creating their own language; they make use of the earth and speak in what they refer to as ‘Earthtalk’. Being bred from the Niess, this is an ability they have acquired that their creators do not know they possess and occurs through vibrations in the ground. This is drawn into focus in Hoa’s six-part countdown chapters in *The Stone Sky*, whereas he speaks of when he first meets Kelenli: “The new woman, the conductor says, is Kelenli. That’s wrong, too. Her name is actually *deep stab, breach of clay sweetburst, soft silicate underlayer, reverberation*, but I will try to remember “Kelenli” when I use words to speak” (TSS 44, emphasis in original). In the context of colonialism and dehumanization, this act of naming and re-naming showcases the inability, or rather unwillingness, in granting a person the autonomy of existing on their own

²⁸ “Sess” is a way of feeling, but not quite. It is also similar to perceiving. It is used on contexts where such an action becomes understandable to the reader, but without fully explaining what is happening. This is a condition of lacking language.

terms and in their own bodies. Detailed above, but further observed as Kelenli is introduced by her accepted Sylanagistian name - and when history remembers the Niespeople as such rather than Thniess - because “[...] it was hard to say their name with proper pronunciation, so Sylanagistines called them Niess” (TSS 208-209). Furthermore, orogenes on numerous occasions have realizations of possessing no language to express who they are or what they can do. Damaya did not possess the language to accept the identity thrust upon her, thereby having to resort to notions of language taught by the oppressors as she referenced herself as a rogga. The quotation which opened this thesis in the introduction points specifically to the issue of having no language. When trying to explain how “being in the earth” has changed his bodily wants and needs, the narrator points to this exact problem: “[the real problem is] not his inability to say it, but the fact that words are inadequate to the task. [...] Maybe someday someone will create a language for orogenes to use” (TFS 161). This frustration is mirrored in the *Fifth Season* when Damaya tries to explain to Binoff how she “sesses” an omission in the structure of a hidden room, but “[...] it’s always so hard to tell stills things” (318). Being unable to express thoughts, emotions, and processes like these can delegitimize those experiences. Language is essential in creating and upholding culture, and removing language therefore erases culture. If languages are lost, then so are histories and identities. This is the condition of living in a colonial and diasporic world.

Sharpe observes the importance of “[...] listening to the unsaid, translating misconstrued words, and refashioning disfigured lives [...]” and with that tell the story which cannot be told (32-33). I observe in Jemisin’s trilogy what Sharpe observed in M. NourbeSe Philip’s work; the attempt of finding “[...] a form to bear this story which can’t be told, which must be told, but through not telling” (33). Considering what has been detailed so far in this chapter, it appears as if Jemisin has centered stones as the reference point from which to create a language suitable for telling this specific story. By this I mean that while geologic language is adamantly used as a tool of oppression through renaming and emphasizing racialized connections between bodies and the environment, the same language provides a space for reclaiming identities lost to the processes of dehumanization. This offers possibilities for liberation through storytelling. It is significant here that Hoa and the stone eaters are the descendents of storytellers. The official title of a storyteller is lorist, and in the present describes someone who studies Stonelore and lost history, as well as a defender of knowledge. In the time before Syl Anagist, Lorists “[...] were warriors,

storytellers, nobility. They told their truths in books and song and through their art engines” (TSS 214). Moreover, another significant point is that “[a]ll lorists take the comm name Stone” (TOG 3). I would argue that this indicates the existence of flesh and land proximities before the Niess were colonized by Syl Anagist, and that Sylanagistines weaponized this part of Niess identity. Furthermore, being a storyteller with the name Stone not only points to what inspired the name of Stonelore, but additionally to the also to the inherent capability of carrying histories within the bodies of stone eaters. If geography, as argued in chapter one, contains violent, colonial and lost histories, then stone eaters, as inhabiting the threshold between flesh and land in their bodies and existing simultaneously in the past and the present, become embodiments of history, of black diaspora and deep histories long forgotten. Thus, becoming an archive. The narrator of these books and this story takes on the appropriate form to bear this story and to tell this story; and he is both the storyteller within the story and outside it, existing temporally in the past/present, framing the story with his body.

Embodying the Land, Transforming the Body

In an interview with the New York Times, Jemisin explained she had a dream of a woman walking towards her with a furious look on her face and a mountain floating along behind her (Alter). She was convinced that this woman would throw the mountain at her if she did not discover the reasons for her anger. Based on this, it is clear that Jemisin was driven by a need to provide a context for this woman’s circumstances to understand her. Beyond this, the importance of contextualizing the past is an overarching theme throughout the novels which is why Jemisin employs the notions of temporality to convey the ways in which the past alongside colonial histories continuously force black bodies to transform in various ways in the present. Temporality in the *Broken Earth* trilogy appears simultaneously on multiple levels of the story. In terms of the novels’ structure, the story is separated into chapters containing multiple perspectives spanning across ten thousand years, from the short period leading up to the Shattering until after the Fifth seasons have been stopped. The structural makeup of the novels helps the reader travel in time and across geographies to witness and piece together the differing perspectives. As demonstrated by this thesis, the past is not simply history but rather constantly appears and shapes the present. Likewise, building upon Black geographies, living in the wake,

geologic language, and generational trauma, this thesis has showcased how the flesh and land in this context cannot be separated. The production of fleshy commodities is as prevalent in the present as in the immediate past, and therefore one can argue that living in the proximity with land forces the body to retain the land which contains past histories. This points to a revisioning of time travel. But notions of time travel do not just occur in the standard way in this trilogy, that is, through the structure of a novel or through literal time travel. On the contrary, Jemisin has subverted the typical notions of time travel for the inherent temporal position orogenes, and in particular stone eaters, possess.

Octavia Butler and other authors writing black speculative fiction neo-slave narratives showcase temporality through time travel, whereas Jemisin subverts literal time travel for the temporality of stones.²⁹ As mentioned above, Jemisin has applied stone as the lens through which she tells this story, making stone both a vessel for past colonial histories and a conduit for sharing lost knowledge. Through this perspective, stone eaters, as fleshy embodiments of land, take on multiple critical roles in terms of driving the plot and story forward.³⁰ By embodying land, stone eaters are simultaneously in the present and in the past; the past has solidified in their bodies, making them archives. Or put differently, stone eaters carry violent, geographical, historical, and traumatic pasts within themselves which, consequently, resulted in their transformation. The destruction of Syl Anagist caused material alteration (tuners became stone eaters); Alabaster's destruction of Yumenes and the Fulcrum commenced his transformation into stone eater; Destroying the army occupying Castrima caused Essun's bodily transformation; and lastly, when Nassun retrieves the moon, she also experienced material alteration. They all carry temporal momentum, "[...] grounded in the knowledge of the wake, in a past that is not past, a past that is with us still; a past that cannot and should not be pacified in its presentation" (Sharpe 62). But what connects the transformative experience of engaging with the past to the material alteration?

Molded after the Niess, the tuners became archives carrying histories predating their own the moment they were bioengineered. Tuners contain the magic and many physical attributes from the Niess; and while never explicitly told so, one can speculate whether their ability to 'earthtalk' also stemmed from their ancestors as some evolved trait stemming from the magic

²⁹ For instance, this is seen in Butler's *Kindred*.

³⁰ Hoa as a stone eater, narrator/storyteller, and embodiment of land in this trilogy illustrate this point.

connecting the Niess to Father Earth. As tuners, they have had limited exposure to life outside their rooms (later described as cells) and the people beyond, indicating the space they hold might mirror plantations or the American prison-industrial complex. When the opportunity arises, the tuners are brought along on a journey across the city with their last stop being the briar patch. This journey across the city is to contextualize their existence, to understand where they come from and to understand their purpose. Compared with the transatlantic slave trade, the journey they take would be equivalent to enslaved peoples traveling back to where they were kidnapped from, to learn about their own identity and culture. Kelenli takes on the role of guide and storyteller to enlighten Hoa and the other tuners: “[...] I have less than a month to show you who you really are” (TSS 49). By doing this, Kelenli’s actions echo what arguably is the goal of Afrofuturism: she recounts the past, showcasing pastness as a position always taking up space and shaping the present, and promptly demonstrates its importance when imagining the future. Hoa explains to Essun that he and the other tuners were “[...] changing, complexifying, [their] ambient influence strengthening [...]” because of their journey (TSS 255). The purpose behind the journey was for the tuners to gain control over the onyx, the most powerful obelisk in the web of Syl Anagist and the key to controlling the Plutonic Engine. Hoa explains to Essun that “[w]hen we engage the onyx, it punishes us, stripping everything we can spare and leaving us in a shutdown sleep for hours or days - but not her” (99). Kelenli is the only tuner able to control the onyx, and she is therefore the only one who knows what is required: historical knowledge and emotional resonance which can only come from engaging the past.

The difference in experience between the tuners and Kelenli alongside orogenes is that the latter grew up unsheltered from experiencing structural oppression and slavery, causing them to carry generational and colonial trauma internally and externally. Differently, the tuners were “raised” in sterile, white rooms without contact to the city dwellers, outside knowledge deemed unnecessary by the conductors:

“They stripped our limbic systems of neurochemicals and our lives of experience and language and knowledge. And only now, when we have been made over in the image of their own fear, are they satisfied. They tell themselves that in us, they’ve captured the quintessence and power of who the Niess really were, and they congratulate themselves on having made their old enemies useful at last” (TSS 211).

This passage illustrates the ties identified by McKittrick between ownership and Blackness which “[...] rendered the black body a commodity, a site of embodied property,

through ideological and economic exchanges” (*Demonic Grounds* 44). Likewise, the description summons visualizations of what Saidiya Hartmann referred to as fungibility, whereas Yusoff explains that the slave becomes rendered as matter, only recognized through an inhuman relation to property, “[...] as a commodity with properties, but without subjective will or agency” (6). Furthermore, the passage demonstrates how language has power. Thus, removing language and knowledge can erase cultures, and therefore is important colonial tool for making dull, fleshy commodities to perform labor - strongly echoing transatlantic slavery and colonial practices. Shortly after this passage, we learn that to control the onyx, you need to understand the Niess as it only responds to an emotional resonance found in the bodies carrying the same histories and traumas (TSS 215). Therefore, the journey is intended to “sharpen” them, because, again, “[i]t is not a kindness that you are kept so dull” (100). However, it appears that alongside storytelling, the importance of self-experience is crucial. On the journey from their homes (cells) to their destination, the tuners become aware of how they are perceived by the Sylanagistines, and it does not match their given knowledge. Being promised both freedom and the status of heroes, the reality is quite different: “[...] people stared. Some whispered. One reached out to stroke my hair in passing, then giggled when I belatedly twitched away” (203).³¹ Hoa further recounts an angry man yelling derogatory terms such as “Niesbred,” “forktongue,” and “mistakes,” and promptly claiming they should have been wiped out (203). While the experiences they gain during the journey contribute to their knowledge of their ancestry and purpose, what is observed at the briar patch is what truly puts into motion their later transformation into stone eaters.

Aforementioned, the briar patch designates the space in which tuners were promised retirement and freedom while still contributing to upholding the infrastructures of the city. However, the reality proves different as they promptly discover their ancestors and friends laying incapacitated serving as conduits for powering Syl Anagist through Father Earth’s magic. There is a saying in Syl Anagist that All Life is Sacred, a saying which hides its alarming truth that killing is illegal because life is a valuable resource. The utilization of this belief justifies rendering tuners as property and fleshy tools to make up for the genocide of the Niess. Moreover, this again exemplifies that McKittrick notes about the ties between Blackness and ownership, of becoming a site for embodied property (*Demonic Grounds* 44). In this space, the Niess have laid

³¹ Drawing on real events where black people often experience having their hair touched without consent, alluding to the belief that black bodies exist to perform for the privileged.

for decades, serving as conduits to keep the city alive. Hoa realizes that those who lay in the briar patch are still alive, “[t]hough they sprawl motionless amid the thicket of vines (lying atop the vines, twisted among them, wrapped up in them, speared by them where the vines grow through flesh)” (TSS 262). Having vines growing through their flesh not only visualizes the Niess’ connection with the earth, but also how this connection was in turn applied to justify their proximity and nonhumanness: it was their strength and power, taken from them and subsequently used as a weapon against them. They are kept dull; alive, but simultaneously not: “this is because the sinklines take all the magic of life from them save the bare trickle needed to keep them alive. Keeping them alive keeps generating more” (262). The journey and newfound knowledge generate the necessary emotional resonance for grasping control of the onyx, but it has simultaneously sparked ideas of revolution - a transformation in its own right.³²

After unearthing the truth, the tuners now embody history and knowledge within them; emotional resonance emanating from their flesh through anger. Jemisin has visualized the magic inherited from the Niess to the tuners and orogenes as silver threads. Arguably, it is this silver thread which gaps the bridge between flesh and land, although significantly different than being rendered non/being by proximity. The magic is found in everything, the land and the body concurrently: “Between the gelidity, moving, too, but in a slower and less organic way, you suddenly sess the same thing you found in the stone of him. Something else, neither flesh nor stone [...]” (TOG 101). It is through this silver threaded magic, which weaves the experiences and relationships of orogenes across the temporal and spatial world, that the past becomes reachable. Moreover, it is here Father Earth is rendered ‘speakable’, as observed in the previous chapter. His *self* journeys across the tendrils of magic that reside in stone eaters and orogenes. Therefore, I want to expand the focus on transformations of orogenes to see how they are affected by this connection to land; a connection residing outside colonial practices which sought to dehumanize and subjugate, rather illustrating the *power* of flesh and land proximities.

Anna Tsing makes an interesting observation which speaks to both the isolation of the tuners and the later transformation of all the main characters. While not working with theories

³² The discovery of the truth behind the peaceful and self-sustaining city mirrors Le Guin’s short story mentioned in chapter one. Whereas people would have to make the decision regarding whether the people of Omelas would stay under the newly discovered circumstances, the tuners instead react with outrage and Jemisin angles the narrative so that the only logical answer for them is to plan a revolution. Considering Jemisin’s own goal with the trilogy, how she set out to reflect upon and present her environment as she knows it. Arguably, this serves to directly respond to Le Guin’s short story.

relating to slavery and Black geography specifically, her observation still enriches the understanding of transformation occurring in Jemisin's characters. Tsing observes that transformation happens through encounter, that we change through encounters and collaborations (28-29). Indeed, the trilogy demonstrates this through intricate and complex connections, intertwining the past and present, flesh and land, and beyond. "The evolution of our "selves" is already polluted by histories of encounter," Tsing remarks (29). Alabaster and Essun both transform fully into stone eaters, closing one chapter of their story and opening a new door as they achieve a strange freedom in their altered bodies. Nassun and Tonkee (Binof as an adult) go through minor bodily transformations; Nassun having her hand turn to stone while Tonkee in turn loses her arm. All these characters bear the mark of trauma visibly on and within their bodies, and what connects them is their shared history of living in the encompassing presence of the past, the singularity of slavery as chapter one detailed.

The transformation these characters endure mold them inwardly and outwardly. In much of our initial encounters with Alabaster, he is presented as a dreamer. A man who dreams of a world beyond the pain and trauma he and his "fellow slaves" exist in. As established, he serves as the guide steering Syenite towards an understanding of the circumstances of their oppression while adamantly claiming that they deserve better. He never softens the blow when he speaks into existence a truth known to all orogenes, knowing she hates the way they live though Syenite always fights to advance her position within this racial hierarchy: "Either the Fulcrum owns us, or we have to hide and be hunted down like dogs if we're ever discovered. *Or we become monsters and try to kill everything*" (TFS 123, my emphasis). I have emphasized the quotation because of its importance to Alabaster's character development. As mentioned in the previous chapter, Alabaster breaks the world by creating a rift that directly travels across the continent, through the capital of the Stillness. While the readers know someone has created this rift which sent the Stillness into a new Fifth season, they will not learn that it was Alabaster until *The Obelisk Gate*. Therefore, this sentiment delivered to Syenite, works as a foreshadowing to the monster Alabaster becomes. However, the word 'monster' appears repeatedly throughout all three books to refer to all those considered non-human, and therefore matters considerably. The monstrosity Jemisin constructs, which Alabaster alongside other orogenes embody, can be read and interpreted in two distinct ways. First, the orogenes (alongside stone eaters and Guardians) are generally considered and treated as monsters due to "[...] the consensus built around their

non-human condition” and they have in the process internalized their own monstrosity (Ferrández San Miguel 10). The other interpretation is one that follows the notion of internalized monstrosity. As Alabaster says, there is a possibility of becoming the monster they are claimed to be, speaking to the very real scenario in which you become that which you are treated like.

The internalized monstrosity is demonstrated in the prologue of *The Fifth Season* as Alabaster unleashes his anger upon the Stillness: “And then he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection” (TFS 6). While cracking the earth’s crust, he simultaneously kills all the incapacitated orogenes in the node stations scattered across the Stillness: “his fellow slaves” (6). But the decision to kill the orogenes in node stations is a kindness, and it echoes Syenite decision regarding Corundum. Before Alabaster found himself choosing to destroy Yumenes and Father Earth’s surface, he once more lost a child. Alabaster has fathered several children, all of whom deemed too powerful for the Fulcrum and thus placed in node stations, immobilized. Sharpe notes that in the wake, “[...] we must connect the birth industry to the prison industry, the machine that degrades and denies and eviscerates reproductive justice to the machine that incarcerates” (87). It becomes significant that when observing the Ring Garden within the Fulcrum, she observes that “It’s just that huge, the Fulcrum, a city in itself nestled within the greater body of Yumenes like... well. Syenite would’ve continued the thought with *like a child in a woman’s belly* [...]” (65). This observation further solidifies the connection made in chapter one regarding forced breeding between powerful orogenes. In addition, Sharpe’s point about the birth canal representing the Middle Passage in which the womb becomes a factory producing Blackness, is further proven (74). Syenite’s observation places the Fulcrum as a factory producing orogenes, monstrosity, and Otherness. In the traumatic event when Meov in invaded by the Guardians, echoing Alabaster’s loss, Syenite is forced to make the decision of whether she should let the Guardians claim her child or if she should remove that possibility completely. In an interview with Wired Magazine, Jemisin explains that Syenite’s decision to kill her child so he would not fall into the hands of the Guardians was directly inspired by the story of Margaret Garner (Kehe). Jemisin explains that she was trying to depict “[...] a story about people who have reasons to destroy the world, people who view the state of existence they’ve been forced to live in as literally worse than death” (Kehe). Turning back to the singularity of slavery explored

in chapter one, what Jemisin seems to describe is the totality of Black geographies as it exists in the wake and/or singularity. In this totality of black environments - an environment shaping and being shaped by slavery - Syenite is forced to make the impossible choice Garner had to long before her, thus successfully removing the possibility of Corundum becoming property and humanizing Garner in the process.

Through the traumatic event of losing her child, Syenite is ultimately pushed towards her new identity of Essun. In the chapter appropriately titled “Syenite, fractured” in *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin visualized the dissociative state Syenite is occupying by writing shorter paragraphs separated by asterisks. The sudden, shortened sections help highlight the abrupt shift in the psychological state of the protagonist, making clear through the narrative structure, and title of the chapter, that the event is traumatic. Prompted by Schaffa being disappointed to lose Alabaster, he notes that “[...] his child will be a more than worthwhile replacement” (TFS 440), which brings about her fracturing as she knows what awaits him. The shorter sections alternate between Hoa commenting on and narrating the event, simultaneously explaining to Essun and the reader that “there are moments when everything changes [...],” accentuating the traumatic event (440). In addition to the asterisks, each section switches perspective as the narrator speaks to Essun through the second person perspective and narrates Syenite’s story in the third person perspective. Additionally, it highlights the dissociative state of Syenite as she experiences another traumatic consequence of slavery and signals the change that is concurrently happening in Essun as she transforms from one to the other. In the following passage, Jemisin manages to humanize both Syenite, and subsequently Garner: “Coru is crying. She puts her hand over his mouth and nose, to silence him, to comfort him. She will keep him safe. She will not let them take him, enslave him, turn his body into a tool and his mind into a weapon and his life into a travesty of freedom” (441). The short paragraph highlights the seemingly contrasting, but nevertheless real relationship between tenderness and monstrosity when forcibly embodied in orogenes. The reader becomes immersed in this because Jemisin manages to humanize the horrendous event since the readers intimately understands the context of the circumstances.

Christina Sharpe explains the notion of the ‘asterisked human’ when looking at the experiences enslaved black people have endured due to their position in the racialized hierarchy. She places the asterisk after ‘Trans’ to indicate the variety of ways of trying to get at something about and toward the array of ‘trans*formations’ enacted by and on black bodies (30). She

argues that “the asterisk after the prefix “trans” holds the place open for thinking (from and into that position), and that it further speaks to a range of configurations “[...] of the black being that take the form of translation, transatlantic, transcontinental, transfixed, [...] transubstantiation, [and] transmigration” (30).³³ When it comes to Essun’s trauma that have changed and reshaped her, Christina Sharpe’s notion of ‘the asterisked human’ fits her. Applying this idea when analyzing the traumatic event of losing her child, it becomes clear that having to make the decision of whether to kill your child to save them from slavery or let them fall into the hands of the oppressor, is an event that is unique to orogene (black) bodies. It signifies an event and a decision which forces Syenite on a new involuntary journey that produces another trans*formation. Sharpe draws on Dionne Brand, describing ‘post the rapture of the world’, of which Brand tells us that “[...] *we*, whether *we* made that passage or not, are “transform[ed] into being. That one door [the door of no return] transformed us into bodies emptied of being, bodies emptied of self-interpretation, into which new interpretations could be placed” (32). I find this thought relevant in the context of Blackness and black bodies because it points to the emotional and physical effects of generational trauma and slavery as something transformative. Jemisin visualizes this transformation across and beyond her characters by applying the fantastical when considering the events recounted above. When Syenite’s body is ‘emptied of self-interpretation’, she creates Essun in hopes of leaving her traumatic past behind and hide in a new body and a new identity. And on this new Middle Passage journey, from one body to the next, her flesh carries the memory of a child and childbirth, but her child does not follow her on the journey.

Moreover, when Syenite realizes there is nowhere to run and decides to kill (save?) Coru, the language, again, draws on the geologic. Here, I want to further expand on the transformation happening to Syenite in the passage when her son dies. As mentioned above, Ingwersen observed how Jemisin aligns human and geologic affect, and its presence in these pages is therefore important to highlight. The first asterisk separating the different temporalities, from Syenite perspective to Hoa commenting upon his own narration, becomes an effect which illustrates the dissociative state Syenite enters as it appears directly after Schaffa tries to lay claim to her child. Hoa explains to Essun, again, that “there are moments when everything changes, you understand” (TFS 440). He lays the foundation of compassion for the following affectual

³³ Transubstantiation describes the process by which one might understand the making of bodies into flesh and thus into fungible commodities while still retaining the appearance of flesh and blood (30)

connection where the reader experiences two stories in one: one of trauma and the other of the aftermath of trauma. Hoa's comments both showcase the connection between flesh and land, and humanizes Syenite through her actions:

“Even the hardest stone can fracture. It just takes the right force, applied at the right juncture of angles. A *fulcrum* of pressure and weakness. [...] You understand these moments, I think, instinctively. It is our nature. We are born of such pressures, and sometimes, when things are unbearable- [...] - sometimes, even we... *crack*” (440-441, emphasis in original).

Immediately, the choice of the word ‘fulcrum’ as representing the place from which the fracture originate, draws a linkage between the Fulcrum as a geographical site of dehumanization and slavery with an inward fracture in its aftermath. As established, the Fulcrum is the place Damaya officially transforms into non-human as she passes the first ring test and chooses the name Syenite. Additionally, this quotation illustrates just how geologic language can be used to make sense of and comprehend trauma. The usage of this sort of literary arsenal stems from the tuners and their ‘earthtalk’, and because orogenes are descenders of tuners, this suggests that this language is always readily available for orogenes to reflect on their own identity and experience of being. Drawing on Ferrández San Miguel and trauma studies, she explains that trauma studies have in large part ignored the world of the fantastic because “[...] there have been prescriptive tendencies around what is considered to be an appropriate aesthetics for the representation of trauma” (2). However, considering perspectives from trauma studies in this passage, it becomes clear that the fantastic has a unique way of exploring trauma because speculative fiction opens imaginative doors which need not concern itself with accurate renderings of the contemporary world. Therefore, positioning the Fulcrum as a geographical site denoting the official beginning of non-humanness, and later having Syenite/Essun represent a fulcrum in herself, points to the lasting aftermath of slavery on the black body and thus by extension, illuminates the flesh and land proximity which spring from it.

What is further highlighted is that the geological language Jemisin uses to narrate is generally most prominent in sections detailing traumatic events: “There’s a dark heavy space inside her that is heavier than the stone eater, much heavier than a mountain, and it’s eating everything else like a sinkhole” (TFS 441). Here, Jemisin uses stone as a metaphor for the heaviness of trauma and grief while simultaneously bridging the divide between flesh and land as the characters hardens emotionally. This connection is exemplified when Damaya and Binof encounters at the Fulcrum. While exploring a hidden location, they discover a hollow room

which Damaya intriguingly refers to as a depression. Using a word which both signifies a mental state and a geological phenomenon, again, connects flesh and land. We learn that this is but one of many locations where the obelisks were made, additionally indicating that a briar patch was located here before the Shattering. In many ways, the depression Damaya locates in the Fulcrum foreshadows the ‘dark heavy space inside her’ as Syenite. She further notices that “[...] something monstrously heavy *punched* this pit into the earth, and sat in the depression long enough to make all the rock and soil beneath it solidify into these smooth, neat planes” (320). One could argue that the rift across the Stillness symbolizes the wound of generational and colonial trauma becoming entrenched in the space which generates the trauma in the first place (Ferrández San Miguel 2).³⁴ The wound festers as it represents the collective suffering of an entire people. Arguably, Syenite connects with this collective history and trauma when taking control of the obelisk: considering that obelisks contain colonial history, and that the silver threads of magic connecting all non/living material emerges from Father Earth and through them, this connection makes sense. She had direct contact with archives brimming with the pain and suffering of those who served as chattel in the numerous briar patches, which might indicate a trans(*)fer and therefore a trans(*)formation. Syenite’s subsequent fracture after killing/saving Corundum thus occurs while carrying the shared historical and generational trauma in her flesh, herself becoming an archive like the obelisks which, additionally, sets her on a path of becoming a stone eater.

The notion of generational trauma becomes further apparent when looking at Nassun’s transformations from when her father kidnaps her to her final stance when she retrieves the moon, ends the Fifth seasons, and loses her hand. Hoa begins Nassun’s first chapter by reflecting upon the fluidity of identity: “[...] a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one’s being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself *and* the family that rejected her *and* the people of the Fulcrum who chiseled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster *and* Innon *and* the people of post lost Allia and Meov” (TOG 1, emphasis in original). He highlights how humans carry histories of geography, violence, and people within us and how they shape us - reinforces the power the past has on the future.³⁵ This is one of the conditions of living in the wake. Nassun is eight when her childhood ends, a reality for black kids in the US when they

³⁴ Ferrández San Miguel draws on trauma studies of the wound to make a similar connection.

³⁵ Jemisin illustrates here what Tsing observed about encounter previously.

realize their status in their country.³⁶ Nassun's first transformation occurs through a marking, the breaking of the hand. Sharpe draws on Hortense Spillers while looking at the significance of markings in *Beloved* by Toni Morrison. In *Beloved*, Sethe's mother bears a mark beneath her breast, and while it holds multiple meanings, Sharpe argues that "[...] it is consistent with the branding that would turn those Africans into property," explaining that the mark "[...] is connected to the ship on which Sethe's mother is forced to cross into slavery and to what was before and what comes in its wake" (48-49). Sharpe asks, alongside Spillers, whether "[...] this phenomenon of marking and branding actually 'transfers' from one generation to another, finding its various symbolic substitutions in an efficacy of meanings that repeat the initiating moments" (49).

This marking Nassun endures can be traced to Damaya who receives the same from her Guardian, as a standard Fulcrum practice. This is significant because while Damaya undergoes this marking by her new Guardian Schaffa as they travel to the Fulcrum, it is Essun who marks Nassun.³⁷ The mother transfers her own marking to her daughter, an action comparable with inherited generational trauma. The breaking of the hand is a Fulcrum-used test to observe whether an orogene child would be able to control their abilities under emotional turmoil. Thus, having grown up in the Fulcrum, one can assume Essun's training at the Fulcrum is the only she adheres to when teaching Nassun to control her powers. Therefore, Nassun having her hand broken by her mother signifies this transference of branding Spillers addresses, where generations of trauma and violence is transported to the next generation. Additionally, the violence directly stems from a violent environment: it is the Fulcrum enforcing this training rooted in dehumanization. This maintains the idea of geography holding histories and likewise transferring histories, meaning Nassun now also carries geographical trauma inside her body. In the process, Nassun has begun the journey of storing colonial violence in the flesh, beginning her journey towards embodying the land.

The transference of colonial and historical violence embedded in the skin of orogenes stemming from branding practices does not stop there. The focus on the severed arm (and dismembered body parts in general) in terms of signifying bodily alterations due to the historical trauma of slavery is not uncommon in neo-slave narratives, nor in black speculative fictions.

³⁶ As Ta-Nehisi Coates explains in *Between the World and Me* above.

³⁷ It is also interesting to note here that Schaffa was the one to mark Damaya by breaking her wrist.

Butler's *Kindred* is another source, perhaps one of the most knowable sources, to bodily alteration/disruption. In *Kindred*, Dana loses her arm on her last trip home. Much scholarly research point to the metaphorical aspect of her loss, of which the focus has been on Dana's amputated arm either symbolizing the impact of history and/or the loss of self and identity. Isiah Lavender III argues that Dana's loss of a limb "[...] is a visible reminder that the past is not simply history" (69). He further suggests that *Kindred*'s interaction with the neo-slave narrative and science fiction opens a rift in history that both witnesses and testifies to the cultural memory of slavery in the present (69). Applying both these ideas to the Stillness and to the orogenes suggests a similarity between Jemisin's portrayal of bodily alterations and Butler's loss of limbs. As seen above, orogenes in the Fulcrum are marked by violent histories through the act of breaking the hand. This extends to orogenes outside the Fulcrum as well, as seen with Nassun, as indirectly connected to the Fulcrum, and further to Tonkee. As a trans woman, Tonkee already embody notions of transformations. In fact, her story is rife with transformations: her name and identity, her body, and her geographies, all of which are entangled with the other.

Tonkee's interactions with obelisks proves interesting when analyzing her transformation. Considering the obelisks established nature of containing past histories and her life-long entanglement with them, she became a victim in the crossfire of past/present and flesh/land manifestations. Her arm is amputated by Essun to save her life as her body is contaminated by Father Earth.³⁸ Despite descending from colonizers, she is still fractured and re-shaped by slavery.³⁹ While immediately shaping the lives of orogenes, this can suggest that the singularity, or wake, of slavery still expands to flesh and land perceived as existing outside of it. Tonkee's loss of her arm could arguably symbolize the interconnected nature of flesh and land in the context of slavery, thereby showcasing the intermediate proximity of flesh and land alongside the past and present. This opens a space for thinking about the overarching, temporal singularity of slavery. Sharpe observes that "[i]n the United States, slavery is imagined as a singular event even as it changed over time and even as its duration expands into supposed emancipation and beyond" (106). However, slavery was never singular, but rather a singularity, meaning an event occurring around a particular time, date, or set of circumstances, further noting that emancipation

³⁸ Contamination is the most frequently used word to describe the process of Father Earth gaining control over human bodies. Specifically relating to Guardians, who are not a primary focus in this thesis. The wording is nonetheless interesting as it hints at Father Earth's magic being viewed as a disease.

³⁹ Tonkee (Binof as a child) is the child of one of the riches and oldest families in Yumenes.

did not free black life, but instead continues to hold them in this singularity (106). Chapter one established that the Stillness exists inside this singularity of slavery in which slavery was never simply history. The orogenes have not achieved emancipation, but the retrieval of the moon to end the Fifth seasons is the path towards freedom. Hence, indicating that people cannot be free until the land is free. Moreover, Sharpe explains that the environment, as built on anti-Blackness, ‘trans*forms’ black being (106). Taking into consideration the wake of slavery as fully molded by and itself molding the environment, the oppression of orogenes controls and shapes the lives of all the inhabitants of the Stillness; in the process showcasing how entangled bodies are with the environment, and vice versa.⁴⁰ The singularity of slavery is an incessant event which ruptures the lives of all existing within it - even those not immediately afflicted.

Walter Mosely notes that “[t]he ability to formulate ideas into words, itself humanity’s greatest creation, opens the door for all that comes after” (qtd. in Thomas 405). But what does the future hold in the aftermath of slavery? How does Jemisin evaporate the singularity of slavery which Sharpe identified? First, she makes use of Afrofuturist neo-slave narratives as the elements upon which she frames her storytelling. Kodwo Eshun argues that black speculative fiction and Afrofuturism should create spaces where knowledges and histories could be recovered, thereby manufacture tools for rewriting the political and cultural climate upholding structural racism and enslavement (Anderson and Jones viii). Jemisin points to the importance of engaging with the past on several instances throughout the trilogy. As established, Black geography appears to contain this pastness which emerged through, and upholds, colonialism, slavery, and its practices of dehumanization. Jemisin has created characters with the ability to directly engage with geography as they exist on the periphery of humanness, and on the threshold of flesh and land. While this proximity has been used to dehumanize and thereon subjugate, Jemisin has showcased that there lies a power in engaging with and thus reclaim the past. Her characters do so by immersing themselves (quite literally) in their histories through geographies and stories, and through reclaiming geologic language.

Lorde notes that revolution was not a one-time event, and I believe this thesis has demonstrated this temporality. Arguably, the future became unshackled from the past by destroying the oppressive infrastructures upheld by Yumenes and the Fulcrum allowing for

⁴⁰ Mirroring the U.S again, this can be compared with how white supremacy is built into the infrastructure of the country and continues shaping the way the country is run.

spaces of overcoming to emerge. In the process, flesh and land proximities transformed from tools of oppression to possibilities for reclaiming lost histories and identities. However, Jemisin by no means presents this as the final solution to living in the wake; indeed, by opening the trilogy with this destruction she instead showcased the amount of work necessary to achieve just futurities. Akin to her short stories, only when oppressive systems are dismantled and the past has been resolved, can one truly begin re-visioning and build a better future:

“What do you want?”

You consider. I listen to the slow ongoing roar of the volcano, down here in the deep. Then you say, “I want the world to be better.”

[...]

“Then let’s go make it better.”

“It might take some time”

“I don’t think I’m very patient.” But you take my hand.

Don’t ever be patient. Don’t ever be. This is the way a new world begins.

“Neither am I,” I say. “So let’s get to it.” (TSS 398, my emphasis).

Conclusion

“[...] you need to know where you’ve come from to know where you’re going.
Do you understand?” (TSS 397).

Through two chapters, this thesis aimed to explore how Jemisin utilizes flesh and land boundaries in the *Broken Earth* trilogy, and to what degree these entangled spaces have provided tools which might contribute to imagining futures beyond the wake of slavery. To accomplish this, I have built the theoretical framework on concepts from postcolonial theory and black studies, along with Afrofuturist neo-slave narrativity. In the *Broken Earth* trilogy, Jemisin portrays the complex world through multiple perspectives to depict and examine the overarching themes of slavery and structural oppression, environmental destruction, kinship, and identity. This thesis primarily focused on notions of colonialism and its connected themes of slavery, structural oppression, and identity. As such, possibilities of further studies exploring the relationship between colonialism and environmental destruction as appearing in this trilogy, can help broaden the discourse of colonialism and the environment in the aftermaths of slavery.

To convey this story, Jemisin has made use of Afrofuturism and neo-slave narrativity, both sharing in the speculative fiction tradition. Speculative fiction is defined by the ways it deconstructs and challenges socio-political and cultural structures within a society. Therefore, a space for exploring abstract and complex ideas is provided, encouraging the reader to expand their knowledge. Additionally, Jemisin has managed to create a space for what Kodwo Eshun identified as being Afrofuturism’s mission, a space for “[...] recovering histories of counter-futures created in a century hostile to Afrodiasporic projection and [...] a space within which the critical work of manufacturing tools capable for intervention within the current political dispensation may be undertaken” (Anderson and Jones viii). For this reason, it becomes the desired mode for examining the overarching issues of slavery, structural oppression, kinship, and identity present in the trilogy. Jemisin narrates multiple perspectives separated into individual chapters, all alternating between first-, second-, and third-person perspectives. By doing this, Jemisin showcases the inherent temporality and malleability of identities when existing in the currents of slavery. Furthermore, *The Fifth Season* presents three focalizers revealed to be different identities of the same woman across spatial and temporal boundaries, highlighting the fractured state of traumatized identities.

In the wake, Sharpe observes that, “[...] the past that is not past reappears, always to rupture the present” (9). This suggestion underscores her identification of slavery as describing a

singular event that keeps changing and expanding beyond supposed emancipation (106). Chapter one, “‘Speakable’ Lands: Black Geography and Past/Present Speculations”, explored specific geographies in the Stillness to uncover the manners of which they contained past histories that contributed to the incessant oppression of orogenes, whereas other geographies held possibilities for liberation. Specifically, how examining geography revealed possibilities for liberation through past/present considerations. Accordingly, I mapped the Stillness and its significant geographies Syl Anagist, the Fulcrum, Meov, and Castrima. Each geography held possibilities for uncovering the overarching presence of pastness. The imperial city of Syl Anagist and its predecessor the Fulcrum are geographies shaped by violent, colonial pasts, whereas Meov and Castrima challenge colonial violence through kinship and resistance. Following in the tradition of neo-slave narratives and Afrofuturism’s involvement with pastness and the future, this chapter illustrated the necessity of examining and unpacking violent geographies to move beyond the singularity of past/present colonial violence. Jemisin’s application of the past showcases how geographies hold transformative powers for abolishing old and new racial hierarchies. As such, she illustrates how “[...] there can be no black futurity without necessarily acknowledging slavery’s impact and continued reach” (Morgan 32).

The discoveries in the first chapter provided a framework for observing how flesh and land boundaries blurred through geologic language and symbolism. As McKittrick noted about diaspora, black bodies, and geography: geography is human, and that humanness is always geographic (*Demonic Grounds* xi). Chapter two, “Non/Being: Embodying the Past in the Governed Borders of Humanness,” asked to what degree interactions between flesh and land set about mutual alteration and how this influenced the character’s identities. Furthermore, it asked what purpose these alterations held regarding past/present interactions and imagining futures beyond the wake of slavery. I argue that geologic language and symbolism appear as tools of oppression and dehumanization. Not only does it perpetuate generational trauma, but also removed autonomy. Kathryn Yusoff noted that “the collective functioning of geologic languages coded - inhuman, property, value, possession - as categories moves across territory, relation, and flesh” (4). Sharpe mirrors this through what she identifies as monstrous intimacies: the subjective powers of geology which through the designation of geologic and inhuman life render nonbeings in colonial practices (in Yusoff 5). However, characters such as the tuners and stone eaters also reclaim geologic language by speaking in “earthtalk”; a language beyond stills’ comprehension.

Through geographical interactions, the proximity of flesh and land, as accentuated by geologic language, could be reclaimed when tuners and stone eaters interacted with the land, and therefore with past histories. Jemisin further blurs flesh and land boundaries through geologic symbolism appearing through orogenes' and stone eater's proximity to the environment, their powers, and physical attributes. When orogenes and stone eaters engage with the land, they absorb geographical histories in their flesh. Consequently, they are transformed through encounter - carrying history and pastness in their bodies. For instance, Essun's body changes after direct engagement with the past embedded in the obelisks, causing her flesh to transform to stone (TSS 17). This showcases that the characters embodying pastness and colonial history also exist across temporal and spatial boundaries. As showcased, this provides them with intrinsic possibilities for examining the past across flesh and land to make space for re-visioning the future.

In conclusion, Jemisin asks, "How can we prepare for the future if we won't acknowledge the past?" (TSS 216). Black speculation and speculative fiction contain an arsenal of possibilities for influencing the political and cultural sphere. As evident, there is an increased demand in diverse and socio-politically charged stories. Through her choice of genre and narrative techniques, Jemisin has created geographies for her characters (and readers) to examine violent histories of the past for the purpose of remaking geographies of dominion into geographies for overcoming. She illustrates the transformative powers inherent in acknowledging the past by mapping pastness on the flesh. Furthermore, the *Broken Earth* trilogy has shown that only through completely dismantling oppressive racial hierarchies can pastness be unshackled from the present. Revolution is a continuous event that occurs across temporal and spatial boundaries, across flesh and land. Only when the past is resolved; when colonial and racist infrastructures are demolished; and when spaces for healing are built, can one surface from the wake of slavery.

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