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“Even the hardest stone can fracture.” Racialization, Reproductive Control, and the Wake of Slavery in N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*

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“Even the hardest stone can fracture:” Racialization, Reproductive Control, and the Wake of
Slavery in N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*

By

Elsbeth Sanders

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

In

Gender and Women’s Studies

Minnesota State University, Mankato

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N.K. Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*

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This thesis has been examined and approved by the following members of the student’s
committee.

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“EVEN THE HARDEST STONE CAN FRACTURE:” RACIALIZATION, REPRODUCTIVE CONTROL, AND THE WAKE OF SLAVERY IN N.K. JEMISIN’S *THE FIFTH SEASON*

ELSBETH SANDERS

A THESIS SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE
REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF
MASTER OF ARTS

MINNESOTA STATE UNIVERSITY, MANKATO
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ABSTRACT

When the science fiction and fantasy novel *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin won the Hugo Award in 2016, Jemisin became the first Black author to win the prestigious literary science fiction award. A departure from similar novels at the time, *The Fifth Season* has a strong understanding of systems of oppression and how they are built and upheld. This thesis argues that *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin follows the conventions of the neo-slave/meta-slave narrative to explore themes of racialization and reproductive control under enslavement and oppression. I conduct a feminist literary of the novel, focusing on these themes, and ground my analysis firmly in Black feminist thought and the study of Black science fiction. Using authors such as Dorothy E. Roberts and Angela Y. Davis, I explore the ways in which Black women in America had their reproduction controlled for dehumanization and profit, as well as how they resisted such control. Using this historical context to read *The Fifth Season*, I demonstrate how Jemisin’s neo-/meta-slave narrative incorporates these themes of reproductive control and racialization, using the genre of science fiction to re-discover and re-imagine the personal experiences of enslaved women lost to history.

INTRODUCTION

The Fifth Season by N.K. Jemisin is a 2015 science fiction and fantasy novel set in the ironically-named Stillness—where Earth is in constant flux and violent geological events are always threatening to cause apocalyptic damage. Orogenes—humans with the ability to harness and control the kinetic energies of the Earth—are feared for their power and their connection to the “Evil Earth” while also being invaluable for humanity’s survival on such a volatile planet. When Essun, an orogene raised and trained in the imperial core, has her eyes forcibly opened to the conditions of her enslavement. She must grapple with her identity and humanity with this newfound understanding, as well as with the limits of what she has been taught by her oppressors. Exploring themes of racialization and reproductive control, *The Fifth Season* follows Essun through three phases of her life, each punctuated by unimaginable trauma and moments of resistance, as she tries desperately to cling to her humanity. Through the systematic enslavement and dehumanization of orogenes, Jemisin explores how racialization positions groups as sub-human, while these groups become integral for profit and imperial expansion. The novel also shows reproductive control as crucial to the project of racialization as it examines Essun’s complicated feelings toward motherhood.

In the face of racist, anti-diversity backlash,¹ *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin won the Hugo Award for science fiction/fantasy in 2016, becoming the first book by a Black author to win in the prestigious Award’s 63 years of existence. When the next two novel’s in Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*—*The Obelisk Gate* and *The Stone Sky*—won Hugo Awards the two subsequent years, Jemisin became the first author of any race or gender to win the Award three times in a row and established the *Broken Earth Trilogy* as a truly remarkable series. The

¹ Tasha Robinson, “How the Sad Puppies Won - By Losing,” NPR, August 26, 2013.

complexity of its worldbuilding and themes make *The Fifth Season* to stand out from other popular dystopia fantasy novels of the time. Life is complicated; societies are complicated. Change is hard, but it is worth it to change society for the better. *The Fifth Season* in particular, and the *Broken Earth Trilogy* more generally, avoid the simple explanation that oppression comes from a few evil people in power, instead, showing how a society founded on oppression and exploitation must be changed from the bottom-up. Violence, dehumanization, and exploitation seep into every aspect of society, and cannot be rooted out by just killing the people in charge. *The Fifth Season* uses its obfuscated, non-linear narrative structure to create a compelling and unique meta-slave/neo-slave narrative that uses a fantastical context to explore its harrowing themes.

The Fifth Season addresses themes of dehumanization, racialization, and reproductive control through the distance allowed by the science fiction/fantasy genre. The care with which Jemisin crafts the world and weaves in these themes leaves the narrative ripe for analysis. In particular, *The Fifth Season* lends itself to a Black feminist literary analysis, with its allusions to important Black feminist novels such as *Beloved* by Toni Morrison.²

This thesis will be a feminist literary analysis of racialization, dehumanization, and reproductive control presented in the meta-slave/neo-slave narrative in the science fiction fantasy world of Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*. Essun's life story—through the distance of a fantasy world—shows the social constructed-ness of race and how reproductive control is used to dehumanize, oppress, and profit. First, I will explain the methods and methodologies I use to analyze the novel—namely feminist literary analysis and Black feminist thought—and how my positionality affects my analysis. Then, I will review the literature of three bodies of knowledge

² Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, First Vintage International Edition (New York: Vintage Books, 2004).

important for this thesis: black science fiction, dehumanization and racialization, and reproductive control. Next, I will analyze the novel and answer the following questions: Does *The Fifth Season* follow the structure of the neo-slave/meta-slave narrative? How does that narrative explore ideas of racialization and reproductive control under slavery? Finally, I conclude by reiterating the important themes of the novel and explaining the importance of such literary analysis.

METHODS AND METHODOLOGY

For this research, I will be performing a feminist literary analysis of N.K. Jemisin's sci-fi fantasy novel *The Fifth Season*, focusing on themes of racialization and dehumanization, identity formation under oppression, and reproductive control. Feminist literary criticism, though similar to feminist media analysis, has an extremely long history and, of course, applies specifically to the analysis of literature. According to author Dorin Schumacher, an important aspect of literary criticism is its duality as both a scientific and artistic process. She says that literary criticism is not simply reading for comprehension and finding the literal meaning of the text. Instead, the critic creates meaning through active, interpretive reading. Schumacher writes:

The literary critic, however, selects and defines an idea, or an interpretive model, and then uses it to seek out extended meanings for the words of the text as they relate to that model. Thus, since the basic semantic and syntactic data of a text are manipulated by the critic, the meaning s/he produces is individual; but the work is accomplished according to specific rules, and always within the framework dictated by the selected idea.³

Literary criticism is heavily dependent on both the critic and the lens through which the critic is analyzing the text.

For my research, I draw heavily on the methodology of Black feminist thought. In her seminal work, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, intersectional social theorist Patricia Hill Collins defines Black feminist thought as a wide range of oppositional and subjugated knowledges created by African-American women concerning their own subjugation. In other words, Black feminism focuses on the unique experiences of Black women at the intersection of race, gender, sexuality, class, etc. Collins writes, "Developing black feminist thought also involves searching for its expression in

³ Dorin Schumacher, "Subjectivities: A Theory of the Critical Process," in *Feminist Literary Criticism: Explorations in Theory*, ed. Josephine C. Donovan (Lexington, KY: University Press of Kentucky, 1989), 30.

alternative institutional locations and among women who are not commonly perceived as intellectuals.”⁴ Black feminist authors such as Angela Y. Davis, Dorothy E. Roberts, and Jennifer L. Morgan have looked to Black women’s reproductive experiences during slavery to fill out the previously under-researched topic. Fiction authors such as Toni Morrison can also be looked to for Black feminist thought, as it is not confined to academic theory. Ultimately, Black feminist thought, whether Morrison’s fiction or Davis’s research, seeks to voice the subjugated knowledges of Black women. As the literary and cultural studies scholar Arlene R. Keizer points out, black feminist criticism and black feminist literature have a deeply intertwined history.⁵ In line with Collins’s definition of Black feminist thought, I plan to search for subjugated knowledges (re)produced by Jemisin within the pages of her sci-fi fantasy novel, *The Fifth Season*. With a deep understanding of subjugated knowledges as a Black woman in the United States, Jemisin’s novel is a rich source from which Black feminist thought can theorize.

As all feminist researchers acknowledge, my positionality will affect my research. Since I am performing a feminist literary critique, my analysis will necessarily be a product of my own interpretation of the novel. As previously stated, the literary critic creates and extends the meaning of the words in a text. My situated knowledge as a white woman is partial, and I will engage in deep reflexivity to ensure my limited perspective is questioned at every step in the research process. According to feminist researcher Sharlene Hesse Biber, reflexivity is “a process by which they [researchers] recognize, examine, and understand how their social background, location, and assumptions can influence the research.”⁶ By heavily focusing on the works of

⁴ Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment*, 30th Anniversary Edition (New York, NY: Routledge, 2022), 18-19.

⁵ Arlene R. Keizer, “Black Feminist Criticism,” in *A History of Feminist Literary Criticism*, ed. Gill Plain and Susan Sellers (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 154–68.

⁶ Sharlene Nagy Hesse-Biber, “A Re-Invitation to Feminist Research,” in *Feminist Research Practice: A Primer*, Second Edition, Kindle Edition (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2014), 3.

those engaged in Black feminist thought—such as Collins, Davis, and Rogers—I seek to ground my analysis in Black feminist theory and the perspectives of Black women. Another aspect of my positionality that will affect my research is my humanities background. My interdisciplinary academic training in English/Literature and Gender and Women’s Studies lend to a heavier focus on humanities than social science and thus will affect both my engagement with and methods of analyzing literature. For instance, in the humanities, more generally, and literary criticism, more specifically, there is much overlap between methods and methodologies—to the point where it is often difficult to distinguish between the two. Thus, the methods and methodologies I draw on will be intertwined and messy.

To analyze *The Fifth Season*, I first read it thoroughly several times. Upon the second read, I began to identify the themes of the novel: racialization, identity formation under oppression, and reproductive control and resistance. As a work of literature, these themes show up in intertwining ways within the narrative and often are too complex to boil down to one or two quotes. Though I do quote some lines that are particularly forward with the themes, I mostly wrote down scenes, ideas, character arcs and interactions, and worldbuilding that best illustrate the themes I aim to analyze. While coding for racialization, I identified elements that show the construction of the oppressed group—orogenes—in the novel. For the theme of identity formation under oppression, I draw heavily from conversations between two characters from this oppressed group discussing their status in society. Finally, I identified any parts of the book that relate to motherhood and reproductive control as a method of oppression. This was by far the simplest theme to code for, as it is much less up to interpretation which elements of the novel demonstrate this theme. After identifying scenes, ideas, or arcs from the novel and coding them

for these three themes, I will apply Black feminist thought to analyze the way Jemisin utilizes these themes to broaden readers' understandings of these same issues in our real world.

In conclusion, N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* is a groundbreaking work of science fiction that deserves a close literary analysis. Through a Black feminist lens, my research will use feminist literary critique to examine the themes of racialization and reproductive control in the neo-slave/meta-slave narrative of the novel. By drawing heavily on the methodologies of Black feminist thought, I will reflexively evaluate my positionality and ensure my limited perspective is questioned at every step. Overall, this research will contribute to the ongoing conversation about the importance of diversity and representation in science fiction and fantasy literature.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Any literary analysis must be made within the context of the surrounding scholarly literature. In my analysis, I will be exploring the neo-slave narrative in the novel *The Fifth Season* by N.K. Jemisin and how it is used to present themes of reproductive control and racialization. Thus, a thorough understanding of the scholarship surrounding Black science fiction, reproductive control under slavery, and the process of racialization is needed. In this literature review, I will first discuss the field of Black science fiction, speculative fiction, and Afrofuturism through the works of authors such as Isiah Lavender III and Samantha Schalk. Then, drawing heavily from Angela Y. Davis and Dorothy E. Roberts, I will present important arguments in the study of reproductive control under American plantation slavery. Finally, drawing from scholars such as Michael Omi and Howard Winant, I explore the process of racialization in the United States.

Black Science Fiction and Neo-/Meta Slave Narratives

Science fiction has long been a genre for exploring the unknown and the human condition. With its focus on transformed futures and distant technologies, science fiction allows authors and readers to imagine realities that are so very different from our own while, at the same time, echoing familiar elements of society. In his essay “Black to the Future,” American novelist Walter Mosley discusses the appeal of science fiction to Black Americans, writing:

Black 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.⁷

⁷ Walter Mosley, “Black to the Future,” in *Dark Matter: A Century of Speculative Fiction from the African Diaspora*, ed. Sheree R. Thomas (New York, NY: Warner Books, 2000), 405.

Despite this appeal, André M. Carrington, a scholar of gender and race in Black and American cultural production, states that Black people have been alienated from the genre as a whole and very rarely see themselves directly represented.⁸ Carrington asserts that it is preferable to refer to the overwhelming whiteness of the genre instead of the lack of Black science fiction authors because the latter risks allowing the whiteness of science fiction to go unmarked and minimizes the efforts of the Black people who have historically written and consumed science fiction.⁹ Similarly, Isiah Lavender III—professor of African American literature and science fiction—points out the issues of science fiction works that assume a raceless future for America. Quoting Black science fiction scholar De Witt Kilgore, Lavender explains how a colorblind vision of the future disguises and enshrines white masculinity.¹⁰

Though long dominated by whiteness, science fiction’s ability to cast new light on common experiences makes it a rich genre for exploring issues of race, racism, and Black history. In his book *Race in American Science Fiction*, Lavender discusses the idea of estrangement in science fiction. Expanding on the idea from literary historian and critic Darko Suvin, Lavender defines estrangement as “presenting something familiar in a way strange enough to make it unfamiliar.”¹¹ Through estrangement, science fiction presents new perspectives and may allow readers to see the world differently and wrap their minds around new ideas.¹² Aside from giving readers new ways to think about the world, science fiction offers a way for Black people to both think about the scientific and technological future of race relations

⁸ André M. Carrington, “Introduction: The Whiteness of Science Fiction and the Speculative Fiction of Blackness,” in *Speculative Blackness: The Future of Race in Science Fiction* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2016), 17.

⁹ Carrington, *Speculative Blackness*, 16-17.

¹⁰ Isiah Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction* (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2011), 35.

¹¹ Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 28.

¹² Lavender, 28.

and rethink racial history in uncommon ways.¹³ Scholar of race, gender, and disability in African American women’s fiction, Samantha Schalk, acknowledges the use of the word “estrangement,” but opts for a less genre-specific term: defamiliarization. She says that Black women’s speculative fiction, in particular, defamiliarizes concepts like disability, race, gender, and sexuality, and leads to questions about the meanings and boundaries of the categories themselves.¹⁴ In my analysis, I hope to show how N.K. Jemisin uses this estrangement or defamiliarization found in the science fiction genre to explore concepts of race and reproductive control.

Science fiction provides a way to rethink, remember, and explore slavery. Lavender discusses two types of slave narratives in fiction: the neo-slave narrative and the meta-slave narrative. Borrowing the term from African American literary scholar Bernard Bell, a neo-slave narrative is a work of fiction written by a contemporary Black author that uses elements of fable and legend alongside characteristics of a slave narrative—such as those by Frederick Douglas and Harriet Jacobs—to reinterpret the past and connect it to the present.¹⁵ Or, as Schalk succinctly defines it, neo-slave narratives are “a broad range of post-Emancipation fictionalized representations of slavery.”¹⁶ Schalk notes the way that Black women authors of speculative fiction have utilized the neo-slave narrative to reimagine histories of race, gender, and disability, weaving stories of marginalized groups out of fragments of history that have largely forgotten them.¹⁷ Professor of sociology Avery Gordon says of Toni Morrison’s neo-slave novel *Beloved*, “[Morrison] imagine[s] the life world of those with no names we remember, with no ‘visible

¹³ Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 34.

¹⁴ Samantha Dawn Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined: (Dis)Ability, Race, and Gender in Black Women’s Speculative Fiction* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2018), 114-15.

¹⁵ Lavender, 57.

¹⁶ Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 36.

¹⁷ Schalk, 36-27.

reason' for being in the archive... She imagines them speaking their complex personhood as it negotiates the... complexities of the hands of power."¹⁸ Through Black speculative fiction and the neo-slave narrative, Black authors such as Morrison are able to bring an inner life to those denied their humanity by the writers of history.

Building on the idea of the neo-slave narrative are the meta-slave narrative and the postmodern slave narrative. Noticing a similar trend toward revising history through exploring themes of race and otherness in science fiction, Lavender coins the term meta-slavery, or the meta-slave narrative. Though these types of narrative share many similarities, "meta-slavery tales go beyond [neo-slave narratives] because they are not limited by the preexisting patterns of the slave narrative itself."¹⁹ The prefix "meta" emphasizes how the meta-slave narrative uses science fiction to distance itself from historical accounts of slavery.²⁰ Lavender explains how Black authors have used the distance—or estrangement—of science fiction to create "alternative realities and unfamiliar humanity" and show how slavery fractures society.²¹

In a similar vein, scholar of African American literature, A. Timothy Spaulding, uses the term "postmodern slave narrative" to differentiate contemporary slave narratives that do not rely on realism to explore historical narratives. According to Spaulding, postmodern slave narratives "use the fantastic to occupy the past, the present, and, in some cases, the future simultaneously" instead of simply focusing on the historical context of slavery.²² Both the meta-slave narrative and the postmodern slave narrative emphasize the distance of the narrative from the literal

¹⁸ Avery Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*, New University of Minnesota Press Edition, Kindle Edition (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 150.

¹⁹ Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 63.

²⁰ Lavender, 53.

²¹ Lavender, 59-60.

²² A. Timothy Spaulding, *Re-Forming the Past: History, the Fantastic, and the Postmodern Slave Narrative* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 2005), 5.

historical events of slavery, focusing less on telling a true story of American slavery and more on re-forming and re-remembering history.

Often overlapping with the genres of Black science fiction or speculative fiction, the genre of Afrofuturism provides another way for authors to reimagine Black futures. Coined by cultural critic Mark Dery in 1994, Afrofuturism is a genre in which Black writers can explore modern problems through the process of an “African-American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future.”²³ In *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, Isiah Lavender III and science fiction studies professor Lisa Yaszek provide an updated definition of Afrofuturism: “a multigenerational, multi-genre aesthetic and social movement that responds to/engages with social media and Web 2.0” in which Black artists, authors, and scholars reorganize “time and space in their work to challenge whitewashed narratives of history and imagine futures in full color.”²⁴ They emphasize the shifting, pliable nature of Afrofuturism, and use the term in lieu of more specific and niche terms such as Africanfuturism, Steamfunk, and Astrocentrism, as works in these genres still fit within the definition of the Afrofuturist project²⁵ presented by Lavender III and Yaszek. In the same book, Sheree R. Thomas explains that Black women are at the forefront of Afrofuturism. Black women Afrofuturists, often blending science fiction and fantasy, have created works with fully-realized Black women protagonists who often rely on intergenerational knowledges and survival

²³ Mark Dery, “Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Trician Rose,” in *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, ed. Mark Dery (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1994), 180.

²⁴ Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, “Introduction: Imagining Futures in Full Color,” in *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 7.

²⁵ Lavender III and Yaszek, “Introduction,” 6-7.

techniques.²⁶ Such survival techniques were essential for during the period of American enslavement.

Racialization and Dehumanization

In their book *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, American sociologists Michael Omi and Howard Winant define racial formation as “the process by which social, economic, and political forces determine the content and importance of racial categories, and by which they are in turn shaped by racial meaning.”²⁷ Further, Omi and Winant describe racialization as the ideological and historically specific process of extending “racial meaning to a previously unclassified relationship, social practice, or group.”²⁸ The authors indicate the importance of so-called “common sense” in spreading and maintaining racial differences, leading to a set of complex, often unspoken rules of “racial etiquette” that guide how one can act in the world.²⁹ Racial formation and the belief in racial “common sense” and “etiquette” accelerated during slavery, but the effects last into the present.

Many scholars have noted how white supremacy and slavery linked enslaved Black people to animals, one step in the process of racialization that supported United States slavery. In her book *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Jennifer L. Morgan, professor of social and cultural analysis and history, discusses the contradiction between slaveowners seeing enslaved African Americans as animals while also not being able to

²⁶ Sheree R Thomas, “Dangerous Muses: Black Women Writers Creating at the Forefront of Afrofuturism,” in *Literary Afrofuturism in the Twenty-First Century*, ed. Isiah Lavender III and Lisa Yaszek, New Suns: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Speculative (Columbus, OH: Ohio State University Press, 2020), 44.

²⁷ Michael Omi and Howard Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States: From the 1960s to the 1980s*, Critical Social Thought (New York, NY: Routledge, 1989), 61.

²⁸ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 64.

²⁹ Omi and Winant, 62.

“completely jettison their humanity.”³⁰ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, scholar of African diasporic literature, notes the same contradiction in her book *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*. She writes, “New World slavery established a field of demand that tyrannically presumed, as if by will alone, that the enslaved, in their humanity, could function as infinitely malleable lexical and biological matter, at once sub/super/human.”³¹ Jackson emphasizes that enslaved people’s humanity was not denied, but rather manipulated into a “state of abject *human* animality.”³² This view of Black people as both human and Other was a step in the process of racial formation in the United States, as Black people had these contradictory traits assigned to them.

One author who discusses the effects of slavery on the present is Black studies professor Christina Sharpe. In her book *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Sharpe uses the metaphor of “the wake”—a disturbance in the water/air, a state of wakefulness, a wake or vigil—to describe the effects of slavery on Black people today. Sharpe writes, “to be *in* the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery’s as yet unresolved unfolding.”³³ Sharpe’s metaphor of being in the wake of slavery could be used to describe living in the aftermath and continuing process of the racialization that upheld slavery. Similarly, in a critique of the request to “get over” slavery, African American Studies professor Calvin Warren describes slavery as something that cannot be temporized because “certain forms of violence never die but

³⁰ Jennifer L. Morgan, *Laboring Women: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*, Early American Studies (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004), 119.

³¹ Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, *Becoming Human: Matter and Meaning in an Antiracist World*, Sexual Cultures (New York, NY: New York University Press, 2020), 47.

³² Jackson, *Becoming Human*, 47.

³³ Christina Elizabeth Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being*, Kindle Edition (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 13.

are continually regenerated, reborn, and reincarnated.”³⁴ Both Sharpe and Warren point to the fact of slavery not as a distant historical event, but as something that continues to fracture the present. Sharpe writes, “In the wake, the past that is not past reappears, always, to rupture the present.”³⁵ In *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin uses the estrangement of the science fiction genre to explore themes of racialization applied to a fictional magical group, drawing parallels to American plantation slavery and the processes of racialization and dehumanization.

Reproductive Control and Motherhood Under Slavery and Beyond

Colonial powers have long used reproductive control to demean and dehumanize the people they oppress, and this is perhaps best exemplified by the systematic control of Black women’s reproduction under American chattel slavery. In her book, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, Dorothy E. Roberts—scholar of race, gender, and law—explores the history of the dehumanization and reproductive control of Black women in the United States. She explains that, after the US banned the importation of slaves in 1808, reproduction became the way that slave masters ensured a continued supply of slave labor. Black women’s bodies served as both producers and reproducers—slaveholders forced them to endure the violent work conditions in the field while, at the same time, bearing children to create the next generation of enslaved people.³⁶ In her book *Women, Race, and Class*, author and activist Angela Y. Davis adds that, though Black women’s fertility was valued, it is a mistake to believe this granted them the respected status of motherhood. Instead, they were seen as “animals whose

³⁴ Calvin Warren, “Black Time: Slavery, Metaphysics, and the Logic of Wellness,” in *The Psychic Hold of Slavery: Legacies in American Expressive Culture*, ed. Soyica Diggs Colbert, Robert J. Patterson, and Aida Levy-Hussen (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 59.

³⁵ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

¹⁹ Dorothy E. Roberts, *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, 1st Edition (New York, NY: Pantheon Books, 1997), 25-26.

monetary value could be precisely calculated in terms of their ability to multiply their numbers.”³⁷

Despite this financial incentive to control Black women’s reproduction, both Roberts and Davis warn against believing that economics was the only factor. Roberts writes that dominating Black women’s reproduction was “the most effective means of subjugating enslaved women, of denying them the power to govern their own bodies and to determine the course of their own destinies.”³⁸ By forcing enslaved women to have children, slaveholders enacted sexual violence meant to dehumanize Black women and remind them of their position in society. Davis further explains that sexual violence and rape “was an uncamouflaged expression of the slaveholder’s economic mastery and the overseer’s control over Black women as workers.”³⁹ The dehumanization that enslaved women experienced through forced breeding and sexual violence is an often-explored topic in neo-, meta-, and postmodern slave narratives, since the historical narratives of these Black women have been largely ignored and erased by history.

One way reproductive control dehumanized enslaved Black women was the denial of motherhood. As Davis explains, Black women were not considered mothers but “breeders,” with no legal claim or authority over their children.⁴⁰ Author and historian Crystal Lynn Webster writes, “Slaveholders threatened or entirely rejected African American’s kinship ties through the sale of enslaved children...to inflate their pocket-books...[and] also to inflict psychological trauma on enslaved families in attempts to sever maternal-child bonds.”⁴¹ Dorothy Roberts goes further and says that the law ensured the master-slave bond existed prior to the mother-child

³⁷ Angela Y. Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, First Vintage Books Ed (New York: Random House, Inc., 1983), 7.

³⁸ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 55.

³⁹ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 7.

⁴⁰ Davis.

⁴¹ Crystal Lynn Webster, “In Pursuit of Autonomous Womanhood: Nineteenth-Century Black Motherhood in the U.S. North,” *Slavery & Abolition* 38, no. 2 (April 3, 2017): 435.

bond.⁴² Jennifer L. Morgan also explores the tension between slaveowners acknowledging parent-child bonds by using phrases such as “her child,” while also using inheritance and ownership to break those bonds. Differing slightly from Davis and Roberts, Morgan says that this contradiction shows how “African Americans were [seen as] animals yet [slaveowners] could not completely jettison their humanity.”⁴³ Enslaved women thus had to navigate a complex set of contradictions, fears, and desires surrounding childbirth and motherhood.⁴⁴

One way in which enslaved women exercised their humanity and control over their reproductive futures—though a relatively rare occurrence—was through escaping to maroon communities. Davis briefly discusses the importance of maroon communities in the South as critical sources of community and resistance for both fugitive slaves and those still on plantations.⁴⁵ In her article “‘Rejoice! Your wombs will not beget slaves!’ Marronnage as Reproductive Justice in Colonial Haiti,” professor of Africana studies, Crystal Eddins, explores marronnage as an act of reproductive justice, in which enslaved pregnant women and mothers chose to brave the perils of running away to gain a measure of control over their own bodies, children, and families. Eddins considers marronnage to be a “process of reclamation—of runaways’ physical bodies, time, energy, relationships, as well as their value as commodified labourers.”⁴⁶ These organic acts of reproductive justice are largely missing from the historical record, teased out by Eddins through a subversive reading of runaway slave advertisements. By piecing together the bits of archival evidence, Eddins shows how enslaved women fought to have, not have, or keep their children, who “had intrinsic value to their families and were an

⁴² Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*.

⁴³ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 119.

⁴⁴ Morgan.

⁴⁵ Davis, 22.

⁴⁶ Crystal Eddins, “‘Rejoice! Your Wombs Will Not Beget Slaves!’ Marronnage as Reproductive Justice in Colonial Haiti,” *Gender & History* 32, no. 3 (October 2020): 572.

important part of biological and fictive kin structures, which, in the midst of constant death, enslaved people and maroons went out of their way and even risked their lives to preserve and nurture.”⁴⁷ Maroon communities were an important way that enslaved women were able to enact control and agency over their own lives.

As fictionally depicted in Morrison’s *Beloved*, some enslaved mothers resorted to infanticide to resist the grip of slavery. As Roberts points out, we will not ever know how many enslaved women killed their children either as resistance to or to protect them from slavery; the historical record in that regard is unreliable. Some cases of infanticide may have happened without being recorded, and many recorded cases were false accusations.⁴⁸ Davis provides the story of fugitive slave Margaret Garner, who killed her daughter to save her from how women suffer as slaves.⁴⁹ Regardless, both Davis and Roberts note the existence of infanticide under slavery. Though rare, Roberts says that infanticide may have been seen as “a more humane fate for her baby than the living hell of slavery.”⁵⁰

These experiences of reproductive control, as well as the ways in which enslaved women resisted such control, are missing from the historical narrative. Thus, these themes are fertile ground for Black science fiction, speculative fiction, and Afrofuturism. As a genre that allows writers to rewrite history and fill in the historical narrative, Black authors such as Toni Morrison, Octavia Butler, and N.K. Jemisin have used their novels to explore the internal worlds of enslaved Black women.

⁴⁷ Eddins, “Marronnage as Reproductive Justice,” 572.

⁴⁸ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 50.

⁴⁹ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 21.

⁵⁰ Roberts, 49.

Conclusion

My feminist literary analysis of *The Fifth Season* will explore the neo-slave narrative and themes of dehumanization, racialization, and reproductive control. The bodies of knowledge discussed in this literature review are important to contextualize my analysis and craft my argument: N.K. Jemisin uses the estrangement of a neo-slave narrative to explore the possible internal experiences of enslaved women lost to history.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The Fifth Season is set on a nearly unrecognizable version of Earth—called the Stillness—that undergoes an apocalyptic geologic event every few thousand years. Certain people, called orogenes, are born with the ability to control the kinetic energies of the Earth. Though they are widely feared and met with violence and discrimination, orogenes are crucial for maintaining society in the face of a restless planet and, thus, are tightly controlled by those in power. The novel follows an orogene in three phases of her life—the timid child Damaya, the headstrong young adult Syenite, and the weathered woman Essun—as she comes to terms with her enslavement and begins to search for more. In *The Fifth Season*, N. K. Jemisin uses the defamiliarization/estrangement of the science-fiction/fantasy genre to craft a meta-slave narrative that addresses themes of reproductive control, racialization, and dehumanization. As a parallel to Black Americans living under American plantation slavery and discriminatory policy, I argue that Jemisin uses Essun’s story to explore the themes of reproductive control, racialization, and dehumanization and how they fracture identities, families, and societies. This analysis will first examine *The Fifth Season* in relation to conventions of the Black science fiction genre and identify elements of its neo-/meta-slave narrative. Then, I will explore how institutions and racialized “common sense” in the novel lead to dehumanization and erode the identities of those caught in the crosshairs. Finally, I discuss the novel’s exploration of systemic reproductive control and how it further dehumanizes the oppressed group and fractures their lives and identities. Utilizing the science fiction genre’s distance from reality, Jemisin incorporates these themes and gives a new perspective for conceptualizing the lost narratives of history.

Black Science Fiction and Neo-/Meta-Slave Narratives

As previously stated, a neo-slave narrative is a work of fiction by a contemporary Black author that uses characteristics of slave narratives alongside fantasy or fable elements to reinterpret the past and connect to the present.⁵¹ Literary scholar Isiah Lavender III expands on this idea of the neo-slave narrative with his definition of a meta-slave narrative. He says that “meta-slavery tales go beyond [neo-slave narratives] because they are not limited by the preexisting patterns of the slave narrative itself.”⁵² Meta-slave narratives use the distance from reality, or estrangement, of the science fiction genre to explore how slavery fractures society through an altered lens.

The Fifth Season by N.K. Jemisin is a science fiction fantasy novel and fits within Lavender’s definition of a meta-slave narrative. The setting of the novel is highly separated from that of contemporary society; the Earth of the Stillness is barely recognizable as a version of our own. Additionally, racial categories as we know them do not exist in the world of *The Fifth Season*. Though most characters are described to be phenotypically Black, their skin color is not what creates racial divide in the Stillness. Instead, Jemisin crafts an allegory in which “orogenes” are akin to Black people who are enslaved or oppressed under white supremacy in America. By using a science fiction creation to explore racialization, dehumanization, and reproductive control, Jemisin creates a distance from the literal historical events of slavery and crafts a meta-slave narrative. Within that distance, she can explore these themes through a new lens, potentially giving readers a new way to conceptualize the forgotten personal narratives of history.

⁵¹ Lavender, *Race in American Science Fiction*, 57.

⁵² Lavender, 63.

Dehumanization and Racialization

Misalem and Shemshena

At the beginning of the novel, when Damaya—Essun’s name as a child—is discovered to be an orogene, her family turns on her and reports her to the Fulcrum—the government organization that takes in and trains orogene children to use as tools. A Guardian—someone tasked with controlling orogenes by any means necessary—named Schaffa comes to take her from her family and transport her to the Fulcrum for training.

While traveling, Damaya is still trying to figure out how she fits into the world as an orogene; she does not yet identify with the concept since she just discovered her powers. To help, Schaffa tells her the ancient story of Misalem and Shemshena. As the story goes, Misalem, an evil orogene, conspired to overthrow the Emperor of Sanze—the most recent colonizing power in the Stillness—and spread death and destruction. Shemshena—the Emperor’s bodyguard and fabled first Guardian—defeats this evil orogene. This story sets up Shemshena as a valiant hero and Misalem as the out-of-control, evil-by-nature orogene. Schaffa tells Damaya this story, knowing that she will first see herself in Shemshena.

While he told it, she imagined herself as Shemshena, bravely facing a terrible foe and defeating him with cleverness and skill. With every *you* and *your* that Schaffa speaks, however, she begins to understand: He does not see her as a potential Shemshena.⁵³

Through telling this story, Schaffa slowly puts Damaya in her place. It serves as both a story of the inherent evil of orogenes, and as a lesson that she herself is one of those evil orogenes. While listening to the story, Damaya thinks:

Orogenes, then. It is terrible to know that orogenes can kill so many, so easily. But then, she supposes that is why people hate them.
Her. That is why people hate *her*.⁵⁴

⁵³ N. K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 1st Edition, The Broken Earth Trilogy (New York, NY: Orbit, 2015), 92-93.

⁵⁴ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 89.

This moment represents the first time Damaya associates herself with the dehumanizing rhetoric about orogenes she has heard all of her life. Until her powers were discovered, Damaya was a regular human child, so Schaffa uses the story of Misalem and Shimshena to explain that she is no longer human nor a child. She must reframe her view of herself and the world through the lens of her newly discovered identity as an orogene, or else she risks punishment or death from her Guardian.

Finally, this story also explains Damaya's place in relation to the Guardians. Schaffa says:

“We train,” he says again, “as Shemshena did. We learn how orogenic power works, and we find ways to use this knowledge against you. We watch for those among your kind who might become the next Misalems, and we eliminate them. The rest we take care of.” He leans over to smile at her again, but Damaya does not smile back this time. “I am your Guardian now, and it is my duty to make certain you remain helpful, never harmful.”⁵⁵

The story perfectly encapsulates how Schaffa wants Damaya to understand the world and her place in it. She is not a human child; she is an evil orogene. She is a tool. The only way she can avoid following in Misalem's terrible footsteps is to serve the Fulcrum. Using this story, Schaffa starts the long process of crushing Damaya's identity to form her into the perfect enslaved subject—someone who will not hope for better because they have been taught that better cannot exist. Jemisin writes, “But Damaya understands now that the world is not fair. They are orogenes, the Misalems of the world, born cursed and terrible. This is what is necessary to make them safe”⁵⁶ Damaya internalizes the idea that she is not a child; she is an orogene, and thus, she must deserve the terrible treatment she endures.

Similarly to how Omi and Winant describe racial “common sense” as a large factor in spreading racialization during US slavery,⁵⁷ people in the Stillness often rely on old stories,

⁵⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 93.

⁵⁶ Jemisin, 193.

⁵⁷ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 62.

called “stonelore,” and other types of “common sense” to guide how they treat orogenes. The story of Misalem and Shemshena happened tens of thousands of years before the events of the novel, yet it is still a widespread story used to control orogenes and instill fear in Stills (non-orogenes). The story also dehumanizes orogenes, painting them as ruthlessly evil and violent for no apparent reason. It shows orogenes as requiring enslavement to live in peace; it gives them no other way to move forward. Be a tool of the state or die. The story of Misalem and Shemshena shows that there is no humanity to be found in orogenes, just danger or usefulness.

Knowledge is produced in a way that benefits the dominant group. Historically, white slaveowners such as Thomas Jefferson, Samuel Cartwright, and Thomas Hamilton used their academic accolades, scientific expertise, and political clout to create and perpetuate the idea that Black people are biologically different. For example, in a section of his book, *Notes on the State of Virginia*, titled “Laws” (Query XIV), Jefferson gives an exhaustive description of the supposed biological differences between white and Black people. He writes that Black people are inherently irresponsible and lazy, cannot control their urges, and are incapable of deep thought, among a slew of other degrading claims.⁵⁸ In a similar way, those in power in the Stillness—led primarily by the Guardians—use stories and “common sense” observations to paint all orogenes as evil, conniving, and in need of control.

Damaya quickly incorporates herself into strict order of the Fulcrum, moving up the ranks in her training. When Damaya earns her first out of ten rings—a mark of the skill and control of a Fulcrum orogene—she chooses the name Syenite. Once she reaches four rings, she is assigned a ten-ringed mentor, the most powerful orogene in the Fulcrum, Alabaster. During their

⁵⁸ Thomas Jefferson, “‘Laws’ (Query XIV) (1781-1782),” in *The Nature of Difference: Sciences of Race in the United States from Jefferson to Genomics*, ed. Evelyn Maxine Hammonds and Rebecca M. Herzig (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2008), 25-26.

time together, Alabaster mentors Syenite, not just in orogeny but also in being an orogene. He prods her to think beyond what she has been told. He pushes her to question the “common sense” she has been taught her entire life. After a routine Fulcrum mission goes catastrophically wrong, Alabaster and Syenite escape to the island of Meov, where they find two years of peace before their pasts catch up to them. During their many conversations on Meov, they discuss the story of Misalem and Shemshena again. Alabaster says:

“My Guardian gave me that nonsense, too, Syen. The monstrous Misalem, who decided to declare war against a whole nation and off the Sanzed Emperor for no particular reason.”

In spite of herself, Syenite frowns. “He had a reason?”

... “The simplest and most powerful reason of all: revenge.”⁵⁹

Alabaster explains that Misalem was seeking revenge for his family, who had been decimated by the then-growing Sanzed Empire. Instead of his revenge being seen as a failed attempt at dismantling a corrupt system, it is forever remembered as the reason for orogenes’ enslavement. Jemisin writes, “But a rogga is not any man. Roggas have no right to get angry, to want justice, to protect what they love. For his presumption, Shemshena had killed him—and became a hero for doing it.”⁶⁰ To make his point about the dehumanization and violence behind the story of Misalem and Shemshena, Alabaster uses the word “rogga,” a slur for orogenes. As previously discussed, this story shaped Syenite’s sense of self as a child—as Damaya—as she navigated a new identity and world. When Syenite/Damaya finds out later in life and later in the novel that this foundational story is not entirely true, punctuated by Alabaster’s use of “rogga,” it shakes her worldview. Alabaster’s reframing of the story brings into question everything Syenite has been taught about orogenes and the justifications for their dehumanization.

⁵⁹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 416.

⁶⁰ Jemisin, 418.

As this story suggests, the theme of a long-forgotten past impacting the present is strong in *The Fifth Season*. Christina Sharpe's *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* provides a way to explore this theme in relation to US slavery. In her book, Sharpe uses the metaphor of "the wake"—the ripples left by a passing ship, a disturbance to the air, a state of wakefulness or remembrance⁶¹—to examine how slavery still affects Black Americans in the present. She writes, "to be in the wake is to occupy and be occupied by the continuous and changing present of slavery's as yet unresolved unfolding."⁶² Essun/Syenite/Damaya and all other orogenes are caught in the wake of the long history of their racialization and dehumanization. The "common sense" of the Stillness is that orogenes must be enslaved or killed, and the wake of this long history of enslavement fractures the lives of all orogenes. Damaya's personal sense of self is fractured by Schaffa's telling of Misalem and Shemshena, as she comes to terms with the way the world sees her as less-than-human. Immediately after telling her the story, Schaffa breaks Damaya's hand to make a point about how he controls her every response, even her instinctual response to pain. This literal fracturing of bone drives home the point that Damaya's present is being shattered by the "past not yet past,"⁶³ as she now must repress her true wants and needs in favor of behaving how the Guardians want. Later, Syenite's identity is further fractured as Alabaster reveals the propagandistic purpose behind the story of Misalem and Shemshena, shattering the view of herself she internalized at the Fulcrum.

⁶¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 21.

⁶² Sharpe, 13.

⁶³ Sharpe, 13.

Stonelore

As previously mentioned, along with stories such as Misalem and Shemshena, the people of the Stillness rely on something called “stonelore” to guide their interactions with orogenes. Stonelore is a set of stories, histories, advice, and warnings that were carved into stone tablets thousands of years ago by previous human civilizations. Stonelore is often survival-based, telling people in future generations what worked to survive during a Season—an apocalyptic environmental or geological event that makes the Earth less hospitable for a long period of time. No one remembers when stonelore was written, but it is considered infallible and absolute. Aside from telling stories of survival, however, stonelore also warns of the inherent evil and untrustworthiness of orogenes. In this way, it, too, operates as a type of “racial common sense,” as Omi and Winant describe.⁶⁴ The way orogenes are to be seen and treated is literally set in stone in the Stillness.

When Alabaster and Syenite are traveling together, he explains to her how stonelore operates to continue their oppression. He says, “They kill us because they’ve got stonelore telling them at every turn that we’re born evil—some agents of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human.”⁶⁵ Stonelore enshrines the dehumanization, racialization, and oppression of orogenes, once again showing how “the past that is not the past reappears, always, to fracture the present.”⁶⁶ Long-dead rulers set their views in stone and guaranteed the perpetuation of enslavement for as long as stonelore is believed.

Another important moment in Syenite’s understanding of her own oppression happens during this conversation with Alabaster:

⁶⁴ Omi and Winant, *Racial Formation in the United States*, 62.

⁶⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 124.

⁶⁶ Sharpe, *In the Wake*, 9.

“We pass down the stonelore,” Alabaster says, sitting up, “but we never try to remember anything about what’s already been tried, what else might have worked.”

“Because it *didn’t* work. Those people died. We’re still alive. Our way is right, theirs was wrong.”

...“I realize you only have the education the Fulcrum gave you, but think, will you? Survival doesn’t mean *rightness*. I could kill you right now, but that wouldn’t make me a better person for doing so.”⁶⁷

Through stonelore, the empire in the Stillness convinces everyone—even orogenes—that the current way is the only way. There is no possibility for a better future; this is just the way things have to be. On Meov, Alabaster urges Syenite to think beyond stonelore as “common sense” and to see it as it really is: malleable and shaped by those in power to maintain that power. This parallels the way that racism and slavery in the United States were not just rigidly enshrined into law but were accepted as “common sense” by white people who benefited from the system. Additionally, it shows how categories such as race—or, in the case of *The Fifth Season*, human and nonhuman—have fluid definitions that shift to benefit whoever currently holds power.

Useful Monsters

During Syenite’s first couple of weeks with Alabaster, he insists on visiting a node station, something he says all orogenes should do. Node stations are outposts throughout the Stillness, each staffed by a Fulcrum orogene, called a node maintainer, tasked with quelling geologic activity and preventing earthquakes. Not knowing what to expect, Syenite is horrified by the truth of the node maintainers: they are orogenes who cannot control themselves to the Fulcrum’s liking, sedated to be used for their raw power. As Syenite takes in the sight of the node maintainer—an unconscious child tied to a chair—Alabaster says, “Even the least of us must serve the greater good.”⁶⁸ He explains:

⁶⁷ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 124.

⁶⁸ Jemisin, 139.

“Sometimes a rogga can’t learn control... The Fulcrum tries to teach them for a while, but if the children don’t develop at a pace the Guardians think is appropriate, Mother Sanze can always find another use for them.”⁶⁹

In the Stillness, orogenes are not considered human; the only value society sees in them is their usefulness as a tool. Even orogene children are not seen the same as the children of Stills; it is completely acceptable to those in power for orogene children to be stripped of their humanity and turned into a tool to be controlled. As Syenite is coming to this realization, Alabaster says:

“You think you matter?” All at once he smiles. It’s an ugly thing, cold as the vapor that curls off ice. “You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not.” He jerks his head toward the body of the abused, murdered child. “You think he mattered, after what they did to him? The only reason they don’t do this to all of us is because we’re more versatile, more useful, if we control ourselves. But each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking *rogga*.”⁷⁰

Syenite has been living in ignorance to the way orogenes are normally treated in society. Though she has experienced unimaginable trauma, Syenite’s skills have shielded her from the worst the Fulcrum has to offer. Visiting the node station is perhaps the most important step in Syenite’s journey toward understanding her oppression. Prior to seeing the horrible conditions of the node maintainer, Syenite had some pride in conforming to Fulcrum standards and rising through the ranks. By showing her the node station, Alabaster crushes Syenite’s long-held assumptions about the Fulcrum, showing it for what it is—a violent, oppressive institution. Like enslaved people under US plantation slavery, orogenes are primarily valued for their labor and usefulness.

⁶⁹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 140.

⁷⁰ Jemisin, 143.

Reproductive Control

Fulcrum Breeding

While orogenes are oppressed and feared, they are also needed to maintain the remnants of the Sanze Empire. To control and maintain the supply of orogenes, the Fulcrum pairs powerful orogenes together to breed and create the next generation. As a promising young orogene, Syenite is assigned to have a child with Alabaster—the most powerful orogene in the Fulcrum. Though no one says so explicitly, Syenite knows that fulfilling her assignment to reproduce is the only way to continue rising through the Fulcrum ranks. The senior orogene who gives her the assignment, Feldspar, herself has six children, showing how normal forced breeding is in the Fulcrum. While grappling with her new assignment, Syenite thinks:

...well, orogenes have to prove themselves reliable. The Fulcrum has a reputation to maintain; that's part of this. So's the training, and the uniform, and the endless rules they must follow, but the breeding is part of it, too, or why is she here? It's somewhat flattering to think that despite her feral status, they actually want something of her infused into their breeding lines. Then she wonders why a part of her is trying to find value in degradation.⁷¹

The forced breeding in the Fulcrum does not just ensure the supply of orogenes, it also maintains the iron grip the Fulcrum has on its inhabitants. This speaks to the conditions Black women faced living under US slavery. As described by Angela Y. Davis in *Women, Race & Class*, though Black women's fertility was valued, they were not granted the respected status of motherhood.⁷² Though orogenes are forced to breed, they do not get to raise their children; instead, they are handed over to be raised by the Fulcrum.⁷³ Dorothy E. Roberts, in *Killing the Black Body: Race, Reproduction, and the Meaning of Liberty*, writes that controlling Black women's reproduction and "denying them the power to govern their own bodies and to determine

⁷¹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 73.

⁷² Davis, *Women, Race & Class*.

⁷³ Jemisin, 75.

the course of their own destinies”⁷⁴ was an effective means of dehumanization and racialization during US slavery. Similarly, the Fulcrum continues its breeding practices to maintain control over all aspects of orogenes’ lives. Through the distance from historical events provided by the science fiction genre, N.K. Jemisin’s meta-slave narrative explores the effects reproductive control and forced breeding may have on enslaved women.

Node Maintainers

Though the Fulcrum’s forced breeding program is the most obvious sign of reproductive control in *The Fifth Season*, Jemisin also explores a more covert form of reproductive control: being unable to raise children in a safe environment. The extreme danger faced by orogene children and the total inability of their parents to protect them reinforces their dehumanized position. The best demonstrations of the dangers faced by orogene children re the node maintainers. When Alabaster takes Syenite to the node station and she sees the node maintainer for the first time, Jemisin writes:

But she sees the bigger picture, too, in spite of her effort to concentrate on the minutiae. The node maintainer: a *child*, kept like this for what must have been months or years. A child, whose skin is almost as dark as Alabaster’s, and whose features might be a perfect match for his if they weren’t so skeletal.⁷⁵

In the gaunt face of this node maintainer, Syenite sees one possible future for the child she is tasked to produce with Alabaster. If her child does not satisfy the Fulcrum, they will have their autonomy ripped away and be forced to live a horrible, torturous life as a node maintainer.

This complete lack of control over her child’s future brings to mind the experiences of enslaved women written about by Roberts, Davis, and Crystal Lynn Webster. By destroying

⁷⁴ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 55.

⁷⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 140.

African American's kinship ties, slaveholders not only profited but also inflicted "psychological trauma on enslaved families in attempts to sever maternal-child bonds."⁷⁶ Similarly, orogenes are forced to have children to benefit the Fulcrum while also knowing the danger those children will face. Through the estrangement/defamiliarization of a sci-fi meta-slave narrative, Jemisin uses orogenes to explore how enslaved women may have internally felt as they faced their children's uncertain futures.

Meov, Marronnage, and Reproductive Freedom

As previously mentioned, after this visit to the node maintainer Alabaster and Syenite are sent on a mission by the Fulcrum, which goes terribly wrong, resulting in Alabaster and Syenite's escape to the island of Meov. Meov is unlike anything Syenite and Alabaster have experienced before. On the most basic level, Meov defies conventional wisdom of where to build a community in the Stillness. The story's narrator says:

Notice, for example, that no one in the Stillness speaks of islands. This is not because islands do not exist or are uninhabited, quite the contrary. It is because islands tend to form near faults or atop hot spots... there with an eruption and gone with the next tsunami.⁷⁷

As it stands apart from the Stillness physically, ignoring thousands of years of stonelore, Meov also stands apart socially. The people of Meov openly accept orogenes, even seek them out as leaders, because they know how crucial orogenes are for surviving an unstable Earth—especially on an island. Meov gives Syenite a taste of a different way of life; a world in which she and other orogenes are not dominated and controlled, though are still needed for their abilities.

⁷⁶ Webster, "In Pursuit of Autonomous Womanhood," 425.

⁷⁷ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 150.

Meov evokes the maroon communities that existed during slavery. Since maroon communities were composed of mostly freed and escaped enslaved Africans, they could not always engage in legal trade. Instead, as Jemisin’s fictional Meov does, these communities often resorted to raiding to maintain crucial supplies. According to Crystal Eddins, professor of Africana studies, “Marronage, or escape from enslavement, was one tactic that women used to extricate themselves and their children from a life in bondage—at times with relative success.”⁷⁸ Though Syenite and Alabaster did not escape their bondage for the purposes of reproductive choice, a byproduct of their newfound freedom is the security to start and grow a family. By including an island akin to real-life maroon communities, Jemisin shows that even in the midst of so much oppression and violence, people resist. People search for and create new ways of living to escape an oppressive system.

Though Syenite and Alabaster are originally forced into a sexual relationship by the Fulcrum, they continue to have a complicated relationship while living together on Meov, one she later describes as “less than lovers and more than friends.”⁷⁹ The two mutually fall in love with the swarthy pirate leader of Meov, Innon, a “feral” orogene—one never trained by the Fulcrum. In Innon, Syenite sees that it is possible for an orogene to survive and thrive without the control of the Guardians and the violence of the Fulcrum. In this environment, where Syenite finally finds a modicum of love and freedom, she gives birth to her and Alabaster’s son—Corundum, or Coru—and two years of peace and relative freedom pass. Alabaster and Syenite discuss having another child, with Alabaster suggesting Innon father the child, to be raised by all three of them.

⁷⁸ Eddins, “Marronage as Reproductive Justice,” 563.

⁷⁹ N. K. Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate*, 1st Edition, The Broken Earth Trilogy (New York, NY: Orbit, 2016), 12.

Syenite shakes her head, but she's thinking about the little pessary the island women have shown her how to use. Thinking maybe she will stop using it. But she says: "Freedom means we get to control what we do now. No one else."

After finding relative peace, Syenite's views on motherhood have shifted. Where before she was forced to try to get pregnant with Alabaster's child and feared for their child's potential future as a node maintainer, the safety of Meov gives Syenite the freedom and security to make reproductive choices for herself. With the knowledge that any child she has on Meov will grow up surrounded by a welcoming community, loving parents, and a safe environment, Syenite lets her guard down and allows herself to hope and plan for the future.

Fractured Families, Fractured Identities

The Fifth Season both begins and ends with the death of one of Essun/Syenite's children, suggesting the centrality of reproductive control to Jemisin's novel. At the end of the novel, the Fulcrum tracks down Alabaster and Syenite, unwilling to let them live after their escape. Coru, their child, has the potential to be an extremely powerful orogene like his father, and the Guardians will not let them live in peace. As the Guardians begin to close in on them, and Alabaster becomes incapacitated, he makes Syenite promise the Fulcrum will never take Coru, saying "You know what they'll do to him, Syen. A child that strong, my child, raised outside the Fulcrum? You know,"⁸⁰ referring to the terrible fates of the node maintainers. Cornered by a group of Guardians, Syenite witnesses Innon's murder and finally recognizes one of the Guardians—Schaffa, here to take her and her child back to the Fulcrum. As he advances on her, reaching for Coru and insisting on her total obedience, Syenite makes a choice that nearly destroys her. As Jemisin writes, "she will not let them take him, enslave him, turn his body into a

⁸⁰ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 433.

tool and his mind into a weapon and his life into a travesty of freedom.”⁸¹ Syenite, sobbing and screaming, smothers Coru and uses her orogeny to destroy the island.

Syenite chose her name because it is a type of rock that does not break under heat and pressure but grows stronger. When she chose that name, she vowed to be stronger, to endure.⁸²

But, as the narrator says after Syenite decides to kill Coru:

Even the hardest stone can fracture. It just takes the right force, applied at the right juncture of angles... 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.⁸³

Losing Innon and Alabaster and being forced to kill Coru destroys Syenite’s identity. Even the strongest person will break under such loss, violence, and grief. She loses herself, and finally becomes Essun, who we meet at the beginning of the novel in the midst of another child loss.

According to Dorothy Roberts, “Infanticide was the most extreme form of slave mothers’ resistance. Some enslaved women killed their newborns to keep them from living as chattel.”⁸⁴ Though infanticide was not common, it may have been a final act of desperation to keep their children from the horrors of slavery. In the final moments before Coru’s death, Syenite thinks, “Better that a child never have lived at all than live as a slave. Better that he die. Better that *she* die.”⁸⁵ Syenite uses what she thinks are her last moments to commit infanticide and save her child from the hands of the Fulcrum—a fate she considers worse than death. Similar to *Beloved* by Toni Morrison, *The Fifth Season*, through its meta-slave narrative, explores the impact that this violence has on enslaved women.

⁸¹ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 441.

⁸² Jemisin, 331.

⁸³ Jemisin, 440-441.

⁸⁴ Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 48.

⁸⁵ Jemisin, 441.

In an interview with *Wired*, N. K. Jemisin states that this part of her novel was influenced by the same historical figure that inspired *Beloved*—Margaret Garner⁸⁶—an escaped enslaved woman who killed her daughter instead of allowing the slavecatchers to take her back into bondage⁸⁷. In *Beloved*, Morrison uses elements of folklore and fable to fictionally explore the complex life and decisions made by a woman like Garner. After escaping slavery with her family, Sethe—*Beloved*'s protagonist—has a brief respite of freedom before the sheriff and slavecatcher find her. Rather than let her children be taken back into slavery, she attempts to kill them, succeeding in killing her infant daughter. When describing the act, she says, “I took and put my babies where they’d be safe,”⁸⁸ showing how an enslaved woman may have believed death was better for their children than a life of slavery. In “The Site of Memory,” Toni Morrison explains that her purpose as a writer is to “rip that veil drawn over ‘proceedings too terrible to relate.’”⁸⁹ Through a different genre of fiction, Jemisin similarly exposes and explores the decisions enslaved people—especially mothers—must have made when placed in such a cruel and violent position.

In *The Fifth Season*, the end of the novel is in fact a return to the beginning; highlighting the cycle of violence and anguish that comes in the wake of an oppressive system of slavery. The prologue begins ten years after Coru's death and shows how deeply the tragedy has affected Syenite—now the adult woman Essun. Essun is living in a community where no one, not even her husband, Jija, knows she is an orogene. That is, except for her children, who inherited Essun's orogeny and must also keep the secret from their community and their own father. It

⁸⁶ Jason Kehe, “WIRED Book Club: Fantasy Writer N.K. Jemisin on the Weird Dreams That Fuel Her Stories,” WIRED, June 7, 2016, <https://www.wired.com/2016/06/wired-book-club-nk-jemisin/>.

⁸⁷ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 21.

⁸⁸ Toni Morrison, *Beloved*, 193.

⁸⁹ Toni Morrison, “The Site of Memory,” in *Inventing the Truth: The Art and Craft of Memoir*, ed. William Zinsser, First Marnier Books Edition, Kindle Edition (New York, NY: Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1998), 191.

seems, after years of sorrow and aimless wandering, Essun has again allowed herself to pick up the broken pieces of her life and start a family. But, once again, tragedy and violence find her. On the first page of the novel, Essun walks into her living room to see the lifeless body of her son, Uche, murdered by his own father for being an orogene:

What she thinks then, and thereafter, is: *But he was free.*
And it is her bitter, weary self that answers this almost-question every time her
bewildered, shocked self manages to produce it:
*He wasn't. Not really. But now he will be.*⁹⁰

Even in the face of the death of another of her children, Essun immediately thinks of how now, at least, he is free. Once again, she is faced with the inevitability that the effects—the wake⁹¹—slavery will catch up to her and break apart her life and her family.

Angela Davis, Jennifer Morgan, and Dorothy Roberts all discuss the contradictory and complicated feelings Black women must have had about bearing children while enslaved. On the one hand, they often did not have a choice of what happened to their children or whether to have children in the first place. Under American plantation slavery, children inherited their mother's status as enslaved or free, so enslaved mothers had to see their children experience the brutal system of slavery. And, as Roberts writes, "Black women in bondage were systematically denied the rights of motherhood. Slavery so disrupted their relationship with their children that it may be more accurate to say that as far as slaveowners were concerned, they 'were not mothers at all.'"⁹² On the other hand, they also loved their children and "tried desperately and daily to maintain their family lives, enjoying as much autonomy as they could seize."⁹³ As Morgan states, "There is a degree to which the intimate lives of the enslaved simply will not emerge from the colonial

⁹⁰ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 1.

⁹¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake*.

⁹² Roberts, *Killing the Black Body*, 33.

⁹³ Davis, *Women, Race & Class*, 15.

archive.”⁹⁴ Into this knowledge gap steps neo-slave and meta-slave narratives—like *The Fifth Season* and *Beloved*—to reclaim and re-imagine the lost family experiences of enslaved women.

Through Syenite’s transformation into Essun and her subsequent reaction to Uche’s murder, Jemisin explores the contradiction of having and loving children under slavery. When Essun sees Uche’s dead body, she completely shuts down to avoid dealing with the death of another child. Instead, she channels her anger toward the citizens of her community, who now suspect she is an orogene and have begun to turn on her. Acting on instinct, Essun destroys part of the town, thinking, “These people killed Uche. Their hate, their fear, their unprovoked violence. They. (He.) Killed your son,”⁹⁵ before finally concluding “*I killed Uche. By being his mother. Stupid, stupid woman. Death was always here. Death is you.*”⁹⁶ Experiencing so much death and tragedy has fractured Essun’s identity, forcing her again and again to resort to violence to survive. She has accepted that it is her fault her children died; it is her fault for hoping to grow a family again after what happened with Coru. To be an orogene in the Stillness is to be in constant threat of violence, and Essun blames herself for bringing more children into such a world.

Conclusion

The Fifth Season by N.K. Jemisin is a complex story about life lived under an oppressive regime of slavery. Following one woman as she changes throughout her life—from Damaya to Syenite to Essun—the novel presents themes of racialization, dehumanization, and reproductive control and shows how deeply they affect both individuals and families. The introspection of Essun/Syenite/Damaya as she endures despite the circumstances is something missing from the

⁹⁴ Morgan, *Laboring Women*, 85.

⁹⁵ Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*, 58.

⁹⁶ Jemisin, 60.

historical record—the experiences of enslaved women were not historically valued. Thus, by crafting a meta-slave narrative in this fantastical, science-fiction world, Jemisin fleshes out what such an experience may have been like. And, like other and meta-slave narratives, the novel is able to use the distance of science fiction to remember, re-explore, and re-imagine a forgotten past.

Important to *The Fifth Season*'s exploration of racialization, dehumanization, and reproductive control is the circular structure of the narrative and the choice to present Essun/Syenite/Damaya as three distinct characters. The fact that, in the beginning, the reader does not know Essun/Syenite/Damaya are the same person, shows how profoundly the traumas in her life have affected her, literally fracturing her life into three parts. The transitions from one phase of her life to the next are marred with tragedy, leaving her with no choice but to rebuild her life as a new person with a new name. The circular story structure shows how the past always reemerges to impact the present; Essun/Syenite/Damaya continues to experience the same or similar violence and dehumanization. Over and over, she sees her children die, her family ripped apart, and people turn on her for being an orogene. She sees the worst of the world, but within her story she also sees some of the best. Despite all the heartbreak and despair, Essun/Syenite/Damaya finds Meov and gains perspective on a different way of life. This experience gives her a hesitant hope that other communities can, and probably have tried to, do the same. Hope and grief cycles through Essun/Syenite/Damaya's life, and Jemisin deftly uses this non-linear, circular storytelling to weave together temporally-distant, yet related, events in her life.

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