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The Fantasy of the Female:
Gender Representation
Through the Fantastic in Nora
K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth*

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DOCTORAL THESIS

**THE FANTASY OF THE FEMALE:
GENDER REPRESENTATION
THROUGH THE FANTASTIC IN
NORA K. JEMISIN'S *THE BROKEN
EARTH***

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INTERNATIONAL PHD SCHOOL OF THE UNIVERSITY OF SANTIAGO DE COMPOSTELA
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Título de la tesis: **The Fantasy of the Female: Gender Representation Through the Fantastic in Nora K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth**

INFORMA:

Que la presente tesis, se corresponde con el trabajo realizado por D/Dña **Sara González Bernárdez**, bajo mi dirección/tutorización, y autorizo su presentación, considerando que reúne los requisitos exigidos en el Reglamento de Estudios de Doctorado de la USC, y que como director/tutor de esta no incurre en las causas de abstención establecidas en la Ley 40/2015.

En **Santiago de Compostela, 29 de mayo de 2023**

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INDEX

ABSTRACT	11
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS	13
NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY	15
INTRODUCTION	17
HYPOTHESIS	19
OBJECTIVES	20
METHODOLOGY	20
CHAPTER 1: THE MIRROR OF REPRESENTATION	25
1.1 MIRRORING THE SELF	29
1.2 MIRRORING THE OTHER	31
CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY AS NARRATIVE	35
2.1 NARRATING THE SUBJECT	39
2.2 NARRATING THE OTHER	43
CHAPTER 3: FICTION AS THE MIRROR	51
3.1 THE FICTIONAL OTHER: (Mis)REPRESENTING WOMAN	58
3.2 THE FICTIONAL SUBJECT: REPRESENTING WOMAN	62
CHAPTER 4: FICTION AND THE READER	67
4.1 FICTION AND THE READER’S RESPONSE	67
4.2 FICTION AND THE EMPATHIC RESPONSE	71
4.3 THE LIMITATIONS OF NARRATIVE EMPATHY	77
CHAPTER 5: THE NARRATIVES OF FANTASY	83
5.1 THE CANONS OF FANTASY	97
CHAPTER 6: FANTASY AND/AGAINST REALITY	111
CHAPTER 7: THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NORA K. JEMISIN’S <i>THE BROKEN EARTH</i>	125
7.1 DAMAYA	128
7.2 SYENITE	132
7.3 ESSUN	142
7.4 ESSUN AS THE HEROINE	152
7.5 A WOMAN, A BLACK WOMAN, A BLACK OROGENE WOMAN	154
CHAPTER 8: SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION IN ANOTHER WORLD: JEMISIN’S USES OF FANTASY	165
8.1 SECONDARY-WORLD NARRATIVES OF OPPRESSION	170
8.2 OROGENY AND THE DYNAMIC OF THE MIRROR	173
CHAPTER 9: NASSUN, EUCATASTROPHE, AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE	187
9.1 LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: NASSUN AS ESSUN’S MIRROR	187
9.2 NASSUN AS THE ANTAGONIST	196
9.3 NASSUN AS THE HEROINE: BREAKING THE CYCLE	203
CONCLUSIONS	211
DISCUSSION OF RESULTS	211
WORKS CITED	217
APPENDIX: RESUMO	225

ABSTRACT

This thesis focuses on the representation of human subjectivity, and of marginalized identities in particular, through fantasy fiction. The main objective is to discern how, if at all, fantasy's particular affordances enhance or make possible the representation of an other (a marginal identity who has been denied a functional subjectivity) as a subject within the fiction.

To do so, the dissertation reviews philosophical and critical theories focused on identity and its relationship to narrative, which are linked through the running image of the mirror, in order to explain the importance of fictional representations for the process of individual identity construction. This theoretical framework supports the analysis of Nora K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy as an example of how fantasy can present alternatives to the ingrained primary-world structures and discourses of discrimination which shape individual identity.

Keywords: fantasy, fictional representation, otherness, Nora K. Jemisin, gender.

RESUMEN

Esta tesis se centra en la representación de la subjetividad humana, en particular la de identidades marginalizadas, a través de la ficción fantástica. El objetivo principal es discernir de qué maneras, de ser el caso, las características y posibilidades particulares del género fantástico realzan o posibilitan la representación de un otro (una identidad marginal a la que se le ha negado una subjetividad funcional) como sujeto dentro de la ficción.

Para ello, la tesis revisa teorías filosóficas y críticas, unificadas a través de la imagen del espejo, que se centran en la identidad personal y su relación con la narrativa. Ello explica la importancia que las representaciones ficticias tienen para el proceso de construcción de la identidad individual. Este marco teórico apoya el análisis de la trilogía *La Tierra Fragmentada*, de Nora K. Jemisin, como ejemplo de cómo la fantasía presenta alternativas a las estructuras y discursos discriminatorios del mundo primario que dan forma a la identidad individual.

Palabras clave: fantasía, representaciones ficticias, otredad, Nora K. Jemisin, género.

RESUMO

Esta tese céntrase na representación da subxectividade humana, particularmente a de identidades marxinais, a través da ficción fantástica. O obxectivo principal é discernir de que xeitos, de ser o caso, as posibilidades e características do xénero fantástico realzan ou posibilitan a representación dun outro (unha identidade marxinal á que se lle negou unha subxectividade funcional) como un suxeito dentro da ficción.

Para isto, a tese revisa teorías filosóficas e críticas, unidas a través da imaxe do espello, que se centran na identidade persoal e a súa relación coa narrativa. Isto explica a importancia que as representacións ficticias teñen para o proceso de construción da identidade individual. Este marco teórico serve de apoio para o análise da triloxía *A Terra Fragmentada*, de Nora K. Jemisin, como exemplo de como a fantasía presenta alternativas ás estruturas e discursos discriminatorios do mundo primario que dan forma á identidade individual.

Palabras chave: fantasía, representacións ficticias, outredade, Nora K. Jemisin, xénero.

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NOTES ON TERMINOLOGY

PRIMARY WORLD/PRIMARY REALITY

Employed indistinctly to refer to the so-called ‘real’ world, the specific reality that surrounds the readers and exists outside of fictional worlds, in order to avoid the connotations which the mimetic doctrine attaches to the word ‘real’ as pertaining to a single, objective reality. As such, the concepts ‘real’ and ‘reality’ are employed only in contrasting terms (as with fantasy/reality) or between single inverted commas.

SECONDARY WORLD

Employed, after Tolkien’s theory, to refer to fictional worlds — that is, the universes created through the fictional (in this case, literary) practice.

SUBJECT/OTHER

I employ this dichotomy instead of the more usual subject/object because, in being unrecognized by the norm as an individual in possession of subjectivity and agency, the social other is objectified within the subject’s perception and understood as object by the norm. By this definition, the subject is opposite to the other as the individual who is fully assimilated into the hegemonic sociocultural narratives, by and for whom the ideological discourses and the vast majority of fictional representations are created and addressed.

INTRODUCTION

The point is to develop an account of the world which treats our perspectives not as subjugated or disruptive knowledges, but as primary and constitutive of a different world.

(Nancy Hartsock)

The story of fantasy is one of reinvention. Against the presentation of realist literature as somehow superior or more legitimate due to fantasy's apparent disconnection from known reality, its use of imaginary (secondary, in Tolkien's terminology) worlds and events has recently been re-signified as potentiality. With the genre itself having undergone considerable changes over the centuries, this reconceptualization and development of what 'fantasy' is and means has managed to shift its usual perception. Recent critical and academic endeavours have argued that the ability of fantasy to explore different *what ifs*, which experiment with the tenets of known reality and even go beyond them, makes it a genre brimming with possibility. Additionally, the unfailing popularity of fantastic literature over the centuries, its stubborn persistence on best-selling book lists and its widespread, passionate fandoms, come as a symptom of the interest it holds for readers and writers alike. Such interest, I would argue, comes from the relevance which the stories of fantasy hold for readers and for the world in which they live.

It is this very sense of relevance, both cultural and social, which has inspired and driven this work forward. The ability of literature to represent — to create images of events, situations, and people — has been discussed as one of its greatest attractions, with argument being made for its particular capacity to enter “what one is estranged from” (Morrison 4). Such a capacity has, in fact, been at the core of many recent discussions regarding the possibility for authors to represent certain marginalized collectives, and their accountability for the images they create. Toni Morrison had already argued that, though an author “is not personally accountable for the acts of his fictive creatures, [...] he is responsible for them” (86) and, as such, writers must “take responsibility for *all* of the values they bring to their art” (xiii). The demand for more responsible representations of individuals and identities which have for a long time been relegated to the fringes of the norm is thus at the core of the present study, as fantasy in particular could, potentially, represent such identities at the centre instead of the margins. If, as Brian Attebery recently wrote, “[p]art of the cultural work of the fantastic is to tell us that things need not be the way they are” (*Fantasy* 3), then the genre does not so much explore possibilities as present *alternatives*. Very specifically, its representations constitute alternate imaginings of the ingrained structures and discourses of discrimination which shape primary reality and individual identity; and, in re-imagining them, fantasy may well deconstruct them. Nora Keita Jemisin, in a 2022 podcast interview with Ezra Klein, phrases it thus:



I think we're all painfully aware of climate change, and the encroachment of fascism, and the imminence of possible war, and all kinds of things like that everywhere. And we're looking for alternative viewpoints, alternative ways of being, I think, and ways of thinking.

And that can be good. In a way, it is revolutionary thought. If those thoughts don't take any turn into action, then even without the action revolutionary thought is a good thing. It is a way of imagining that the world can be different. (Klein 00:04:38-00:05:15)

This awareness of the revolutionary potential of the alternatives with which fantasy presents us is precisely where my interest on N. K. Jemisin's own fictional work stems from. This African American author has received such prestigious awards as the Nebula and the Locus, yet her largest achievement has been the winning of three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel, one for each of the books in *The Broken Earth* trilogy, which is the primary focus of this work. This marked both the first time a Black¹ author earned a Hugo Award as well as the first time any author at all managed to earn three in consecutive years, a feat which effectively cemented Jemisin's position as one of the most significant and most celebrated new voices in science fiction and fantasy. Her work in general focuses, very notably, on themes of conflict and oppression, yet she has been particularly praised for her emphasis on the depictions of Black women at the centre of her fictions.

This comes, of course, partly from Jemisin's own lived experience. Though she was born in Iowa, she spent her childhood in Mobile, Alabama, during the nineteen eighties. This meant that both herself and her family had first-hand experience of "the regimentation of Southern society, the quasi-suburban alienation, the racism" which characterized the United States and particularly the American South at the time (Khatchadourian). Violence against African Americans was common, and legal desegregation still very recent. Though Jemisin was herself an avid reader in childhood and already enjoyed science fiction and fantasy, it was impossible for her not to notice that there was hardly any fiction that "credibly represented someone like her" (Khatchadourian). Non-white authors were extremely difficult to find because their work was often published under pseudonyms, or else their treatment of race in their fiction was censored or otherwise concealed, so that Jemisin, despite wanting to write, "believed that a career in writing fantasy was closed to her, because of who she was" until rather late in her life (Khatchadourian). Furthermore, when literary opportunities first began to present themselves to Jemisin, she believed that the rejections she received — which argued an impossibility to fit her work into the market — were at least in part backed by the same sort of bigotry which writers before her, such as Samuel Delany or Octavia Butler, had had to endure. She expressed the rage she felt at the time in an interview with Raffi Khatchadourian:

I came very close to quitting [...]. I had a long dark tea-time of the soul, and basically somewhere in there I realized, People are just *that* racist. If the only problem is that the book is full of black people —O.K., I got you. I am going to write something full of white people, but it is going to be all about how evil those white people are. (Khatchadourian, italics in original)

This clear expression of frustration against the systemic prejudice that had hindered Jemisin's own access to the secondary worlds of fiction as a child also betrays a desire to represent the world as she saw it — to centre the position and point of view of a person who, in the reality she knows, is marginalized and discriminated against. Jemisin herself admits to having drawn inspiration from historical events in her work: "I write what feels real. I write things that are informed both by my own experience and by actual history. And I'm not drawing

¹ I adhere throughout this work to Audre Lorde's use — which seems to be growing increasingly common — of "Black" as capitalized when referring to Africans and African Americans, in the same way as, for instance, Asian or Caucasian.

solely upon my own racial experiences. There's some stuff that's going to happen in the third book [of *The Broken Earth*] that's sort of hinting at the Holocaust. You can see hints of stuff that happened with the Khmer Rouge at varying points in the story" (Newkirk). Her fiction is therefore clearly meant to be read, at least partly, as social commentary.

Not only that — Jemisin's fantasy is also meant to provide an alternative. As Barbara Smith puts it, "the use of Black women's language and cultural experience in books *by* Black women *about* Black women results in a miraculously rich coalescing of form and content and also takes their writing far beyond the confines of white/male literary studies" (quoted in Pickens 45). The images of Black female characters which Jemisin creates in her work therefore centralize the Black, female experience from the point of view of a Black, female writer. This use of language, coming from and directly addressing the marginal position, creates an alternative way of seeing — a "view from elsewhere", in Teresa de Lauretis' words (25) — which constitutes a unique point of view from which to reveal the secondary world of the fantasy. This alternative view is also built in direct opposition to the normative ways in which people of colour and other marginalized collectives are forced to read themselves into the fiction they consume, so that Jemisin's work provides a refreshing mirror in which these marginal identities come to perceive themselves as no longer marginal, but central to the world's narratives and discourses.

It is important to mention that, as a consequence of the above, Jemisin's work has been conflated with the tradition of Afrofuturism, which Mark Dery defines as follows: "Speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of 20th century technoculture — and more generally, African American signification that appropriates images of technology and a prosthetically enhanced future — might, for want of a better term, be called 'Afro-futurism'" (180). Though Afrofuturism unites "different genres and media" under an "interest in projecting black futures derived from Afrodiasporic experiences", the current "is closely related to science fiction as an aesthetic genre", and many of the authors identified as Afrofuturist "explicitly identify themselves as science fiction authors" (Yaszek 42). While there is certainly an argument to be made for Jemisin's work as part of this long-standing tradition, Jemisin blends elements belonging to several different genres throughout the trilogy. I am, in this work, deliberately choosing to read and analyze it as fantasy fiction, which necessarily causes the Afrofuturistic reading to take a step into the background so as to focus on the features that allow its consideration as a fantasy. These features are detailed in greater depth in chapter 8, as part of my analysis of Jemisin's uses of fantasy.

HYPOTHESIS

This work therefore argues that fictional representations act as mirrors for individuals, mirrors which are able to reaffirm and validate their identity, and that fantasy in particular is able to enhance the possibilities for the representation of otherness, as seen through Nora Jemisin's work. There are several reasons why *The Broken Earth* was chosen as a case study, not the least of which being my own love for Jemisin's complex and insightful storytelling. Another reason is the aforementioned blend of genres that this author executes in this trilogy, which illustrates the mutability of the fantastic and its potential for innovation by blurring the already diffuse and permeable boundaries which separate fantasy from its neighbouring genres.

The major motivation behind this choice, however, is the fact that Jemisin's work is completely centred around characters which, in the primary world, would be considered 'other' — racialized women, in particular. It is my major argument that Jemisin's work, by centring the perspective of perceived difference, forces a reorientation of the hegemonic readers' position, thus introducing them to new ways of seeing. At the same time, and perhaps more intentionally,

the trilogy provides otherized readers with carefully fleshed-out images that reflect their identities and experiences, and thus contributes to the constitution of a positive sense of themselves as subjects.

OBJECTIVES

Firstly, then, the thesis aims to show the importance of fictional representations for individual identity by examining different theories of identity construction as related to narrative. Such an examination aims to explain why social others stand particularly to benefit from a larger, more varied presence of representations that can stand as reflections of their experiences, as well as why the fantasy genre is particularly suitable for this purpose given its peculiarities against other, more realistic fictions.

Secondly, the above is intended to be proven by using Jemisin's trilogy as a case study. The analysis structures the second part of the thesis, and takes *The Broken Earth* as an example of how the use of fantasy enhances the positive representation of otherness. As mentioned above, the idea of representation, and particularly the representation of difference — of that which lies outside the norm — has always been of particular interest to me. I was already taking up the issue in previous writings where I examined the representation of female identity through different case studies, hoping to understand how such images worked in relation to identity construction and why this was significant, given the condition of woman as other. Most of the materials I found during that period of research were academic essays and books dealing with 'representation' in terms of character analysis: the analysis of the actions and descriptions of fictional characters, within the context of the fictional world, under the light of different theoretical frameworks (in this case, mostly feminist theories). This is a perfectly natural and useful methodology which I continue to make use of here, but the theory I sought after was something else entirely. Having often interacted with fandom and fan spaces, I had first-hand experience of the current concerns regarding the scarcity and inadequacy of the fictional representations afforded to marginalized identities — not just to women, but also people of colour, LGBTQ+ identities, and other experiences in the social margins. Despite the many recent, positive developments in this regard, their demands for visibility and for more (and more conscious) representations in the fiction they consume are very much justified. The theory I had hoped to find, then, was one that would explain why this is such a concern: why fictional representation is so significant, both in general and in particular as applied to these marginalized identities. Not finding one, I set out to make an approach towards such a theory, which I now see was rather naïve of me. There is not, that I am aware, a single theory under which fictional representation can be examined, evaluated, or indeed explained. There is no single tool that will enable the analysis of representation and the responses to it in a way that will truly answer the question I began asking myself all those years ago.

METHODOLOGY

There is a way to answer that question, however, by using a combination of existing theories, whose concepts and accounts of individual identity and its relationship to fiction may provide an explanation of how we relate to fictional worlds and characters, and why this makes it possible for fiction to have a plausible, positive impact over non-fictional people. This work thus pulls together many different theories into an amalgam for the sake of its argument; hopefully, this will serve as a *toolkit* — a set of concepts and frameworks that, when combined, may be able to shed light on some of the issues around the concept, such as: how does representation work in this fictional context? What does it take for individuals to truly be, or feel, *represented* within a

fictional image? What makes a fictional representation ‘good’ — or, perhaps more interestingly, what makes it ‘bad’?

Chapter 1 therefore begins by taking a look at the concept of representation itself, establishing a working definition and delving into the necessary situatedness of representations, as they are subjected to and affected by individual perspectives — what Sara Ahmed calls orientation, Brian Massumi position, and Donna Haraway situated knowledge. This chapter also explains my choice of the image of the mirror as the thread pulling the different theories together, and its significance for the dynamic subject/other, which is taken as central to this work.

Chapter 2 employs Louis Althusser’s concept of interpellation to describe the dynamic by which individuals are made subjects — which, in his theory, means subjected to ideological systems, but which is here repurposed to imply recognition, as Maurice Merleau-Ponty argued. The latter’s theory of embodiment therefore describes the communication between subject and other through the body and the gaze in order to establish the relationality of identity — the essential role which others play in the construction of the self. The chapter then delves into theories examining the process of identity construction as related to narrative, particularly Paul Ricoeur’s idea of “*emplotment*” as expressed in *Oneself as Another*, in order to establish the link between identity construction and fiction. This is done in the interest of proving narrative to be a crucial concept for both individual identity and the articulation of society at large. The concept of the ‘other’ is then examined in terms of the inability to locate oneself in dominant social narratives, or to create a self-narrative that is not defined or impeded by that perceived otherness.

Chapter 3 then focuses on providing an explanation for how fictional narratives can act as mirrors to social others, for which purpose I borrow mainly from Alan Palmer’s idea of fictional minds, as well as from theories surrounding the concept of identification, in order to understand the influence which fiction has, or can potentially have, for individuals and their self-image. The chapter then turns to discussing in what ways this mirroring has been used to enforce otherness through the discourses of fiction. As my case study focuses on female characters, I resort to Laura Mulvey’s concept of the male gaze and Slavoj Žižek’s concept of symbolic identification in order to understand in what ways fiction has been used to misrepresent woman. On the other hand, the chapter also provides an exploration of how fiction may be used in the opposite way — to deconstruct and resist dominant discourses against difference. To do so, I rely on bell hooks’ idea of a liberated voice and Brent R. Henze’s conception of agency, as well as Teresa de Lauretis’ technologies of gender, in order to come up with an explanation of how fiction may provide individuals with positive images of their own difference, in order to individually and socially reframe its perception as ‘other’.

Chapter 4 examines reader-response and empathy theories in order to discern by which mechanisms fiction is able to have an impact, to produce a tangible or noticeable change, in primary reality. Wolfgang Iser’s reader-response theory is considered so as to explain what takes place during the reading process, and the effect which fiction has over the individual during their consumption of the texts. Theories of narrative empathy, such as Suzanne Keen’s and Lynn Hunt’s, are then called upon to describe how said effect may, potentially, extend beyond the individual to affect society at a larger scale.

Chapter 5 provides a literary review of some of the most significant theories of fantasy, from Tzvetan Todorov to Brian Attebery, in order to arrive at a tentative definition of what the genre entails. The complexities in the relationship between fantasy and the ‘real’ are also foreshadowed here, particularly through Lubomír Doležel’s theory of possible worlds — a crucial concept to my understanding of the workings of fantasy. This chapter, then, serves to

outline fantasy's most prominent features, as well as to provide a revision of its literary canon — or, rather, lack thereof, given J. R. R. Tolkien's extensive influence on the genre as a whole —, in light of which the particularities of Jemisin's work are considered as it subverts many of the expectations derived from this tradition.

Chapter 6 further develops the discussion on the peculiar relationship existing between fantasy as a literary genre and the extra-literary reality surrounding it, in order to conclude how fantasy can have an effect over said reality that makes it into a suitable tool for political and social subversion — a way to frame revolutionary thought, to paraphrase Jemisin's words (Klein 00:04:37). With this in mind, the chapter establishes a parallel between the binaries reality/fantasy and subject/other, given that the genre's devaluation as an inferior reflection of the 'real' creates a noticeable parallel with the position of other. In doing so, the chapter argues that fantasy's deviations from primary reality are its strongest asset, as it allows to overcome or sidestep the discourses and narratives at work in the primary world.

Chapter 7 opens the analysis of Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy, which aims to provide evidence of how the genre's potential as a political tool may be exploited, and how marginalized identities — women, and racialized women in particular, given my current focus — can find in it a locus of self-expression that enables the weaving of a discourse beyond the mirror dichotomy and its dualistic hierarchies as outlined in previous chapters. As such, chapter 7 focuses mainly on the analysis of Essun, the main character of the trilogy, from an intersectional feminist perspective that takes into account how both her gender and race are represented within the secondary world.

Chapter 8 moves to dissecting how Jemisin's use of the fantastic articulates a discourse of empowerment and healing within the secondary world. The chapter examines how she uses the premise of the fantasy to alter the oppressive dynamics at work by drawing on the concept of 'fantastic racism' to describe how Jemisin's depiction of a fantastic trait at the source of oppression is not an escapist endeavour. This therefore shows how Jemisin avoids otherizing her characters due to such factors as gender or race, while still providing insightful, fleshed-out commentary on how discriminatory relationships articulate society. To explain the radical re-imagining of systemic enslavement which Jemisin executes through the fantastic premise, I draw on the theories presented in previous chapters as well as on Christina Sharpe's concepts of the 'wake' and the 'weather', which are useful to describe the alterations Jemisin makes to the ingrained discourses and narratives of primary reality against Blackness in particular, given the equivalence drawn between orogeny and slavery.

Chapter 9, finally, analyzes the development of Essun's daughter, Nassun, in order to understand how Jemisin makes particular use of one of fantasy's most crucial elements, which Tolkien called 'eucatastrophe', in order to provide a sense of consolation and hope despite the narratives of oppression which her story focuses on. In so doing, the dissertation attempts to shed light on how Jemisin's novels provide an alternative model of resistance and enable marginalized communities to find both understanding of their oppression and, simultaneously, a respite from it in her secondary world.

This dissertation thus argues that such respite from primary world ideologies and discourses around the marginal, the nonnormative, is key for individuals to become able to conceive of their identity beyond the imposed social definitions and discourses of otherness. By articulating the theoretical analysis around such interrelated concepts as representation, identity, narrative/fiction, and fantasy, I hope to show how fictional images created through secondary worlds serve as positive models by which individuals who are marginalized in the primary world can find their identities validated, and how fantasy's particularities can prove crucially helpful in doing

so. The change in self-perception thus provoked enables individuals to perceive themselves as individual subjects whose agency and voice are bolstered and not impeded by the difference which has thus far excluded them — a change which proves fundamental to the formation of resistance against the norms and ideologies defining and constraining our primary reality.

CHAPTER 1: THE MIRROR OF REPRESENTATION

The image touches me, and, thus touched and drawn by it and into it, I get involved, not to say mixed up in it. There is no image without my too being in its image.
(Jean-Luc Nancy)

Given the importance of the concept of ‘representation’ for the present work, it is only fitting for it to be the subject of the first chapter. The term has had an extremely long and complex history, and has been employed across disciplines from philosophy to mathematics in wildly varying ways. It is beyond the scope of the present chapter to outline such a history, but the ensuing pages will nonetheless revise some of the historical developments of and around the term — particularly as applicable to fiction, which is the primary focus of this study — with the aim of coming up with a working definition or tentative description substantial enough to suit the use made of the term throughout.

To make the task slightly less daunting, as well as for the sake of clarity, it is useful to begin by consulting the *Oxford English Dictionary*. Its second acceptance links “representation” to a “depiction or portrayal” (OED, “representation” n.1. II), which is the sense I am most interested in. Three of the definitions provided therein bear some basic, significant resemblances:

“A depiction or portrayal of a person or thing, typically one produced in an artistic medium; an image, a model, a picture.” (OED, “representation” n.1. II.6.a)

“The action of putting forward an account of something discursively; a spoken or written statement, esp. one which conveys or intends to create a particular view or impression.” (II.8.a)

“The action or process of presenting to the mind or imagination; an instance of this; (also) the result of this process; an image or picture presented to the mind or imagination in this way.” (II.9.a)

Textual evidence shows uses of the term that align with the above definitions as early as 1477. However, I would draw particular attention to the polysemy hinted at in definition II.9.a, which states that ‘representation’ may be used to refer to an action or process, as well as to the result of said process — *or* to an image presented through it. This ambiguity is at the heart of the theoretical debate and confusion surrounding the term. Philosophy, in particular, has used it indistinctly to refer to the “image, concept, or thought in the mind [...] regarded as an object of direct knowledge”, as well as to “the means by which knowledge of objects in the world may indirectly be acquired [...], the formation or possession of images, concepts, or thoughts in the mind” (OED, “representation” n.1. II.9.b). Either way, it becomes obvious that ‘representation’ entails the existence and/or the creation of images or concepts in the mind — images that condense, and engender, knowledge about the world. For my current purpose, I narrow down

the concept of ‘image’ to refer to those portrayals created through various artistic mediums, and particularly fictional mediums (such as literature or film), which the human mind then consumes and incorporates into their experience of the world.

To consider these artistic, fictional portrayals as objects of knowledge is itself debatable, given the historical devaluation of images perceived throughout philosophical and academic thought. Plato had already famously cautioned against representations — or imitations, likely to be a more accurate translation in this context — as “mere substitutes for things themselves” (Mitchell 14), which interfere between the viewer and the real. As Plato writes, “all artists, starting with Homer, are imitators of images of goodness and other things they create, without having any grasp of the truth” (320, 600e) and “no knowledge of what is, but only of what appears to be” (321, 600c). If the poet “is nothing but an image-maker, and he stands far removed from the truth” (Plato 327, 604c), the images he creates may “be false or illusory” and thus “stir up antisocial emotions (violence or weakness)” and encourage the “imitation of evil” (Mitchell 14-15) — in Plato’s words, a “destructive influence on the minds of those who hear it” (313, 595b). Whether knowingly or unknowingly following such cautions, the control and monitoring which Plato advised often took the form of state-sanctioned censorship and other similar mechanisms imposed on the representations produced by every society. In his essay “Forbidden Representation”, Jean-Luc Nancy traces the devaluation of the image to “the alliance [...] forged between the principle of monotheism”, the prohibition of idol worship, “and the Greek problematic of the copy or the simulation, of artifice and the absence of the original” that was so very present in Platonic philosophy (Nancy 31). It was thus that rational thought, and the conceptualizations it produces, were consistently held to be above art, which was “degraded as secondary, as imitative and therefore as inessential, as derivative and lifeless, as deceitful and weak” (Nancy 31). And yet, as much as humans may mistrust or underestimate the value of images, they cannot seem to stop producing them — and, in many ways, depending on them. Aristotle’s seminal *Poetics* already described how the practice of imitation or *mimesis* — in other words, the creation of images — comes “naturally to human beings from childhood”, and indeed it is “in having a strong propensity to imitation and in learning their earliest lessons through imitation” that humans differentiate themselves from other animals (Aristotle 6). This philosopher established three ways in which representations can be distinguished from one another, a distinction which was, needless to say, enormously influential for subsequent discussions: in *medium* (or *means*, depending on the translation referenced), *object*, and *mode* (or *manner*, again depending on the translation) (see Aristotle 3). By medium, Aristotle refers to the materials with which or through which the representation is carried out: one may use “colour and shape” to produce “visual images (some through art, some through practice)”, or “the voice [...], rhythm, language and melody”, or simply “language unaccompanied” (3-4), an art which we now generally refer to as literature. By manner, this philosopher refers to “the mode in which one may imitate each of these objects”, since it is possible “to imitate the same objects in the same medium” but to employ different strategies to do so (Aristotle 5). Finally, the object refers to the image itself, to “that which is represented” (Mitchell 13), be it agents (meaning “characters”, see Aristotle 5) or inanimate objects or states of affairs. Clearly, Aristotle regards the image as imitative, which presupposes the *objective* existence of an object, of something to be imitated — an external reality which exists independently of its representations, and which the latter attempt to come as close as possible to.

Erich Auerbach’s study *Mimesis* clearly testifies to the influence of this Aristotelian conception of art as imitative of reality, as its very subtitle — *The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* — seems to imply. Auerbach traces here an extensive history of such

imitation practices, analyzing technique, style, and subject matter in order to determine how and what aspects of reality are present in each of his chosen texts. As Edward Said argues in his introduction to the 2003 edition, Auerbach seems to take the “representation” of reality “to mean an active dramatic presentation of how each author actually realizes, brings characters to life, and clarifies his or her own world” (xx). *Mimesis* thus goes over the history of how western literature managed such a feat by examining literary currents and works ranging from the Greek Homeric epic to the twentieth-century modernism of Woolf and Joyce. In so doing, Auerbach seems to link these very different genres back to what he calls “modern realism”, which “has ever since developed in increasingly rich forms, in keeping with the constantly changing and expanding reality of modern life” (Auerbach 554); it merely alters its form, style, and other textual tools in order to more fittingly represent the changes in reality. For instance, as Auerbach argues, after the First World War, “in an Europe unsure of itself, overflowing with unsettled ideologies and ways of life, and pregnant with disaster — certain writers distinguished by instinct and insight find a method which dissolves reality into multiple and multivalent reflections of consciousness” in order to convey “the confusion and helplessness, [...] the decline of our world” (551). In other words, Auerbach sees the development of modernist literature as both a symptom and a consequence of the convulsed, tragic European society of its time — and thus a form of realism, even if these are generally regarded to be separate literary currents. In this way, Auerbach appears to argue that all literature (or all western literature, at any rate, given the western-centric nature of his choice of corpus) is mimetic — an imitation of reality, regardless of how separate from the real it may appear to be. It is worth saying, however, that he does so seemingly without any of the Platonic suspicion: his analysis of romance literature in particular has none of the oft-found condemnations of excessive imagination and encouragement of dangerous fancy, and he seems to regard these sorts of fantastic fictions as merely different ways of representing certain facets of reality.

This point of view resonates very curiously with some of the theoretical approaches to fantasy literature that will be outlined in later chapters. Nonetheless, the popularity and ever-presence of *Mimesis* among academic criticism suggests that the idea that art in general (and literature in particular) exists as a means to re-present reality is still deeply ingrained, despite the many changes in technique and purpose that have influenced literary history and which Auerbach himself partly traces. The prefix ‘re-’ applied to ‘presentation’ is often held to suggest this sense of artifice, of a simulacrum or mimicry that replaces the original. The conception that representations are, in fact, reflections, degraded versions of a true object, is likely “the source of the mistrust toward images that continues unabated into our own time” (Nancy 31). Against such mistrust, Nancy argues the following: “Representation [...] is not the replacement of the original thing — in fact, it has nothing to do with a *thing*” (33, italics in original), but rather involves “the presentation of the object to the subject”, and therefore involves “the constitution of the object as such” (36). The use of the ‘re-’ prefix is therefore “not repetitive but intensive” (Nancy 35): the object is not presented *again*, in an imitation, but presented to the mind in its essence — in other words, as it is perceived. However, the object cannot be presented — perceived — in its entirety, for perception is partial, and there is always a measure of absence to it. As Sara Ahmed puts it, “the sameness of the object involves the specter of absence and nonpresence. For despite the self-sameness of the object, [...] I never see it as such; what ‘it is’ cannot be apprehended as *I cannot view [the object] from all points of view at once*” (Ahmed, *Phenomenology* 36, italics in original). We seem to agree that such objects do, indeed, exist, but we cannot perceive them as they are; they shape differently in each of our perceptions. Consequently, the same must happen in the act of representation,

where “the absence of the thing” (Nancy 37) is essential for the object to be reproduced — that is, presented again. Admitting the partiality of our perceptions, of course, means to accept that any representations of perceived objects are themselves partial. In fact, “the object is not reducible to itself, which means that it does not ‘have’ an ‘itself’ that is apart from its contact with others” (Ahmed, *Phenomenology* 43): there is no way to represent an object ‘as it is’, because in perceiving it, humans are simultaneously shaping the object, and being shaped by it in turn. This is what Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, calls ‘orientations’: we orient ourselves towards objects, and they become oriented towards us, in ways that are affected by our knowledge and beliefs, as well as shaped by the senses — particularly those of sight and touch, the ones most commonly tied to the act of perception. In other words: “We only see what we look at. To look is an act of choice. [...] To touch something is to situate oneself in relation to it” (Berger 8). Ahmed’s use of ‘orientation’ in this sense was coined as a play on words with the idea of sexual orientation, but this study of how bodies situate themselves in relation to the world has also been known as *positioning*. As Brian Massumi explains, the concept was created for the purpose of bringing the “focus on the systemic [...] back down to earth in order to be able to integrate into the account the local differences and the practices of resistance they may harbor” (2). According to Massumi’s account, individual bodies position themselves on a grid, “an oppositional framework of culturally constructed significations: male versus female, black versus white, gay versus straight, and so on” (2), each body occupying one of these sites. Donna Haraway refers to this as “situated knowledges”, an idea which locates objectivity not in distance and disembodiment, but in “particular and specific embodiment” (582), “limited location” and “partial perspective” (583). It is from these positions — or orientations — that we perceive and are perceived, establishing reciprocal relationships with the world around us — relationships that shape us, and that shape it in turn.

To accept this premise calls into question the idea of a single, objective reality which was essential to the mimetic doctrine. This shift towards a plural conception of the ‘real’, one dependent on the multiplicity of perspectives and orientations of each individual, is described by Brian McHale as part of the postmodernist movement “from problems of *knowing* to problems of *modes of being* — from an epistemological dominant to an *ontological* one” (10, italics in original). An ontology, to use McHale’s own working definition, is “a description of *a* universe, not of *the* universe; that is, it may describe any universe, potentially a *plurality* of universes” (27). What is significant about this ontological shift is that it completely does away with sharp distinctions, blurring the external boundaries of fiction that had been essential for mimetic approaches to function: if reality is multiple and multifaceted, fictional universes — as *representations* — must be able to reflect such plurality. In McHale’s words, “Classical mimetic theories [...] have a vested interest in maintaining this conceptual boundary, since without a sharp distinction between fiction and reality there could be no relation of similarity or mirroring between the two, no re-presentation of reality *in* fiction” (34). Yet to admit to the overlap between fiction and reality, to admit that reality itself is a fiction to the extent to which it depends on an individual’s positioning, does not in fact eliminate the representational ability of fictional images. Rather, it enhances it: the mirror of fiction, its *mimesis*, is held up to reflect multiple realities instead of imposing the truth of a single, shared truth. As McHale expresses it, “postmodernist fiction *does* hold the mirror up to reality; but that reality, now more than ever before, is plural” (39). Therefore, the necessary incompleteness and absences present in an image are not, in fact, flaws that make it inferior to the ‘real thing’; rather, the absences in perception derived from individual positions *add* something that rids these representations of the mimetic confinement to imitation: perspective.

The concern of this work, then, is with representation in terms of fictional image: as the holding of a single mirror up to a fraction of a plural reality, and thus a reflection of a subjective account and experiences, from a multiplicity of possible perspectives embodied through the narrator and characters present in the work. As John Berger put it, every image “embodies a way of seeing” (10), and as Haraway argues, “all eyes, including our own organic ones, are active perceptual systems, building on translations and specific ways of seeing, that is, ways of life” (583). Thus, representations are understood not as referential (representative *of* something), or re-presenting as in *presenting again*, but as referring, specifically, to images — and particularly images depicting minds and subjectivities — created within and through literature.

1.1 MIRRORING THE SELF

My choice to take the mirror as a running image throughout this work derives from the fact that this image has been equally used to talk about fictional representations, as seen above, as well as about identity and the self. To choose the mirror as a driving concept is itself a charged decision due to the significance it places on the visual. Such significance, as seen through Berger’s *Ways of Seeing* and Ahmed’s own emphasis on sight (as well as touch) as essential to perception, receives the name of ocularcentrism. This concept describes the essential role played by the dynamics of vision and visual metaphors throughout western philosophical thought, which Martin Jay reviews in detail through the work of many seminal philosophers and theorists in his book *Downcast Eyes* (1994). Jay also reviews some of the theoretical attempts made thus far in order to leave this economy of vision behind, but, as he himself remarks, visual metaphors pervade even the very nature of language (8-11): we continue to speak of “ways of seeing”, in Berger’s own words, and to consider different “points of *view*”, and continue to think in terms of “images”. This means that it may be impossible to articulate a discourse outside of the visual, regardless of one’s awareness of the possible disadvantages and necessary limitations which the metaphor imposes. And, as the image of the mirror shows, ocularcentrism has fundamentally influenced understandings of the process of perception and, as a result, continues to deeply pervade philosophical understandings of the self — as well as of others: the emphasis on sight, on the dynamic of the gaze, has resulted on an emphasis on the *I*, the looker, the perceiving *subject*. In turn, this has had consequences for that which is perceived: firstly, it is positioned *in relation* to the perceiving subject, and hence appears dependent on it — as Ahmed put it, it appears to have no existence “apart from its contact” with the perceiving subject (*Phenomenology* 43), and thus to exist thanks to it and, simultaneously, for its benefit. Secondly, and as a consequence, the perceived seems to be relegated to a secondary position, to an *object*, and therefore deprived of autonomy outside of the subject’s perception. As Donna Haraway explains, the gaze has been used to signify the power “to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interests of unfettered power” (581).

Consequently, identification of both oneself and others has been widely considered to be a wholly visual process, one by which we differentiate between our self and other selves, as well as situate — orient — ourselves in relation to others. This mainly visual understanding stands at the root of many of the major theories regarding the formation of the self, among which stands Lacan’s famous theory of the mirror stage,² which ensured that the idea of identification with a mirror image would remain significant for subsequent understandings of how identity is formed, beginning a consistent problematization of the reflective dynamic that takes place

² For more on the workings of the mirror stage, see Jacques Lacan’s own account in “The Mirror Stage as Formative of the I Function as Revealed in Psychoanalytic Experience” (1949). In Bruce Fink (trans.), *Écrits: The First Complete Edition in English*, 2006, pp. 75-81.

when confronting the other. This concept departs from Lacan's distinction between the non-capitalized 'other' and the capitalized 'Other', a distinction which I do not apply throughout my arguments here, as this work refers only to one type of other throughout. Generally, the other is defined as a placeholder identity created by the subject, and with which it shares an ambivalent relationship: subjects *introject* the good qualities they find within the other, so that it comes to stand as a reflection of the subject's greatest features — an ego-ideal, in Lacanian terms. On the other hand, subjects *project* their fears, flaws, and perceived lacks on the figure of the other, so that it comes to function as a sort of scapegoat through which subjects rationalize these lacks. Thus, when the subject identifies with the other as an ego-ideal, this other becomes an idealized or mystified entity; when the opposite happens, the other is instead rejected, feared and, consequently, subjugated. This work, then, employs 'other' in sociological terms, as it is conceived of in feminist, postcolonial, and queer schools of thought, to refer to an individual (or a community) who has been consistently denied a functional subjectivity under the parameters which socially define it, and consequently, denied individuality and agency in turn. Marginalized collectives are thus placed in this 'other' position, so that the relationship subject/other is nowadays commonly employed to describe the relationship established between a subject and those who prove to be unlike itself — marked by a fundamental difference that makes them be perceived as somehow dangerous or threatening to that subject's existence. Indeed, the relationship subject/other is often conceived of as a power dynamic, marked by the dehumanization, exploitation, and objectification of the latter, which the subject tends to rationalize and justify.

If we conceive of this dichotomy in terms of the mirror, the subject occupies the position of that which is reflected, and the other the position of the reflection, which unfolds in two ways: the subject, in its quest for an image of itself, or of what it believes itself to be, comes across the other and relegates it to this reflective position, where its good qualities are only such insofar as they reflect the subject's, and its undesirable qualities exist due to its inherent inferiority. It is thus that the other is ambivalent, simultaneously idealized (or fetishized) and regarded as either a negative or inferior version of the subject's desirable traits: as a reflection, it is seen as lacking an existence of its own, and comes to suggest an entrapment in a position of not only inferiority to the subject, but dependence upon it. This results in a conception of the reflection as a lesser, imperfect version of the reflected, which is somehow more 'real' or 'true' — which immediately returns us to the mimetic doctrine and its idea of fiction as a poorer imitation of the 'real', which shows how this power dynamic, where one of the poles is seen as fundamentally unequal, has not ceased to pervade our perception — and especially our perception of marginal, or other, identities. As such, while fictional representations can, indeed, be thought of as mirrors, they have historically been held up by the same hands, and constructed and dominated by the same voices — and, thus, giving back the same images — that have been in control of hegemonic sociocultural discourses. As a result, not only have the presences of the social others been largely ignored, but these individuals relegated to the margins lack mirrors to see themselves reflected in. Furthermore, the mirrors they do have reflect the dominant images and discourses back at them. They are distorted or broken, so that the images of these individuals that they create become inaccurate or misinforming. Yet if the mimetic doctrine and its ideas of a single, objective reality are to be left behind, then "on what grounds could the representation of anything at all be subject to condemnation?" (Nancy 38). After all, it is not possible to inaccurately (mis)represent images, if they can be said to merely *present* reality from a different angle. It is this very quandary that has drawn social justice movements and theorists of identity politics to become concerned with "the relationship between aesthetic

or semiotic representation (things that ‘stand for’ other things) and political representation (persons who ‘act for’ other persons)” (Mitchell 11). Both of these, as Mitchell points out, share a similar triangular structure: “representation is always *of* something or someone, *by* something or someone, *to* someone”, since the medium (or means) may be almost anything, but “we can represent things only *to* people” (12): only human beings can be recipients of and benefit from these representations. The concern for identity politics, then, is with who benefits from these images, and in what ways these benefits translate into cultural and social privilege. Since the same hegemonic positions have dominated fictional representations, the possibility for other positions on (or off) the proverbial grid to be represented and/or represent themselves is called into question, which leads to the persistent quandary of whether the representation of otherness in fiction is even possible at all. In George Hartley’s words, “The figure in the margins [...] is beyond (phenomenal) representation and must, then, be presented negatively [...]. It is the concept of marginality or subalternity itself that is beyond our grasp precisely because such a concept is a logical one, functioning as the negative limits of the ‘positive’ colonial subject” (Hartley 237). In simpler terms, the implication is that the other, given its condition as a negative of the subject — a reflection, an inferior — is unknowable, and hence unrepresentable as anything but.

1.2 MIRRORING THE OTHER

This quandary represents one of the major challenges to the notion of representation: having mostly left the mimetic doctrine behind, the concern is with the possibilities of and challenges to the representation of otherness. As mentioned in the introduction, the theory I had hoped to find was one that would answer the question of why fictional representation plays such a significant role for identity in general, and for marginalized identities in particular; to this end, I set out to compile a theoretical framework that will articulate relevant concepts into a coherent answer to that question. My use of the image of the mirror is meant to provide this amalgam of theories with a connecting thread that gives them a measure of cohesion. What follows in subsequent chapters, then, is an attempt to trace the importance of the mirror in theorizing the relationship between fiction and identity and how they influence one another, as well as to understand how fictional representation is thought to function, especially where marginalized identities are concerned.

It is important to mention that my choice of corpus is also intrinsically related to the problematic of representation as outlined thus far: fantasy literature is a challenge to the mimetic doctrine from its inception, given its refusal of the traditional concept of the ‘real’ in favour of depicting the magical, the foreign, the impossible. Many theorists, McHale among them, have made a case for the fantastic “as one of a number of strategies of an ontological poetics that pluralizes the ‘real’ and thus problematizes representation. The postmodernist fantastic can be seen as a sort of jiu-jitsu that uses representation itself to overthrow representation” (McHale 75). And yet, as argued in chapter 5, this means that the fantastic is at least partly mimetic: as Rosemary Jackson and Kathryn Hume discuss, the fantastic must make use of the ‘real’, the familiar, in order to confront what is *un*-real. Nonetheless, fantasy works force us to admit the possibility of the *impossible* through what has been called suspension of disbelief, a concept unsatisfactory to J. R. R. Tolkien, who called it “a subterfuge we use when condescending to games or make-believe” (52). He preferred the term “literary belief”, which is the “genuine thing” — true belief in the proposed fantasy world and events for the duration of the reading (Tolkien 52). This idea of genuine literary belief directly incorporates the existence of multiple realities (the mundane against the supernatural) within the fiction. This challenge to the real

begs the question of what it is about this plural reality that fantasy chooses to represent, as well as what the intentions and potential consequences of such choices may be. After all, if fictional images embody ways of seeing, as Berger argued, even fantastic representations must be the result of social codes that surround and determine the position they are created from. Tracing these very ways of seeing within the work itself may point towards such codes, which are ultimately to be questioned and held responsible for the absences and lacks which the produced representation may suffer from.

However, when representations are produced by these marginalized identities, they embody ways of seeing outside of the hegemonic centre of the grid. It is often argued that this may lead to proactive, or at least perceivable, social change beyond the moment of fictional consumption. When a subject is placed before these fictional representations of and by otherness, they may find this otherness integrated into their vision of the world: the consumption and internalization of these different ways of seeing may serve to shift preconceptions and prejudices, or, at the very least, to question them. However, and as will be further argued throughout this work, the point of fictional representation need not be to produce a change in the worldview of the hegemonic subject by shifting its perception of otherness — and perhaps ought not to think of the hegemonic subject at all. I would like to take a moment to look at the following statements, from authors of fantasy and science fiction:³

You guys know about vampires? [...] You know, vampires have no reflections in a mirror? There's this idea that monsters don't have reflections in a mirror. And what I've always thought [...] is] that if you want to make a human being into a monster, deny them, at the cultural level, any reflection of themselves. And growing up, I felt like a monster in some ways. I didn't see myself reflected at all. I was like, 'Yo, is something wrong with me? That the whole society seems to think that people like me don't exist?' And part of what inspired me, was this deep desire that before I died, I would make a couple of mirrors [...] so that kids like me might see themselves reflected back and might not feel so monstrous for it. (Junot Diaz, quoted in Donohue)

I read a lot of science fiction as a kid. And, of course, that meant reading boys books because that's what kids' science fiction was. I made up my own stories to put myself in them. (O. Butler)

In Mobile's public library, [Nora K.] Jemisin read voraciously, but she almost never encountered characters who credibly represented someone like her. Black writers have been engaged in speculative fiction since at least the nineteenth century, but when Jemisin first immersed herself in the genre their work was either difficult to locate or difficult to recognize. (Khatchadourian)

Me. I write for me. I write the stories that I wish I had seen, either when I was growing up or just when I was bored. (Jemisin, "A True Utopia")

These are but a few examples. Though plenty more could be gathered, it is easy even in these few to notice a common element. All of the above authors, themselves belonging to historically otherized communities, speak of their younger selves looking for a reflection in fiction, and

³ Some theorists have chosen to use 'speculative fiction' as an umbrella term, given the contemporary tendency for genres of fantasy and science fiction towards "bending and blending, [...] shape-shifting and morphing" (Cart 97). Despite the apparent usefulness of the term, this work adheres to Brian Attebery's use of the term 'fantastic' instead (see chapter 5 below).

failing to find it. None of them imply that to relate to existing images was impossible; however, they do highlight that there was no fiction where they could see their particular identities (whether in terms of ethnicity, gender, or sexuality) represented in meaningful ways. This tells us three things:

1) That while otherized subjects have little or no trouble relating to and identifying with fictional images that do not resemble them, and can share in the enjoyment of such images, it is nevertheless trying to constantly have to ignore or even reject one's own difference in order to enter into the fictional experience.

2) That the lack of these representations makes otherized individuals acutely aware of their own difference as an exception, even an abnormality; aside from being exhausting, to find oneself alienated from representation is likely to become an obstacle for the formation of a positive sense of self in these individuals, as they are denied positive identification with images that resemble them. As a consequence, this awareness of one's own difference creates a wish to change, to homogenize oneself and adapt to what hegemony demands in order to, quite simply, be seen.

3) Perhaps most significantly, authors such as the above-quoted never speak of their writing as being created for the benefit of those who have oppressed and in many ways continue to oppress them. They do not, at any point, express an intention or a wish to communicate their experience in order to change the minds or worldviews of their oppressors; rather, they explicitly state they are writing for others who are *like* themselves, for others whose shared difference(s) have created similar life experiences, and who are looking for themselves in fiction as eagerly as these authors once did. Others who may be looking for images to use as role models or ideals to admire, but especially images of people, of unique individuals whose existence is valid and that can be related to as true subjects instead of, simply, an *other*.

If these social others were able to leave behind the preconceptions, impositions, and social constraints which define, delimit, and impose their otherness, it may be possible for them to achieve fully functional, validated identities *as* subjects. Fictional representations could achieve this, at least partially, by offering an image of what this fully functional identity may look like for these individuals to identify with and aspire to. As will be argued in later chapters, then, representation is not necessarily meant for hegemonic subjects to gain new perspectives on difference — though it may certainly achieve that, under the right circumstances. Rather, it can be a useful tool for displaced or otherized individuals to gain access to their own voice and, consequently, their own agency *as* subjects. Referencing a scene from Shirley Jackson's *The Haunting of Hill House* (1959), where a little girl insists on drinking her milk from her special cup with stars at the bottom, Carmen Maria Machado expresses it thus:

For me, the cup of stars is a reminder that you are allowed your own fantasies, the particular fancies of your own mind. That everyone deserves this, and should insist upon it. That — even as others tell you the things you want are unrealistic, outrageous, not permitted, or silly — it's okay to say, *I want this*. [...] We don't allow certain types of people that space for all kinds of reasons; there are so many ways the real world doesn't value our purest time. [...] I am driven to find that. Even if it's just my own mind, I want to have my cup of stars. The response to that attitude can be: *Oh, that's so selfish*. Or: *That's so not accommodating to other people's needs*. Or: *How dare you demand that thing?* But you have to. "I want it", we deserve to say. "Give it to me." (Carmen Maria Machado, quoted in Fassler; italics in original)

The demand for representation, for that space within fiction and outside of it, is the demand for that cup of stars. However unreasonable it may seem to the current status quo, the fictional space can and indeed should be seized and transformed so that the perception of difference can, itself, be transformed. No longer perceived under the limiting parameters of reflection and otherness, difference can, through fictional representations, be fully explored and rendered as part of an individual's identity as a subject. Hence my decision to explore how the fantasy genre opens up new possibilities for these marginalized identities to seize this space in world-bending ways. Octavia Butler mentions the "freedom" which the genre allows: "There isn't anything that I can't do [...] — past, present, future, Black, white, Hispanic, Asian, whatever, I can get away with all sorts of things in science fiction and fantasy, I should say, that might not be that possible in trade fiction" ("Octavia Butler on writing"). This reasoning may well be argued to be at the core of the preference for fantastic genres that is shared by so many marginalized authors⁴: when used in a politically conscious way, fantasy and the fantastic's creation of new possible worlds — which are at least partly untethered from reality — rejects the power dynamic of the mirror, turning it from a constricting binary into a tool for the deconstruction of the very concept of otherness — and doing so in ways that are unavailable to other genres due to their further commitment in closely representing facets of our 'real', primary world.

⁴ It is worth mentioning that fantasy and other fantastic genres are not by any means the only ones to have been linked to marginal identities. Other genres and forms, such as the short story, have also been argued as particularly suitable for the expression of marginality, precisely due to their own status as marginal with respect to the literary canon. See, for instance, Adrian Hunter's *The Cambridge Introduction to the Short Story in English*, Cambridge University Press, 2007.

CHAPTER 2: IDENTITY AS NARRATIVE

If my identity were to lose all importance in every respect, would not the question of others also cease to matter?
(Paul Ricoeur)

Much as it happened with “representation”, the concept of “identity” has a long and complex history, enough to fill a work such as this thrice over. Unable to consider the extensive psychological, psychoanalytical, and philosophical body of work devoted to the concept, I choose to focus on understandings of identity as related to my structuring image of choice — the mirror. The metaphor informs the majority of the theoretical approaches I revise here, its consistent appearances illustrative of the dynamics between subject and other, which makes it particularly suitable for my current purposes insofar as it refers *ab initio* to the process of construction of “other” identities — those marked as different by social preconceptions derived from the intersection of oppressive systems. The theories here outlined thus discuss the process of identity construction, how it goes hand in hand with the construction of otherness, and how the process differs in the case of otherized identities given their constitution as such.

From the aforementioned mirror stage onwards, identification of both oneself and others has been widely considered a wholly visual process — meaning, identification taking place with a given image. This spectre of the visual can be traced in Louis Althusser’s theory of Ideological State Apparatuses, which, despite having been developed from a Marxist point of view, applies a mirror-like structure to the concept of ideology in order to understand how subjectivity is constituted and functions within it. Althusser regards ideology as both an illusion (in other words, an unreal or imaginary representation) and an allusion (a direct reference which, if interpreted, will lead to the discernment of real conditions). Thus, ideology is the creation of an imaginary representation of the subjects’ relationship to the conditions of their existence: an “imaginary relation of individuals to the real relations in which they live” (Althusser 39). In turn, ideology acquires material existence in its apparatuses and practices, as well as in the subjects themselves, who embody it by behaving, acting, and participating in systems and rituals determined by the ideological apparatus. Thus, “there is no practice except by and in an ideology”, yet “there is no ideology except by the subject and for subjects” (Althusser 44), meaning that the relationship between subjects and ideology is reciprocal and self-sustaining, in that they continually create and sustain one another. This is interesting, as far as otherness goes, because Althusser maintains that, as long as they exist within a certain ideological apparatus, “individuals are always-already subjects” (50), since ideology has already interpellated them as such and they have responded to that interpellation. This is the notion which most interests me about Althusser’s theory: that of interpellating, or hailing — the act by which an individual becomes a subject. For Althusser, such interpellation involves language, or at the very least a voice, and *not* a visual image, much in the same way as Lacan upheld the idea that the symbolic order — language — was what restored the subject’s function as such (76). Ideology

thus posits an Absolute or capitalised Subject, who stands at its centre and interpellates every subject around it, at once subjecting (i.e. subjugating) them and “giving them the Subject in which each subject can contemplate its own image” (Althusser 54). This “duplicate mirror” structure is what makes possible the recognition of the Absolute Subject, as well as that of subjects themselves and among themselves — thus eliminating the other from the equation entirely. Under Althusser’s proposed structure of the ideological apparatus, every individual is considered a subject from the get-go: the very ideology has ensured that this be so, since every individual must recognize themselves as hailed or “interpellated as a free subject in order that he shall submit freely to the commandments of the Subject, i.e. in order that he shall freely accept his subjection” (Althusser 56).

Against this one-sided hailing, Maurice Merleau-Ponty proposes the concept of “mutual recognition” which leads to a wholly different conception of subjectivity. Merleau-Ponty’s major work, *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945), attempts to explain how perceptual dynamics establish subjectivities and codify the relationships between them. The most thought-provoking aspect of this approach is that it problematizes the classical philosophical conception of an active subject against a perceived, passive object without resorting to an ideological system, as Althusser did. Rather, Merleau-Ponty suggests a communicative understanding of perception as a reciprocal process by which subjects establish mutual, not unilateral, relationships. This author suggests that “classical philosophy” posits a division of the subject in four parts, which once again emphasizes the visual:

(1) myself, my ‘psyche’; (2) the image I have of my body by means of the sense of touch or cenesthesia [...]; (3) the body of the other as seen by me, which we shall call the ‘visual body’; and (4) a fourth (hypothetical) term which I must reconstitute and guess at — the ‘psyche’ of the other, the other’s feeling of his own existence — to the extent that I can imagine or suppose it through his visual body. (144-145)

Thus, I (1) perceive the world through my body (2), particularly through touch and sight; in perceiving the other’s visual body (3) and identifying it as such, I build the other’s psyche (4) by using my own as a model. Merleau-Ponty was here especially referring to theories in the Cartesian, dualist tradition, which separate mind from body and thus uphold the impossibility of knowing anything but our own existence. However, it is interesting that some later work echoes similarly Cartesian ideas. R. D. Laing, for example, posits an approach against theories from egoistic standpoints, instead considering the *you* — that is, the other — as fundamental to the formation and maintenance of subjectivity, thus conceiving of identity as a “dyadic system” where “there is no isolated individual person. The one person, in order to maintain *his own* self-identity, has to *act towards the other*” (Laing et al. 27, italics in original).

And yet, in spite of this connection to the other, Laing’s work seems to suggest an ultimately egoistic end to interpersonal perception: he appears to imply that subjects, by acting upon the other, want to shape the other’s perception of themselves towards the self-image they wish to project. In other words, subjects build determined, preconceived identities by interacting with and bouncing off of the other in certain ways so that they may reach, in their own eyes, their ideal or preferred self. Additionally, while Laing does recognize the importance of the views and actions of the other in shaping the subject’s identity, and that the subject cannot always control or predict the other’s behaviour, he seems to be more concerned with individual experience (as perceived through a veil of biased interpretations of the other’s behaviours) as the core of

perception, and therefore of identity construction. This would be conducive to the assumption that Laing, and theorists in his vein, preserve the consideration of the other as fundamentally inaccessible, someone (or *something*) that the subject is unable to directly communicate with or act upon: “I cannot act on the other himself directly, but I can act on my own *experience* of him” (Laing et al. 22, italics in original). Indeed, Laing appears to interrogate the possibility that interpersonal communication can be anything other than ultimately selfish: “If one can act upon one’s experience of the other, so that one can shape to one’s own desire the way one sees the other and hence the way one supposes the other sees oneself, is it worth the bother to act toward the other in order to shape *the other’s* experience?” (Laing et al. 27, italics in original). In fact, he goes as far as to assert that “[m]y need is for the *other’s* need of me. His or her need is that I need him or her. [...] My solicitude is not for another, but for another to want me” (34). Meaning, in short, that subjects seek to interact with others only so that they can build an identity according to their own desires, while only being able to “reconstruct” and “guess at” the other’s experience — imagining or supposing it through the body, as Merleau-Ponty suggested. Laing’s work can be thus interpreted to consider the other’s mind and experiences as fundamentally inaccessible to the subject, due to the impingement of one’s own subjective point of view on what the other says and does; this would make the act of perceiving, in Laing’s structure, a causal process — bidirectional, yes, and affecting both parties, but without attributing any meaning to the perceived except as a projection of the perceiver. This is highly similar to Emmanuel Levinas’ argument that the other “is not unknown but unknowable” (75): the experience of the other is unrepresentable to the self, and therefore inaccessible. In fact, Levinas argues that to understand and narrate the other’s experience is, in reality, to produce it — to reshape it into an image of sameness, of recognizable similarity, which is to Levinas an unethical act: “If one could possess, grasp, and know the other, it would not be other. Possessing, knowing and grasping are synonyms of power” (90). These are different expressions of the major philosophical quandary known as “the problem of other minds”, which the *Stanford Encyclopaedia of Philosophy* summarizes as follows:

At a superficial glance it can look as if there is agreement about what the problem is and how we might address it. But on closer inspection one finds there is little agreement either about the problem or the solution to it. Indeed, there is little agreement about whether there is a problem here at all. [...] The problem here has most commonly been thought to arise within epistemology: how do I know (or how can I justify the belief) that other beings exist who have thoughts, feelings and other mental attributes? (Avramides, “Other Minds”)

The persistence of this problem throughout the centuries and different philosophical currents — as well as, more recently, in psychology and neuroscience — shows how theorists continue to find it difficult to leave behind the cautions generally instilled in them as to the other’s fundamental inaccessibility. How, after all, could we truly come to know another, if all we really know is our perception of what they are? Indeed, how could we truly know *ourselves*, if all we know is what we think others see us as?

Importantly, however, this Levinasian conception of otherness which Laing’s theory seems to echo is informed by the presumption that sameness and otherness constitute a separate dichotomy, and “that the self and representation are exclusively informed by a self-same logos admitting no residues of otherness” (Yi Sencindiver 5). It may well be argued that to present the other as this unapproachable, unknowable mystery is as harmful, and in many ways as

fetishizing, as to feign its complete understanding. Against this mystifying inaccessibility, Merleau-Ponty proposed the abandonment of “the fundamental prejudice according to which the psyche is that which is accessible only to myself and cannot see itself from the outside” (146), positing a phenomenological theory of perception that defends a living, constant connection between the self and the world that imbues the perceived with meaning *beyond* what the subject can perceive in it — and, therefore, considering the other’s psyche to be (at least partially) knowable. This is not to say that Laing or Levinas deny or question the other’s existence beyond the self’s projections; they simply seem to outright deny the possibility that the subject could have *access* to this beyond. Merleau-Ponty, on the other hand, recognizes the situated and partial perspective which influences our perceptions — what Haraway called situated knowledge —, but is still willing to grant the subject a capacity to encounter the other, as both are embodied, living beings sharing the world. His theory postulates a communicative structure built around the gaze, by which we identify and come to recognize ourselves and others — so that the gaze occupies, in Merleau-Ponty and in subsequent theories such as Laura Mulvey’s, the same role which the Absolute Subject and its ideological apparatuses played for Althusser. By this mutual recognition, then, Merleau-Ponty refers to a particular way of regarding (a “way of seeing”, to recall Berger’s words) that marks individuals as subjects and makes them accessible to each other, achieving an effect very much like that of Althusser’s hail — yet acting within visual parameters, and without the consequent entrapment into an apparatus of subjugation. Still, Merleau-Ponty is aware of and does not deny the alienating or subjugating effect which the gaze can have; rather, he argues that such an effect takes place only “when this mutual recognition is not realised; when we feel that our actions and expressions” are being analyzed or scrutinized (Crossley 415) as one party constitutes itself as inaccessible, as observing the other from a vantage point of view: “But in fact, the other’s gaze does not transform me into an object, and my gaze does not transform him into an object, [...] unless we both establish an inhuman gaze, and unless each senses his actions, not as taken up and understood, but rather as observed like the actions of an insect” (Merleau-Ponty, *Perception* 378). Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s theory serves to turn the hitherto unidirectional concept of the gaze into a point of intersubjectivity — a way of hailing constituted by its particular context, and only an alienating factor when the observed, the looked-at, is never hailed as a communicative subject at all. Crucially, this does not necessarily imply a refusal to communicate at all, but rather the communication of the fact that they are not being recognized as subjects, so that even the refusal to acknowledge another as such — and the consequent subjugation — “is still a mode of communication” (*Perception* 378).

The mechanism of the gaze may achieve the effect of hailing, but the channel or medium that permits interpersonal connection — and thus the communicative act — is the body. For Merleau-Ponty, the body’s sentience (the ability to feel and to be felt) is what effects perception, and in this encounter, “[w]hen one sees the other [...], one sees meaningful behaviour. And this meaningful behaviour is, in effect, access to the other” (Crossley 411). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty goes as far as to argue that behaviour *is* subjectivity, and hence how subjects have immediate access to each other: individuals are “always-already subjects”, in Althusser’s words, because the body, in communicating their behaviour to another, hails them as such. Crossley puts it very accurately: “One does not first experience the behaviour of the other and then, by some secondary action, attribute meaning to it. The other is not reduced [...] to (my) thought of him/her” (412). It is thus that the visual acquires “an altogether different type of significance for the subject’s life [...]. Our images are predominantly visual, and this is no accident; it is by means of vision that one can sufficiently dominate and control objects” (Merleau-Ponty, “Relations”

166). It is no coincidence that Merleau-Ponty believes the relation of “the specular image to identifications with others” (167) to be fundamental, as to recognize oneself in the mirror is essential to come to identify with others: “I understand all the more easily that what is in the mirror is my image for being able to represent to myself the other’s viewpoint on me; and, inversely, I understand all the more the experience the other can have of me for seeing myself in the mirror in the aspect I offer him” (Merleau-Ponty, “Relations” 167). While the Lacanian theory Merleau-Ponty heavily references does not establish anywhere near as reassuring a relationship with the mirror image, this shows how specularity has been consistently relied upon to describe the dynamic subject/other which seems to be the basis for our perception of the world. Further, Merleau-Ponty’s theory is significant insofar as it suggests that the mirror, rather than creating a power dynamic, *facilitates understanding* between the poles subject/other, in facilitating the subjects’ understanding of themselves. In choosing to communicate as equals within a context that places them in more or less equal circumstances, subject and other choose to grant each other access to one another’s perceptions, to favour mutual understanding as much as possible.

It is here that it becomes most evident that visual perception cannot be the only channel through which the encounter with others takes place; much like Althusser had already argued that interpellation or hailing involves language, Merleau-Ponty takes language to be the bridge between subjectivities, an “interworld” in his own words, that makes intersubjective communication possible. Because the very essence of thought involves communication, language is proof that thought is never an individual act, but rather a social one: the subject always perceives and is perceived, both feeling the world as a subject and being perceived as an object, both shaping the world around it and being shaped by it in turn, as Ahmed posited in *Queer Phenomenology*. And yet, even if others can indeed be accessible to us as we perceive and thus hail them as communicative subjects, there will always be ‘other’ others, whom we do not deem worthy of such status, that we do not judge worthy of communicating with. There is also the issue of the uncertainty inherent to the communicative process: as we construe our identities through others in an endless interplay of reflections, we can never be truly certain of whether we *know* others, or their meanings in communicating, at all. This is the reason why meaning is often *imposed* upon others through several channels, or apparatuses to borrow Althusser’s term, not the least of which is fiction.

2.1 NARRATING THE SUBJECT

The concept of fiction has been consistently related to the construction of identity in different ways. I find this a particularly interesting relationship in light of the above theories, since fiction can convey itself both via visual and non-visual forms, yet narrative intrinsically requires language. Further, fiction-making takes place not only *stricto sensu* through the creation of fictional works, but also through larger apparatuses at the socio-cultural level. As Althusser’s theory of ideology suggested, but did not elaborate upon, social groups collectively agree upon and live by certain narratives (ideologies), which are at the core of widespread beliefs and behaviours that are essential for the functioning of society as we know it — and that, consequently, deeply influence the ways in which individuals constitute their selves. François Lyotard’s concept of metanarratives expresses this idea of grand, totalizing discourses which are or have been acknowledged as universal truths, even though, if “[j]udged by the yardstick of science, the majority of them prove to be fables” (xiii). Indeed, the French term he originally uses — *grands récits*, literally “big stories” — already suggests their fictional nature. However, such great fictions/grand narratives are legitimized through discourse, particularly the discourse

of philosophy (Lyotard xxiii), which serves to grant such fictions an existence beyond their realm, presumably separate from reality. These *grands récits* were defining of modernity, so that the questioning of these narratives, Lyotard holds, is characteristic of postmodern thought. This is but one significant example of how narrative is a process through which we understand and explain the world to ourselves and to one another, and which plays a significant, perhaps fundamental role in the organization and articulation of human societies and behaviours.

It is therefore not by any means a stretch to suggest that narrative also heavily impacts the creation of individual selves, to the point that the idea of the self has itself been regarded a fiction — the product of many subjective perceptions and desires derived from interaction with others. Paul Ricoeur explored a similar idea in his three-volume treatise *Time and Narrative* (1983), which he later reformulated in *Oneself as Another* (1992). It is interesting that Ricoeur establishes a polarity between two “models of permanence” which comprise personal identity: *idem*, or sameness, and *ipse*, what he calls selfhood — the thing which differentiates one particular self from others. These two models of permanence are articulated through narrative, a process which Ricoeur calls “emplotment” and through which we construe and articulate our individual self, and then communicate it to others:

Following the intuitive preunderstanding we have of these things [history and fiction], do we not consider human lives to be more readable when they have been interpreted in terms of the stories that people tell about them? And are not these life stories in turn made more intelligible when the narrative models of plots — borrowed from history or from fiction [...] — are applied to them? (Ricoeur 114, fn.)

In other words, Ricoeur posits that we constitute our selves through narrative, a sum of our life stories and significant events which is built by borrowing structures and techniques from fiction. The sum of these stories constructs what Ricoeur calls “character”, a “set of distinctive marks which permit the reidentification of a human individual as being the same” (119). The polysemy of the word is advantageous in this instance, as it calls to mind a character in the fictional sense, a “person portrayed in a work of fiction, a drama, a film, a comic strip, etc.” (OED, “character” II.14). The resemblance is evident insofar as fictional entities must also retain a sense of coherence in their personality and actions, so that readers may be able to recognize them as the same entity throughout. Ian Watt also recognized this connection between character in terms of identity and in terms of the novel, as “the particularising approach to character resolves itself into the problem of defining the individual person” (17), and definitions on what exactly constitutes “the individual person” change according to the philosophy followed.⁵ Character as Ricoeur understands it, then, is what grants an individual’s identity stability across time, so that they may be understood as *idem* — the same — even through changes in their life. It is thanks to this that humans are able to conceive of identity as regulated by sameness, as well as by a rejection of difference or inconsistency, which is reflected in the expression “out of character” to mean “[c]ontrary to a person’s usual behaviour” (OED, “character” P1.a), or “incongruous” with it (P1.b). This is again reflected in fictional instances, as characters are deemed flimsy or ‘not believable’ when their actions are perceived to be inconsistent with their previously established traits. This is because, if character is built through plots, a plot-like structure always demands concordance and coherence.

⁵ John Locke, for instance, defined personal identity as “an identity of consciousness through duration in time [...], through memory of [the individual’s] past thoughts and actions” (Watt 20), an account in keeping with the importance which Ricoeur granted to the life narrative of the individual and its coherence.

The fact remains, however, that inconsistencies do appear, so that this demand is in constant tension with “the admission of discordances which, up to the close of the story, threaten this identity” that we had intended to build as a single, unitary self (Ricoeur 141). In order to resolve this tension, Ricoeur once again borrows from the structures of fiction and resorts to the concept of event, which can be “a source of discordance inasmuch as it springs up, and a source of concordance inasmuch as it allows the story to advance” (142). In a fictional story, readers witness narrative events that affect the fictional characters and lead them towards certain actions which, even if seemingly incoherent with their hitherto established character, can now be explained *in light of* that event. Inconsistencies or shifts thus no longer imply the annihilation of the character hitherto built (and hence the loss of an identity), but rather the evolution of said character as prompted by circumstance, which is then “emplotted” into one’s life story — thus incorporated as part of one’s identity, one’s character, and becoming recognizable as *idem*. Emplotment is thus crucial for identity building, since it allows individual identities to change and evolve while remaining marked by an intrinsic sense of sameness. Ian Watt expressed the same idea by saying that modern novel readers have “a sense of personal identity subsisting through duration and yet being changed by the flow of experience” (24).

Importantly, Ricoeur emphasizes that these self-narratives are not unique. They coexist with other narratives, belonging to other selves, which in turn shape and redirect the plot of our self and alter our character: “the life history of each of us is caught up in the histories of others. Whole sections of my life are part of the life history of others” (Ricoeur 161), and vice versa. Identity thus becomes an interpersonal equivalent to the notion of intertextuality: as a text is intrinsically made up of other texts which came before it and which coexist with it, the personal plot of one’s individual life story becomes increasingly interwoven with and influenced by those of others. Once again, as Merleau-Ponty and Ahmed had suggested, the self is always affecting and being affected in turn, “acting and suffering”, as Ricoeur puts it (145). And yet, despite this, Ricoeur perceives a major moral issue inherent to the construction of identity, and hence to subject/other relationships: an “essential dissymmetry between the one who acts and the one who undergoes, culminating in the violence of the powerful agent” (Ricoeur 145), i.e. the one occupying the position of subject and hence possessing the power to act over the other, who thus becomes confined to the position of object.

Thus, similarly to how the mechanism of perception and interpersonal communication was plagued with visual metaphors, the way in which individual selves construe their identities in order to communicate them becomes rife with metaphors of storytelling. Indeed, the notion of emplotment makes identities themselves into fictions,⁶ given its suggestion that subjects use their own (subjective) interpretations of the events unfolding throughout their lives to explain their actions with structures and devices resembling those used to construct fictional narratives. In Ricoeur’s words, “self-understanding is an interpretation; interpretation of the self, in turn, finds in the narrative [...] a privileged form of mediation; the latter borrows from history as well as from fiction”, in the sense that it borrows events from the individual’s past and weaves them into a fictional, plot-like structure in order to communicate them, “making a life story a fictional history, or, if one prefers, a historical fiction” (Ricoeur 114, fn.). In turn, these identity

6 Though Ricoeur considered himself and is considered to adhere to narrativist theories of the self, rather than fictionalist theories, this distinction comes from a binary conception — arguably derived from the mimetic paradigm — that holds reality as somehow closer to truth than fiction. My equivalence of identity narratives with fictions does not derive from this conception, nor from the idea that the self is non-existent, but from the fact that they are built from subjective, situated knowledges and hence not derived from an objective, external reality against which they may be contrasted. I therefore hold that personal identity shares both the structure and the fictional nature of narratives, as Lacan suggested by mentioning the “fictional direction” of the ego in his “Mirror Stage” (76).

narratives are then reinterpreted by others, much like fiction is itself interpreted differently by different readers, and are incorporated both into their image of the subject's character and, as a consequence, in their own self-image. The self thus shares the dynamism inherent to the story, as the narrative events change the way the plot unfolds and thus build and shift the ways in which the self's identity unfolds.

Furthermore, individual narratives also interweave and interact with those narratives spanning a broader social scope, the *grands récits* Lyotard described. This position, “[o]riginally introduced by Vygotsky”, holds that “cultural products, like language and other symbolic systems, mediate thought and place their stamp on our representations of reality” (Bruner 3), and this understanding of identity as fundamentally affected by social and cultural discourses has held up into more recent sociological theories. With our social and cultural worlds being cognitively and narratively constructed, we tend to “organize our experience and our memory of human happenings mainly in the form of narrative — stories, excuses, myths, reasons for doing and not doing” (Bruner 4). As a consequence, then, our identities are developed precisely “by locating ourselves (usually unconsciously) in social narratives *rarely of our own making*” (Somers and Gibson 59, italics in original); in other words, identity is first sought through larger, institutionalized categories and systems. This reinforces the similarities between grand narratives and Althusser's ideological state apparatuses: both work as mechanisms enforcing certain constraints upon the social actor, who is meant to acquire a fixed, universal identity autonomous from others upon being inserted in the appropriate narrative. These mechanisms are often thought to function through internalization: though social norms are institutionally mediated and enforced, in being socialized within their parameters, individuals incorporate these norms into their belief systems to the point that they become incapable of realizing that these are not their own conceptions. However, this idea of internalization has been subject to criticism, as it seems to imply that such norms are on principle pre-existing, external to the individuals, and that they impose themselves on the individual through mechanisms (apparatuses) of domination in place. In turn, this would mean that internalized norms could be “stripped away by the sociologist” in order to discover the “real”, unadulterated “self” beyond these discourses (MacIntyre, quoted in Somers and Gibson 73). However, as per Somers and Gibson, recent sociology tends to agree that social norms do not precede the individuals and are not necessarily actively imposed on them through a system of domination and indoctrination; rather, “they are constitutive to self, identity, and agency” (Somers and Gibson 73), not only incorporated into them but an intrinsic part of them from the start. To conceive of identity as narrative is thus to contextualize the self within time, space, and power relations, since “social action can only be intelligible if we recognize that people are guided to act by the relationships in which they are embedded and by the stories with which they identify” (Somers and Gibson 67). According to this perspective, individuals would be situated in Massumi's grid by being positioned in relation to a hegemonic discourse, rather than under the domination and imposition of said discourse.

This situated context explains the “confusion, powerlessness, despair, victimization and even madness” resulting from “an inability or powerlessness to accommodate certain happenings” within the available range of socio-cultural grand narratives (Somers and Gibson 74). These narratives work through the construction of a universalized ideal, a “putative universal social actor”, and one that “is in fact extremely particularistic — namely white, male, and western” (Rimmon-Kenan 53), as well as cis-heterosexual. Audre Lorde calls this “*mythical norm*” (96, italics in original), and Rosemarie Garland Thomson the “normate” (45). I refer to it throughout this work as ‘universal subject’, a term that is both a shorthand of Rimmon-Kenan's “putative universal social actor” (53) as well as a direct link to the subject position, the position in which

“the trappings of power reside” (Lorde 96). This notion encapsulates “the prototypical figure of normalcy”, which is not, in fact, “what we actually see everywhere but rather is what we expect to see” (Garland Thomson 45). It is “only when judged against this alleged norm that women and other ‘others’ have been found wanting” (Rimmon-Kenan 53), and therefore only against this norm that other identities are constructed as inferior reflections of superior (universal) qualities. It is thus that, when an individual’s identity narrative cannot be located within these predetermined parameters, it is explained away by pathologizing its difference as deviancy — and consequently uprooted by the dominant apparatuses, or by the individuals indirectly upholding them. Thus, to be incorporated into existing discourse, difference would need to either erase itself as such, and accommodate itself to the discourses of “putative universalism” (Somers and Gibson 53) which excluded it in the first place, or else force these discourses to recognize their difference as part of them. It is, however, a mistake to assume that all these excluded individuals — these others — want is for their difference to be assimilated into and accepted as part of the current dominant order. On the contrary, it is often the case that arguments are made for the deconstruction of prevailing ideological discourses in favour of a system that will accommodate the existence of difference from its inception, rather than doing so as an afterthought; a system that assumes and “begin[s] from” difference, as Somers and Gibson put it (55). Whether such a system can exist is debatable, yet one thing remains undeniable: that, under the current ideological hegemony of the universal subject, others cannot build their own selves ‘normally’ (that is, according to the norm) because they are forced to contend against a norm that they cannot locate themselves in — precisely because that norm, built around the universal social actor, excludes them by default.

2.2 NARRATING THE OTHER

It is thus possible to deduce that those who are positioned as social others find their process of identity formation hampered, or at the very least altered, by the prevalence of the universal subject as a norm against which they must continually measure themselves. Of course, the identity-building process takes place differently for each individual subject, but the case of social others is peculiar due to the fact that, simply put, these individuals are not regarded as full subjects. Though the othering of these identities finds its source in many categories, such as gender, racial, or sexual differences, the present work lacks the space to delve into them and the intersections among them in sufficient detail. As such, I bring the focus back to the case study of choice — the representation of female identity in fiction. I choose women as an example for two major reasons: for one, female identity is the case study with which I am most familiar, and on which I have the most resources at my disposal. It is also one I am personally affected by and involved with, thanks to my own experience of the category *woman*, so that I am most confident taking it as a subject for discussion and dissection. For another, this category is widely regarded as intersectional in current theories, so that other factors such as sexuality or, in this case, race can be incorporated into the analysis in order to discern how these intersections affect female subjectivity. This decision is therefore in alignment with my choice of case study, since *The Broken Earth* is completely centred around Black female characters, so that the intersection with race, albeit briefly, will also be considered.

As was partly explained in Chapter 1, the male/female binary as constructed under current social and cultural ideologies is a consequence of — among other mechanisms — the workings of the gaze, which is fundamentally involved in interpersonal communication and thus underlies the processes of identification and of identity construction. When it refuses mutual recognition, the gaze develops into a power dynamic by which the subject, the looker, turns the looked-at

into an object for its scrutiny. What is constructed as the object thus loses the agency and power that characterize the subject, as the act of being looked at comes to be what defines, shapes, and determines the object's being. The power dynamic is embodied in the white supremacist and heteropatriarchal systems that make white, cis-heterosexual men the subjects, the lookers, and women — and other racial and sexual minorities — the looked-at. Not only that, the objects of the gaze are also precluded from looking, actively kept from the process of mutual recognition so that they are never hailed as communicative subjects, but rather relegated to passive objects. Such a relegation is not necessarily, or only, communicated directly from subject-to-subject, as Merleau-Ponty's theory of mutual recognition suggested; rather, after Althusser's ideas, the otherized, objectified individual becomes imprisoned by the ideological state apparatuses holding the power of interpellation. As such, the patriarchal ideological apparatuses, through social institutions, preconceptions, and discursive functions, define and delimit the parameters of the "woman" category and institute a single way of looking at her; she is then interpellated (hailed) only insofar as she complies with these predetermined specifics. In the collection of essays *Visual and Other Pleasures* (1989), Laura Mulvey encapsulates this through her concept of "male gaze": "In a world ordered by sexual imbalance, pleasure in looking has been split between active/male and passive/female. The determining male gaze projects its fantasy onto the female figure, which is styled accordingly" (19). This suggests that man turns to woman as to a mirror, seeking a reflection whose inferiority might amplify his better qualities; the visual and discursive presence of woman as an other thus returns to man a perfected image of himself, positively reinforcing his identity and his position as a subject. As Virginia Woolf perfectly expressed it back in her 1929 essay, *A Room of One's Own*, "[w]omen have served all these centuries as looking-glasses possessing the magic and delicious power of reflecting the figure of man at twice its natural size" (55).

Luce Irigaray takes up this line of thought, developing a female perspective on the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage throughout *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974). Here, she makes a very similar statement to Woolf's: if the male ego "is to be valuable, some 'mirror' is needed to reassure it and re-insure it of its value. Woman will be the foundation for this specular duplication, giving man back 'his' image and repeating it as the 'same'" (Irigaray 54). By constructing and defining woman as his other, as his reflection, man ensures his own superiority and makes himself into (part of what constitutes) the aforementioned universal subject, the default against which all others must be compared and defined. It is thus that woman comes to be "defined purely against the man" (Rose 74), as someone — *something* — who strives to be male, but is not: she becomes a negative space, a lack, a simple and by default inferior reflection. This reduction renders woman, and any social other, unable to leave this position of inferiority because, in order to become such a mirror, she must first reject her own difference as contemptible. In doing so, she supplies everything that is needed for man to complete and maintain this system of what Irigaray calls "specula(riza)tion" (54), by which she is made participant of her own oppression. This ought not necessarily to be understood as otherized identities complying with these systems framing their own oppression, though this is certainly a possibility; rather, social others are responding to such systems as a consequence of socialization within their parameters — and perhaps also as a consequence of the images of the universal which they receive and are encouraged to imitate, fictional or otherwise. Woman is thus turned into "a total object of fantasy" (Rose 74) — fantasy in the sense of a construct, one that causes the interiorization of their own inferiority by their tacit acceptance of these perpetuated images and models. In simpler terms, "we know that women are meant to look perfect, presenting a seamless image to the world so that the man, in that confrontation with difference, can avoid

any apprehension of lack. The position of woman as fantasy therefore depends on a particular economy of vision” (Rose 232), an ocularcentrist economy that articulates the workings of the gaze. This economy represses “the feminine as such”, which “returns only in its ‘acceptable’ form as man’s specularized other” (Moi 134).

The idea that there is indeed a “feminine as such”, an essence of woman, has been much disputed, as it suggests some sort of universal basis to what constitutes a certain identity category. The possibility of any such essential core is, however, disproved if we accept the notion of emplotment, and that identities — and the social narratives they are built from — are, in a way, fictions themselves. Judith Butler reinforced this idea by demonstrating, in *Gender Trouble* (1990) not only that gender is a construct, but also the social and individual mechanisms through which it is constructed. Butler established that both gender and sex are constructed through sets of behavioural practices meant to legitimize and perpetuate the male/female binary:

[I]t is clear that coherence is desired, wished for, idealized, and that this idealization is an effect of corporeal signification. In other words, acts, gestures, and desire produce the effect of an internal core or substance, but produce this *on the surface* of the body [...]. Such acts, gestures, enactments, generally construed, are *performative* in the sense that the essence or identity that they otherwise purport to express are *fabrications* manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs and other discursive means. (Butler 185, italics in original)

Like Merleau-Ponty, Butler establishes the body as a bridge between the self and the world, but she deepens his understanding by explaining how the body is a crucial part of identity-building: it is what sustains that identity, what gives it the coherence that is desirable and necessary for emplotment, through performance. So we build our identities through and around social narratives in place, and then consistently reinforce or reaffirm those identities by bodily performance — by a set of behaviours and acts that have been constructed as signifiers of that identity. This suggests that gender “has no ontological status apart from the various acts which constitute its reality” (Butler 185), a social and cultural mechanism at constant work through individual bodies. Its widespread repetition and consistent re-enactment are what create the illusion of a pre-discursive, inherent core to the category that predates the performance, which explains existing claims to a female, or male, essence. It is, however, likely that the concept of “woman” would not exist at all outside of a patriarchal order; it certainly would not exist as we currently know it, nor be held to the same standards. If our model of identity were not so closely reliant on visual perception, and hence on bodily markers (such as sets of genitals, clothing, and other physical factors), it is possible that our concept of gender and what constitutes or differentiates one gender from another would not be remotely the same, or even exist as a category at all. Thus, there are “no true or false, real or distorted acts of gender”, so that “the postulation of a true gender identity [is] revealed as a regulatory fiction” (Butler 192).

And yet, these imposed and self-imposed sets of regulations are also crucial in the constitution of identity: they produce the selves which their sets of constraints regulate, and as such are both the source of difference and the source of its condition as *other*. However, to demand or expect the dismantling of the binaries which condition otherness is likely much too radical a shift, and not achievable under current social and cultural circumstances. It is also worth mentioning that advocating for the complete abolition of identity categories as they stand has lent itself to criticism. For instance, Butler’s own apparent erasure or dismissal of

the category “woman” in response to its ethical insufficiencies has been called into question. According to Butler, the subject of feminism should not be the foundation for its politics as long as subjects are still formed “within a field of power regularly buried through the assertion of that foundation” (8). Controversially, she adds that “paradoxically, ‘representation’ will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of ‘women’ is nowhere presumed” (8). In Paula Moya’s words, Butler’s reaction to the insufficiencies of the category is “not to rethink her understanding” of it, “but rather to radically undermine it as a valid political or analytic category” (“Postmodernism” 77), as Butler questions whether the creation of an unified, common identity category under which individuals may rally is necessary for political action at all (21). Furthermore, Butler argues that “the fragmentation within feminism and the paradoxical opposition to feminism from ‘women’ whom feminism claims to represent suggest the necessary limits of identity politics” (Butler 6). Her mention of identity politics refers to the attempt of this theoretical current to shift the focus from the norm to the individual, thus departing from a concrete, particularized point of view that assumes difference from the beginning: “Such theoretical challenges [...] move away from deriving the meaning of action and the definition of self from falsely imputed universalities and toward generating concrete notions of social being which begin from difference” (Somers and Gibson 55), thus incorporating difference into the dominant ideological apparatuses.

This can and has resulted, as Butler argued, in “fragmentation” and opposition among feminisms, as the intersections with other sociocultural norms like those of gender and class become increasingly apparent. bell hooks, thinking specifically of the intersection between feminism and racial identity, argues in *Feminist Theory. From Margin to Center* (1984) that the reason behind this increasing opposition is based on the idea that these are competing oppressions. Such an idea is itself rooted in a binary thought system,

in competitive either/or thinking, the belief that the self is formed in opposition to an other. Therefore one is a feminist because one is not something else. Most people are socialized to think in terms of opposition rather than compatibility. Rather than seeing anti-racist work as totally compatible with working to end sexist oppression, they often see them as two movements competing for first place. (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 31)

To suggest that these are competing oppressions is to imply that one must be given precedence or primacy over the other — and hence that one is more significant, more impactful, or somehow the basis of all other oppressions. Against this, hooks argues that not only are these oppressions compatible, but “linked in our society because they are supported by similar institutional and social structures”, and as such “one system cannot be eradicated while the others remain intact” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 37). Yet feminist theories have much struggled with the idea and consideration of intersectionality, as Butler’s aforementioned perspective suggests. The idea of “Sisterhood” put forward by feminist theorists — and fundamental in articulating the movement — was “based on the idea of common oppression”, on the belief that there is a common experience shared by all women (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 43). “Needless to say”, hooks adds, “it was primarily bourgeois white women, both liberal and radical in perspective, who professed belief in the notion” (*Feminist Theory* 43), as this idea that all women depart from the same common basis of oppressive experience tends to disregard differences around them, “disguising and mystifying the true nature of women’s varied and complex social reality” (*Feminist Theory* 44). This fits with the general treatment of difference in postmodernist theories,

among which Butler's is generally classified: they tend to "either internalize difference so that the individual is herself seen as 'fragmented' and 'contradictory' (thus disregarding the distinctions that exist between different kinds of people), or they attempt to 'subvert' difference by showing that 'difference' is merely a discursive illusion", thus reinscribing, "albeit unintentionally, a kind of universalizing sameness" (Moya, "Postmodernism" 68). This is why, despite the usefulness of identity categories in presenting a "stable, unified, and agreed-upon identity" (Butler 21) that allows the finding of common ground, and thus aids the articulation of social movements of political action and resistance, the general tendency in recent theories is to employ such categories with a proverbial grain of salt. As Moya suggests, and Somers and Gibson also remark, any such categorical universalization of a series of common experiences into a single, unified category is liable to result in "new 'totalizing fictions' in which a single category of experience, say gender, will overdetermine any number of crosscutting other differences" (55). Audre Lorde phrased it more simply by saying that "community must not mean a shedding of our differences, nor the pathetic pretence that these differences do not exist" (91). Even if approaches like identity politics are informed by that which was excluded, these theories tend to still work with concepts and assumptions already constructed, which presuppose the existence of certain pre-fixed, essentialist categories which individuals either ascribe to or deviate from — and thus tend to repeat the same oppressive patterns that are currently present. For instance, the common ground proposed by the idea of sisterhood can be argued to be fundamentally sustained on the idea of victimization, which comes as a result of the very oppressive system which feminism attempts to dismantle: "Sexist ideology teaches women that to be female is to be a victim. Rather than repudiate this question [...], women's liberationists embraced it, making shared victimization the basis for woman bonding" (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 45). This replicates the patriarchal image of woman as helpless, passive, or generally powerless, and requires that women embrace this identity as victims in order to be (and to feel) part of the feminist movement. In turn, it is a way for women — and white women most particularly — to abdicate responsibility in the reproduction and perpetuation of oppressive behaviours on the basis of race, class, and other factors by avoiding self-critique through this condition as victims (see hooks, *Feminist Theory* 46). Thus, despite the value of shared experiences, true sisterhood and the consequent resistance it inspires is not granted by virtue of shared oppression: it is rather an achievement that must be worked towards, particularly by acknowledging the divisions that do exist amongst women — "sexist attitudes, racism, class privilege, and a host of other prejudices" (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 44) —, confronting them and taking the necessary steps to, eventually, eliminate them (44), so as to make all women the subject of an intersectional and inclusive feminist movement.

On another note, it is worth mentioning that much feminist criticism has been critical of the postmodernist scepticism regarding the subject position. Postmodernism is suspected of upholding current oppressive ideologies by its questioning of the idea of a subject, as its deconstruction coincides with, and hinders, the movement of otherized identities towards reclaiming that position⁷. Beyond this, postmodernist theories are believed inadequate to support effective social resistance and subversion, because they are grounded in "an entirely abstract or discursive realm", rather than the real social world human beings inhabit ("Postmodernism" 79), and hence do not constitute an effective toolset with which to describe and deconstruct existing mechanisms of oppression. Yet it is arguable that this is not necessarily a weakness,

⁷ For more on the complex relationship between postmodernist and feminist theories, as well as on how this postmodernist fragmentation and deconstruction of the subject affects female subjectivity, see the essays compiled by Linda Nicholson (ed.) in *Feminism/Postmodernism*. New York: Routledge, 1990.

since, however theoretical or inapplicable to real social contexts they may be, these theories have inspired other theorists and activists, and thus resulted or encouraged movements of active socio-political resistance — as Butler’s own reflections on gender performance demonstrate.

Taking the above into account, then, it can be concluded that gender categories, and the position of woman as a social other, hinder woman’s capacity to conceive of herself as a subject, and hence to rid herself of the patriarchal ideas and bodily performances that shape her identity. Yet if the total abolition of gender categories, and identity categories in general, is not necessarily the answer, neither is their unquestioning acceptance, as shown by Moya’s and hooks’ criticisms. The question then remains to be answered — how can women build an identity for themselves as subjects despite their position in the current social and discursive economy? Perhaps Paula Moya’s idea of a “realist theory of identity” offers an interesting middle ground between the postmodernist deconstruction of identity categories and their essentialist assumption — and thus perhaps paves the way towards a system in which women, and other others, become able of constructing themselves as subjects. Moya draws on the theory of Chicana activist and theorist Cherríe Moraga, and argues that the “physical realities” of gender, race, class, and other socio-cultural markers do not determine or make up the core of our being — but do, nonetheless, “*inform* the contours and the context of both our theories and our knowledge” (Moya, “Postmodernism” 80, italics in original). Hence Moya’s use of “realist”, as such a view of identity takes context — *position* — into account, which returns us to situated knowledge. The incorporation of individual positions into our conception of identity and its construction “allows for an acknowledgement of how the social categories of race, class, gender, and sexuality function in individual lives without *reducing* individuals to those social determinants” (Moya, “Postmodernism” 80, italics in original). Such a theory, as Somers and Gibson put it, “begin[s] from difference” (55) to shift the perception of identities situated as other: it recognizes the differences present in them, without attempting to assimilate them into a single, overarching category — or without critically dissecting them into virtual non-existence. Moya’s conception of identity categories as fundamental, yet not defining for individuals allows to uphold intersectionality while avoiding the pathologizing of difference, by accommodating identity narratives to *fit* difference within their defaults so that others no longer have to fit around a presumed universal. By following this conception, then, it becomes possible for others to conceive of themselves as subjects — merely *different* subjects than those presented by the current norm. Such a conception of identity is not yet implemented in our current social system; it is not possible, under prevailing binary power dynamics, for women to read themselves as subjects, precisely because ideological apparatuses and dominant, universal images continue to reflect their image as others. However, there are ways of implementing Moya’s idea. In hooks’ words:

One of the most significant forms of power held by the weak is ‘the refusal to accept the definition of oneself that is put forward by the powerful’. Women need to know that they can reject the powerful’s definition of their reality — that they can do so even if they are poor, exploited, or trapped in oppressive circumstances. They need to know that the exercise of this basic personal power is an act of resistance and strength. (*Feminist Theory* 92)

This power to reject imposed definitions of themselves is not immediately available to these social others, as they may have, as explained above, internalized their condition as such and therefore come to believe in their own inferiority. However, the fact is that this rejection

can still be encouraged and exercised through certain mechanisms of resistance, not the least of which is fictional narratives. As the next chapter demonstrates, the consumption of fiction has a central role for the individuals' identity construction, and so that they can influence their self-image — their perceptions of themselves, and of their power. Thus, fiction can encourage the rejection of these images by giving back reflections that show the repurposing of the dominant mechanisms at work, and that reconceptualize their power. Fiction, in other words, could repurpose or even remake the norm, offering new ways of seeing and of being which disrupt the smooth functioning of subjectifying identifications.

CHAPTER 3: FICTION AS THE MIRROR

How do I, choosing messages from the code of others in order to participate in the universal theme of Language, pull SHE from all the myriad symbols and sightings of HE?
(Susan Howe)

It is possible to extract two clear conclusions from the previous chapter. Firstly, narrative is not limited to a representational form used to articulate an individual's history and, consequently, identity; rather, narrative can be considered

an ontological condition of social life [...]; that people construct identities (however multiple and changing) by locating themselves or being located within a repertoire of emplotted stories; that 'experience' is constituted through narratives [...] and that people are guided to act in certain ways, and not others, on the basis of projections, expectations, and memories derived from a multiplicity but ultimately limited repertoire of available social, public, and cultural narratives. (Somers and Gibson 38-39, italics in original)

Thence, narrative becomes a mechanism guiding the functioning of social relationships as well as the inner functioning of identity, and thus works at several levels, simultaneously, in a constitutive manner — not necessarily, or only, a representational one. Given this, identities are not monolithic, but as variable, mutable, dynamic, and subjective as the narratives they articulate and are articulated by. They change in response not only to events, but also to “that which could have happened differently or which might not have happened at all”, hypotheticals which subjects incorporate into their configuration of said events (Ricoeur 142), and which thus frame the events differently for each individual.

Secondly, if this is so and narrative can be considered a form of ontological construction, fiction does much more than represent or imitate the mechanisms and relationships which coordinate and make up primary reality — it contributes to their creation, as Bruner suggests (3-5). Rimmon-Kenan's concept of narration as a mode of access encapsulates this idea: she conceives of narrative not as a mimetic, referential, or direct representation of reality, but rather as an approach or passage into a different signifying system, embodied in the fictional world, which readers are granted access to through the performative repetition of the processes of the text in the act of reading. If this is so, fiction may also function as a totalizing discourse in the way of Lyotard's grand narratives — that is, it can validate the universalizing narratives that constitute the universal subject, and thus validate its superiority. In looking for its reflection, its *idem*, the universal subject becomes seemingly endlessly present, colonizing both the spaces of primary reality and those of fiction. As a consequence, those perceived as other within the primary world will be depicted accordingly in fiction, even if the secondary, fictional world differs greatly from our own: other identities will be represented *as* other, with their difference

carrying over into the fiction and invalidating or impeding their perception of themselves as fully-fledged subjects, both within and outside the fictional context — or else not represented at all. Thus, fictional narratives will tend to endorse and reproduce the social narratives of universalism in place, and hence perpetuate the subject's conception of this difference as somehow undesirable or unacceptable.

Yet, despite fictional narratives being one of the many tools at the service of perpetuating dominant discourses, they are also one that can be seized and repurposed in order to achieve the opposite, and become a space for the reframing of difference. By the very virtue of its being *not*-real, fiction constitutes a space for exploration and rehearsal, for what Ricoeur called “imaginative variations”, that is, “thought experiments” that are engendered and sought out by the selves in constructing their own narratives (Ricoeur 148). In other words, these are hypothetical scenarios which the self purposefully seeks before they take any action, considering how said action may define them and influence the view others have of them. Not only that: imaginative variations also serve to explore the moral realm through mental experiment, putting the subject's sense of ethics to the test. By prefiguring the result of an action, imagining positive or negative responses, and praising or blaming the agent accordingly, the subjects may submit themselves to moral judgement before any effect actualizes in the world around them. Fiction, then, also functions as an imaginative variation — an exploration or rehearsal ground for moral or immoral acts, for different roles and social categories, or for participation in situations that are normally unavailable to the subject, which permits the free exploration of the consequences of these variations without necessarily having harmful consequences on the subject's identity, actions, or behaviours. On the other hand, the ontological status of fiction allows to posit the idea that consuming fictional narratives of other lives could potentially produce similar effects on identity, or one's perception of it, as the communication and incorporation of social narratives and of others' identity narratives. After all, the narratives of others are also, in a way, fictions consumed by the subject. The quandary of other minds would therefore function at both a ‘real’ (to mean our existing, primary world) and a fictional level; the question is, then, whether fiction may grant us access to another self, to the mind of another, in a different fashion than the process of mutual recognition and communication is able to — and thus affect our identity-building in particular ways.

In order to explore that possibility, I would like to take advantage of Alan Palmer's work, *Fictional Minds*, for two major reasons: firstly, because he takes up the importance which Merleau-Ponty gave to intersubjectivity and applies it to his study of fiction; secondly, because his concept of fictional minds serves to explain, at least partly, the importance of fictional representations as mirrors. Palmer first turns to Colwyn Trevarthen's concept of “intersubjective first” to express how, if perception is — as Merleau-Ponty had suggested — an act of communication, intersubjectivity is then at the core of the human mind:

The Western philosophical tradition (as exemplified by René Descartes and Immanuel Kant) generally assumes that human minds are inherently separate in their purposes and experiences [...] [People] construct an awareness of the self in society but remain single subjectivities [...] We will call this view of intelligent and civilized cooperation as an artificial acquisition the [...] “subjective first” position...

A different conception of human consciousness [...] perceives interpersonal awareness, cooperative action in society, and cultural learning as manifestations of innate motives for sympathy in purposes, interests, and feelings – that is, a

human mind is equipped with needs for dialogue [and] intermental engagement with other minds... We will call this view of how human cooperation arises the [...] “intersubjective first” position. (Trevvarthen 1999, quoted in Palmer 5)

This “intersubjective first” position is what Palmer takes as his starting point in order to argue that “narrative fiction is, in essence, the presentation of real mental functioning” (5): of fictional thought processes and feelings in response to narrative events, as well as the actions resulting from them, within different fictional contexts. It follows, then, that the study of fiction is the study of consciousness — “that the study of the novel is the study of fictional mental functioning” (Palmer 5). Fiction, then, in the very act of creating a character, also creates a “fictional mind” — an-other identity which, through the act of reading, we receive and incorporate into our own for the purposes of emplotment. This is how fiction could potentially produce a similar effect on one’s identity as interpersonal communication with a non-fictional other, because the consumption of fiction, in Palmer’s terms, is an interaction between two minds. However, one of those minds is fictional, and therefore static — unable to change beyond the fiction’s scope —, which eliminates the need to decode the other’s behaviour, as we may *assume* that what is established in the fictional narrative to be accurate. A paradox is thus created: “to read ‘she felt happy’ is the most natural thing in the world: we know what it is to feel happy. In another sense, it is the oddest: we do not know and can never know what it is to experience directly how another person can feel happy” (Palmer 10). This acknowledges, first, that fiction is capable of granting close access to the thoughts of another — an access which, unlike in interpersonal interaction, we can assume to be accurate or ‘true’; second, it suggests that the mind and its workings are at once individual (private and non-communicable) and a collective (public, or shared) experience. This idea can be related to Merleau-Ponty’s conception of the body as the channel or intermediary through which our inner worlds are exteriorized, and therefore made understandable, meaning that, as anthropologist Clifford Geertz argued, “thought is consummately social” (quoted in Palmer 11). In interacting, our bodies’ behaviours make us — our minds — accessible, and in the same way, others can make themselves accessible to us. This process takes place very similarly through fiction, as the intentional descriptions of characters’ thoughts and actions (the descriptions of their minds *and* bodies) are used to give crucial information about them:

Just as in real life the individual constructs the minds of others from their behavior and speech, so the reader infers the workings of fictional minds and sees these minds in action from observation of character’s behavior and speech. In one sense, as Laing says, we are invisible to each other. But in another sense the workings of our minds are perfectly visible to others in our actions, and the workings of fictional minds are perfectly visible to readers from characters’ actions. (Palmer 11)

Palmer is thus critical of some of the more formalist and structuralist narratological approaches, such as Vladimir Propp’s (1928) or Joseph Campbell’s (1949). These approaches create character typologies according to the roles — or “functions”, to use Propp’s own term — which they occupy or carry out in the tale, so that Palmer argues that they regard the characters as *types*, instead of individual *beings*, thus forfeiting the consideration as minds or consciousnesses that Palmer advocates for. If narrative truly is a process of communication of a self, and “if the ways in which characters are constructed by readers are to be fully understood,

they have to be regarded as fictional beings that are related to world view and time-space” (Palmer 30), that is, as more than inalterable typologies. To do so, Palmer argues, requires a step beyond the bounds of these perspectives, without making the mistake of disregarding their analytical worth, insofar as characters can function both ways — as “elements in the narrative structure as well as beings” (Palmer 31). Given that characters are not self-contained entities, but rather interact with different levels of the narrative and are “at the same time devices in the communication of meaning” (Jannidis, Paragraph 25), action or function is not the only device or role through which they can communicate meaning, which is why other approaches propose different descriptors (see Pelan 1987, Eder 2008). Manfred Jahn theorizes that this evolution of narratology has tended towards more flexible conceptions of its categories, considering them more dependent on interpretation than they previously were. As far as characters are concerned, Jahn argues that they are most often conceived of as “pragmatic identities [...], situated entities driven by affects, purposes, motives and intentions” (Jahn, “Postclassical Narratology”), much as non-fictional identities are seen to be.

In order to give fictional characters this dimension, Palmer proposes regarding the physical happenings recounted in the narrative “not as events”, as Ricoeur termed them, “but as *experiences*” (Palmer 31, italics in original). While Ricoeur’s emplotment involved individuals choosing to recount certain events from which they drew meaning in order to construct a coherent identity, Palmer argues that fictional narratives choose certain events as part of their plot precisely because of the impact they have upon the fictional character’s minds. In other words, narrative events are in fact the personal experiences that have most affected the construction of this fictional identity; therefore, they will also impact the readers’ construction of these fictional entities, as readers are encouraged to draw meaning from the characters’ feelings, reactions, and responses to such events. The role of readers is therefore crucial in the construction of fictional characters, since “a reader *must* project a pragmatic identity on fictional characters in order to understand description and narrated perception, speech, and action” as well as to “invest them [the characters] with psychological identities” (Jahn, “Postclassical Narratology”). Similarly, Palmer argues that these “mental events [...] have to be recovered (rightly or wrongly) by the reader from the discourse as part of the operation of assembling characters’ purported mental functioning” (Palmer 31). These descriptions of the process of characterization, as a “succession of individual operations that result in a continual patterning and repatterning until a coherent fictional personality emerges” (40), call to mind the above-described process of emplotment, the collecting and retelling of life stories and events through which a coherent, cohesive identity is born. In the same way as individuals, in non-fictional interactions, come to deduce another’s character from their actions, and tend to interpret subsequent interactions in light of that information, so do readers craft a character’s identity “from an individual action [...] toward a supposed disposition or trait”, while “subsequent actions are interpreted by the reader in the context of the whole of the character’s mind as hypothesized up until that point” (Palmer 40). This is why, despite the fictional mind’s inherent unchangeability, it is still possible for characters to be mutable: they evolve for as long as they inhabit the readers’ minds, as new information is progressively revealed that makes it possible to interpret the characters’ actions differently, thus changing the shape of their identities.

To conceive of a fictional character as “non-actual”, as a being “who exists in a possible world and who can be ascribed physical, social, and mental properties” (Palmer 38), allows to deduce that fiction can be — and, indeed, is — incorporated into regular processes of identity construction, as the characters come to be perceived as functional identities for as long as individuals interact with and absorb their narratives. If the other is the mirror in which we seek

ourselves, and if fiction can take up that position, then fiction itself becomes a mirror — which inevitably brings to mind, yet again, the mimetic doctrine. Toril Moi refers to this approach to fiction as mimesis as “extreme reflectionism”, which

posits that the artist’s selective creation should be measured against ‘real life’, thus assuming that the only constraint on the artist’s work is his or her perception of the ‘real world’. [... W]riting is seen as a more or less faithful reproduction of an external reality to which we all have equal and unbiased access. (Moi 45)

This position therefore continues to uphold the idea that fiction is a reflection of an external, objective ‘reality’, which then takes on the character of truth as established in Chapter 1. However, if — as was also established in Chapter 1 — reality is multiple, “not only something we construct, but a controversial construct at that” (Moi 45), this means that fiction is itself constructed from a distinct and individualized point of view. The authors’ positions on the grid, their situated knowledges and distinct perspectives — their ways of seeing — are imprinted into the fiction. Given that the privileges inherent to the position of universal subject have ensured that the creation of fictional narratives is most accessible to those in said position, and given that fiction is not an independent entity — it is in constant interaction with the narratives structuring the world we inhabit —, it is easy to understand how, as previously argued, fiction will tend to reflect and reinforce the narratives predominantly at work in primary reality; yet, simultaneously, it becomes more difficult to argue that misrepresentation is a possibility. It is the idea that there is a single, objective reality to be referenced that “enables us to criticize the author on the grounds that he or she has created an incorrect model of the reality we somehow all know” (Moi 45).

It is easy to infer how this problematizes the fictional representation of otherness. On the one hand, even if the predominance of specific narratives results in the fictional reflections being inaccurate or distorted when representing non-dominant narratives, an argument could be made that these are simply different perceptions of that particular reality. Many authors — such as Judith Butler and bell hooks as seen in the previous chapter, as well as Gayatri Spivak in “Can the Subaltern Speak?” — have already questioned the possibility for identity categories to be represented in any way that may be deemed accurate, or that truly conveys what it means to exist within the social and cultural parameters that define those identity categories. Identity categories tend towards essentialism, toward finding common ground from which to build a universalistic category, so that they risk the superimposition of an individual experience over the differences which compose any identity category, as well as the other categories and associated narratives that intersect with them. But, to recall the case study of choice, if even a woman “cannot be trusted to speak accurately for and about ‘women’, then how is it possible to speak about ‘women’ at all?” (Moya, “Introduction” 4). Sara Ahmed explains this issue in terms of “speaking for”: she holds that the “universalism of ‘speaking for’ the other [...] is premised on fantasies of absolute proximity or absolute distance” (*Encounters* 166), which embodies the duality inherent to the other position. To speak for the other, or to attempt to represent the other, involves on the one hand “a refusal to encounter, to get close enough to face the others; it judges from afar by reading ‘the other’ as a sign of the universal” (Ahmed, *Encounters* 166, italics in original). On the other hand, this universalism is also “a fantasy of proximity”, a fantasy that “one can inhabit the place of the other, that one already knows what ‘the other’ means (and therefore needs)” (*Encounters* 166). Thus, in attempting to represent the other, the subject does so from a perspective external to its otherness, which leads to assumptions and

inferences derived from their own situated (hence biased) knowledges; in turn, this erases the particularities of the other's difference, or presents them under a negative light with respect to the subject's own qualities, which are socially dominant. In the context of fiction, then, this universalistic tendency means that fictional representations tend to speak for social others in ways that are questionable, insofar as they contribute to the other's social and discursive position as marginal — or else to its erasure, by depriving it of representation entirely. Yet, if to qualify these representations as “inauthentic” or somehow unfaithful to an external reality would be to err on the side of mimesis, how may one criticize them at all for their perceived shortcomings? Well, to consider the ‘real’ as a subjective, mutable construct does not mean that fictional works cannot be held accountable for the ways in which they misrepresent individuals or experiences. Instead of for “failing to be ‘true to life’” or “not presenting ‘an authentic expression of real experience’”, these misrepresentations should be criticized on grounds of “having selected and shaped their fictional universe according to oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions” (Moi 45-46).

In other words, what can be denounced is not the fiction's authenticity, or lack thereof, but the bias in the facets of reality that they choose to represent. This inevitably present bias of fiction also influences its possibilities as a mirror. Since, as argued above, fiction also reflects the human mind, offering up fictional narratives of identity, its consumers (readers, as well as viewers, or players) can find within them a reflection of themselves. However, regardless of how much the readers' experiences differ from those depicted in the fiction, they will still look for themselves within it. They turn to the narratives offered by fiction as they might towards a reflective surface, seeking to reaffirm their selves even as they are confronted with fictional minds deeply unlike their own. In order to explain “how ‘real’ and ‘fictional’ worlds”, and minds, “may interrelate psychologically” (Andringa 208), theorists have turned to two major concepts in particular: empathy and identification. The former will be dealt with in the subsequent chapter; identification, on the other hand, is a psychoanalytical term defined as “a psychological process whereby the subject assimilates an aspect, property or attribute of the other and is transformed, wholly or partially, after the model the other provides” (Laplanche and Pontalis, quoted in Roth 58). Freud also pointed out that identification takes place when an individual “finds it difficult to part from the object and thus introjects him as part of his ‘ego’ by identifying with him” (quoted in Roth 58). The term has been repurposed to speak more specifically of what happens within the reader during the consumption of fiction; in this sense, Roth interestingly argues that “in real life the other remains for ever different and an outsider”, thus implying that interactions in primary reality, with non-fictional others, are less “powerful and experiential” than interactions with fictional minds (57), and thus result in less knowledge of the other than that allowed by fiction. In Roth's words,

Reading a book [...] incorporates within what is happening to and in the other, as told in a much deeper and complex manner than that which is perceived through our senses in real life, enabling us to also feel ourselves and the complex processes of change we are undergoing through identifying with the literary character. (57)

It is possible that identification with fictional minds may entail some sort of introjection or ‘ego-confusion’, which Roth refers to as “internalized identification” — by which the “object or its characteristics become part of the representations of the self” (59). According to these definitions, identification would have a stronger impact — and thus result in better, deeper

knowledge of the other — when it takes place with fictional minds than with non-fictional others. However disputable this idea may be, it nonetheless serves to emphasize the fact that a difference is often perceived in the way we approach fictional minds with respect to non-fictional others.

Some theorists have contested these ideas on the basis that readers act and react “as witnesses to what happens to the characters and thus cannot substitute themselves for them” (see Andringa 208). According to this approach, readers establish an affective relationship with fictional minds and are thus affected by them only insofar as they witness and come to an understanding of their situations and emotional states. Andringa, for instance, proposes a middle ground by defining identification simply as “the feeling or the belief that one shares qualities, emotional experiences, or attitudes with another (existing or fictitious) person” (208-209). This suggests an element of what Roth refers to as internalized identification, as it requires an assimilation of the other’s aspects on the subject’s part; simultaneously, however, it also implies a measure of what Roth calls “projective identification”, insofar as it requires the individual to “[project] an aspect of his inner world on to and into the object” (Roth 65; see also Andringa 209). In other words, we do not simply relate to the fiction as witnesses, nor do we simply project our own beliefs and emotions onto the fictional characters as with some sort of blank slate — as we might, unimpeded, in the reflection of an actual mirror. Rather, identification involves both introjection and projection in a very complex process that can, and necessarily does, shift during the reading as the experience of the fictional text evolves. It is thus no wonder that typologies of identification vary quite wildly: where Roth, following psychoanalysis, establishes seven kinds of identification (see Chapter 3 of *A Psychoanalytic Perspective on Reading Literature*, pp. 55-79), Andringa follows Schoenmakers and van Vliet in recognizing only two: “similarity identification”, based on the recognition of similarities between the readers and the fiction, or “wish identification”, whereby readers “perceive aspects or qualities they would like to have or to be like” (209). In other words, one works on the basis of resemblance and the other of aspiration, yet in either case the identification involves a search for a reflection, either of oneself or of an ideal, perfected version of oneself. It is important to notice, however, that similarity identification is not necessarily based on positive traits: while recalling the understanding of identification as “imitating models”, Slavoj Žižek notes that “the feature, the trait on the basis of which we identify with someone, is usually hidden — it is by no means necessarily a glamorous feature” (117), and is in fact often a flaw, or a hidden fear, or any negative trait that the subject may feel the need to conceal from others.

While there can be negative consequences to this process (see Roth’s Chapter 3 for a psychoanalytical interpretation of these), identification is still, as far as fiction is concerned, responsible for the creation of “involvement as an emotional consequence”, as well as what establishes “a *relationship* between the recipient and the world of fiction” (Andringa 210, italics in original). In fact, it may be argued that identification is what makes it possible for the text to act as “a kind of mirror” (*Implied Reader* 281), in Wolfgang Iser’s words. Iser himself argues that this is so because the reader’s experience of the text “will reflect his own disposition” (*Implied Reader* 281), and also because each perspective or position within the text “appears against the others and is therefore not only itself but also a reflection and an illuminator of those others” (Iser, *Act* 98). Even so, he is still sceptical of over-reliance on the idea of reflection, or sameness, to explain the relationship between the reader and the text, reasoning that “[a] response that depends upon the reader finding a reflection of himself could scarcely bring the reader anything *new*” (*Act* 43, italics in original). This is because reflection is not an intersubjective experience, as suggested by the implicit power dynamic of the mirror: it is not an

encounter and interaction with difference, but rather a search for the same, for Ricoeur's *idem*. Readers look for familiarity, for recognizable experiences and feelings, because they seek self-affirmation, reassurance, and understanding in the minds of others — even in fictional others. Put in simple terms, if a fictional character is likeable, and that character resembles oneself in positive or negative terms, or else is what oneself would aspire to be, that makes one likeable in turn. Not only that — readers look for reflections of themselves because fictional identities are imaginative variations, so that to encounter resemblance is a useful way of carrying out the moral and emotional experiments as though one was put in that position oneself. However, Iser argues that “the initial impulse” upon reading “must lie not in the *sameness* but in the *difference* of the text [...]”. The whole process of comprehension is set in motion by the need to familiarize the unfamiliar” (Iser, *Act* 43, italics in original). Andringa also notices how readers are “strongly fascinated by characters and worlds that are *unfamiliar* to them”, so that “dissimilarity” can be understood as yet another type of identification (210). In fact, readers tend to be very well aware that it is not really *themselves* they are reading about — meaning, therefore, that they are fully conscious of recognizing themselves in another. Not only are they capable, but also willing to leave behind their own circumstances and identity in order to identify with this representation of otherness: “its realization must entail an interaction with the desire of the other [...]. [O]nly when the other is truly separate from the self can the self benefit from its recognition” (Jay 345-346).

In this way, although interaction with the text appears to be guided by this search for the familiar, readers are nonetheless driven to incorporate the unfamiliar into their own experience, to assimilate it into something they can understand. Fiction, then, by its inherent quality that allows the imaginative experience of another — and hence of that which lies outside the readers' original position in the grid —, may act as a bridge that belies the presumed fundamental inaccessibility of the other position. The intersubjective structure of fiction, its creation of fictional minds, and the response which it prompts in its consumers, may endow us with knowledge that enables the comprehension of another's experience. Not only that: such knowledge could also shift our understanding of our own position. As a mirror reflecting another creates an infinite pattern of specularity, so, too, the interplay between reading subject and fiction creates a complex process influenced both ways — by the text's contents and by the subject that consumes it, by the projection into the fiction and the simultaneous introjection of it. It is telling that the image of the mirror, versatile as it is, also establishes a parallelism between the dichotomies of subject/other and reality/fiction, the latter pole of both regarded as a simple, inferior version — reflection — of the first. Even today we continue to refer to fiction as a mere illusion, a word with heavy connotations of falsity. Nonetheless, when we accept the premise that the other is but an-other subject, one that can be perceived, understood, and communicated with, we can open up to the possibility of fiction being nothing but an-other reality — an alternate world that can be perceived and interacted with, and which influences the 'real', as such. This dichotomy is further examined in chapter 6, as it is fundamentally connected to the concept of fantasy — which has, as a literary genre, also suffered from much the same associations with the false and the illusory.

3.1 THE FICTIONAL OTHER: (MIS)REPRESENTING WOMAN

The above begs the question of how fictional images may alter the perception which otherized individuals have of themselves *as* others. If fictional narratives can be mirrors in which the readers try to find or insert themselves, perhaps the solution is to create “a different, more benign kind of mirror” (Jay 533). Yet fiction, as seen earlier, is inextricably interwoven with the grand

narratives articulating the social and cultural systems around it; this means that its narratives tend to be modelled after the dynamics at work in primary reality, and hence to reproduce the status quo. As a consequence, the fictional images of social others reproduce that otherness, as well as the oppressive power relationships that produce it. To return to my current case study, the fictional representations of woman will often reflect her position within the specular male/female power dynamic. How, then, is this “more benign kind of mirror” to be produced?

In order to come up with an answer, let us first examine how the representation of woman in fiction is impacted due to her condition as other in primary reality. I would draw on Slavoj Žižek’s and Laura Mulvey’s concepts here, as they can be interpreted in complementary ways. Žižek in particular draws on the notion of identification to suggest that, in interactions with others, it always takes place “*on behalf of a certain gaze in the Other*” (Žižek 117, italics in original). If the subject is somehow imitating a model or “‘playing a role’, the question to ask is: for whom is the subject enacting this role? Which gaze is considered when the subject identifies himself with a certain image?” (117-118). Though the gaze can work in this way with any individual, in the case of women, as noted in Chapter 2, this would be Mulvey’s male gaze, and this is what determines the role and attitudes of women in fiction. Though her theory was developed thinking specifically of cinema, as she finds similarities between the camera’s controlled, deliberate point of view and the process of visual perception of the subject in regular conditions, I nonetheless believe that it can be applied to any form of fiction, regardless of its use of a visual medium. There are literary techniques, such as focalization or first-person narration, that work in ways similar to that of the camera focus, with the added bonus of offering intimate access to the character’s thoughts and opinions at any given moment — which arguably makes literature even more effective in its conveyance of point of view, as it acquires both physical and mental/psychological dimensions. As Mulvey puts it, then, the way the male gaze works in fiction is as follows: “In their traditional exhibitionist role women are simultaneously looked at and displayed, with their appearance coded for strong visual and erotic impact so that they can be said to connote *to-be-looked-at-ness*” (Mulvey 19, italics in original). The man’s control of the gaze turns woman into its passive object, tailored after what the gaze seeks to find. The mirror dynamic thus persecutes woman within fiction as well as outside of it, entrapping her within this reflective position that strips her of agency and allows man to live out “his fantasies and obsessions” through her, imposing and projecting them onto her character (Mulvey 15). Furthermore, Mulvey argues that “the gaze of the spectator and that of the male characters [...] are neatly combined without breaking narrative verisimilitude” (19), meaning that the consumer’s position, “regardless of actual sex (or possible deviance)” (29), is immediately aligned with the male perspective. The mechanisms inherent to fiction-building and “[i]n-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as ‘point of view’” (Mulvey 29), and in so doing, prompt the consumer to identify with the male protagonist, or simply to experience the fictional characters and events through a male lens — irrespective of how they may identify outside of the fiction. Mulvey outlines two possible responses to this forced alignment of perspectives: “the female spectator may find herself so out of key with the pleasure on offer, with its ‘masculinisation’, that the spell of fascination is broken. On the other hand, she may not. She may find herself secretly, unconsciously almost, enjoying the freedom of action and control over the diegetic world that identification with a hero provides” (29). In other words, they may feel alienated by the male perspective, which breaks their enjoyment and their immersion in (and hence identification with) the fictional narrative, yet they may also find enjoyment in taking the position of the side that holds the power, even if just for the duration of the process of fictional consumption.

Mulvey clearly had in mind fictional narratives with a male or male-aligned protagonist, but I would argue that any fictional representation of woman (regardless of protagonist, or authorship) is at risk of being in some way pervaded by the presence of the male gaze — precisely because of this imposed alignment with the masculine perspective. Women are consistently forced to take the masculine or masculinized point of view, thus symbolically identifying woman “with the gaze for which [she] is playing [her] role” (Žižek 118). In turn, this means that the female spectator is more likely and better able to identify with characters that are *unlike* herself, due to their identifying both with the image presented (in terms of similarity, dissimilarity, or wish identification as Andringa suggested) and with the point of view, or the gaze (as both Mulvey and Žižek suggest). Woman is even likely to outright reject identification with her fictional counterpart, as much in an attempt to grasp at some form of agency, as embodied through the male characters, as to disassociate herself from the negative connotations perceived within fictional images of woman. Therefore, fiction makes for perhaps the clearest evidence of how woman’s representation — and self-representation — have been denied to her. Virginia Woolf had already pointed out woman as a “very queer, composite being” due to the contrast between her fictional importance and her position in primary reality: “Imaginatively she is of the highest importance; practically she is completely insignificant” (Woolf 66). And yet, this importance often translates into either catastrophe and/or punishment for the woman (and/or those close to her), or else into disproportionate idealization. This is because woman’s fictional images demonstrate the typical and contradictory ambivalence that is attached to the role of other:

[Woman] will be neither inside nor outside, neither known nor unknown. It is this position that has enabled male culture sometimes to vilify women [...] and sometimes to elevate them [...]. Needless to say, neither position corresponds to any essential truth of woman, much as the patriarchal powers would like us to believe that they did. (Moi 167)

This explains the coexistence of archetypal opposites within the same image of woman, and simultaneously betrays the inability of patriarchal narratives to represent woman in ways that are not reductive, objectifying, or imposing the ideal repetition of the male image — and thence of what the male gaze finds valuable and desirable. As such, individuals who identify as women feel a fundamental disconnection between themselves and what the fictional image and the gaze are implying that they are, or should be. This idea is also expressed in Mulvey’s essay when, exploring the Freudian conception of femininity, she writes that

the feminine cannot be conceptualised as different, but rather only as *opposition* (passivity) in an antinomic sense, or as *similarity* (the phallic phase) [...] The definition in terms of opposition or similarity leaves women also shifting between the metaphoric opposition ‘active’ and ‘passive’. The correct road, femininity, leads to increasing repression of ‘the active’. (31)

To recall Žižek’s symbolic identification with the gaze, it is thus that the fictional image idealizes *the version of the subject that enacts the wishes of the gaze*. What this means is that women, and other marginalized identities, are denied the development of the identification process (in fiction and outside of it) as it takes place for the subject — or even deprived of identification at all, as the images that resemble them become demonized or fetishized, thus serving to legitimize the rule of the oppressive system (see Žižek 118). In being presented with

these idealized images, otherized individuals become unable to comprehend their own identity outside of the parameters given by the narratives in power. This happens not just to the social others themselves, in fact; to use women as an example, any individual encouraged by both the ideological systems in place and the fictional images such systems produce can, and does, come to reduce the idea and the image of woman to that presented by the male gaze. In turn, this creates expectations at the individual level which women find themselves pressured to meet, and which thus impact their identity building. As Teresa de Lauretis specifies, the “sex-gender system” of “representation [...] assigns meaning (identity, value, prestige, [...] status in the social hierarchy, etc.) to individuals within the society”, and therefore “for someone to be represented and to represent oneself as male or female implies the assumption of the whole of those meaning effects” (5). The inability and unwillingness to represent social others in fiction as the fully agential subjects they could potentially be thus has clear consequences for these others, as they are denied the same validation that the universal subject receives from them. Woman, in her case, is denied a positive differentiation from man, and prevented from achieving subjectivity as she becomes unable to conceive of her difference as anything but an undesirable lack, indicative of her inescapable inferiority — which in turn justifies her position as such. Because they do not have the advantage of positive representations that reinforce their sense of self, they become unable to define their identities outside of this liminal, otherized state of being-*not*.

Žižek explains this dynamic of identification by which the gaze reasserts its own power with several examples, one of which demonstrates the applicability of these ideas to the position of social others *other than* woman:

[The] idealized image of the working class is staged for the gaze of the ruling Party bureaucracy — it serves to legitimize their rule. That is why Milos Forman’s Czech films were so subversive in mocking small, ordinary people: in showing their undignified ways, the futility of their dreams... [...] Forman did not want to destroy the bureaucrat’s imaginary identification; he wisely preferred to subvert his symbolic identification by unmasking the spectacle enacted for his gaze. (119)

Incidentally, this idea points to a possible answer to the problem of the representation of the other in fiction. In order for female representation to escape the patriarchal specular order, woman must unmask “the spectacle enacted for [her] gaze” — and in so doing, define herself in her own terms by refusing the gaze’s influence on her self-perception. By elevating, or denigrating, woman to fit into the moulds which the gaze devises (with the alternative being, at a discursive and social level, virtual non-existence), fictional images of woman work to favour and sustain patriarchal power dynamics. Conversely, by demystifying the female experience, showing the crippling flaws, the ugliness, every facet of the difference that is present within her and which the male gaze would conceal, these images may instead offer an alternate point of view, one that speaks from the other’s position instead of *for* them. Therein lies the key to subverting the specular system, or at least circumventing it, as Milos Forman did with his films. To do so would require the abandonment, destruction, or otherwise the disturbance of the dynamics of the gaze — to somehow upend it, or prevent it. Though it does not appear possible to operate outside of the boundaries of the mirror, and of the systems and ideological discourses that have constructed its power dynamics, the very idea that gender, identity, and even reality are artificially constructed narratives suggests that they can very well be *deconstructed*.

3.2 THE FICTIONAL SUBJECT: REPRESENTING WOMAN

Perhaps, then, instead of attempting to bypass or overturn the entire system, the creation of the “more benign” mirror Jay spoke of may be more successful by starting from the transformation of the individual, the single image or representation. By starting from difference, as Somers and Gibson put it, the fictional imaginative variations can slowly be expanded in order to reflect the presence of otherness, so that these social others may encounter the sameness which interpersonal communication, and identification, seek. There is the question, however, of perspective: which point of view these individual images of difference are or can be created, so as to contribute to said deconstruction of the power relations in place.

As mentioned earlier, the creation of fictional narratives is usually monopolized by the voice and presence of the universal subject: given its privileged position in the current binary power relations, fictional narratives tend to align with that universal, its voice speaking over — and speaking for, as Ahmed put it — the voices of others. This dominant voice is what needs to be counteracted by the individual, from the point of view of difference, of the other. However, these ‘other’ voices are silenced, and hence prevented from producing and speaking out their own narratives, as the subjects recognized as such by the dominant systems in place are able to. This silencing of alternative points of view is a sign of submission, as bell hooks points out, given that the inability to speak (and to write) fundamentally hinders communication or prevents it altogether — and communication, as Merleau-Ponty had established, is fundamental for one subject to recognize another as such. hooks writes that “[s]ilence is the condition of one who has been dominated, made an object” (*Talking Back* 129), and such silences create absences, gaps which are quickly filled by other, stronger narratives. This prevents self-realization and acts of resistance against the oppressive systems which produce and enforce such silences:

Moving from silence into speech is for the oppressed, the colonized, the exploited, and those who stand and struggle side by side a gesture of defiance that heals, that makes new life and new growth possible. It is that act of speech, of ‘talking back’, that is no mere gesture of empty words, that is the expression of our movement from object to subject — the liberated voice. (*Talking Back* 9)

The struggle is thus not just to *find* that voice, but also to *use* it in order to talk back to a system that insists on silencing it. It is in the act of talking back that the speaking subaltern⁸ transforms into a speaking subject: “Speaking becomes both a way to engage in active self-transformation and a rite of passage where one moves from being object to being subject. Only as subjects can we speak. As objects, we remain voiceless — our beings defined and interpreted by others” (hooks, *Talking Back* 12). hooks seems to conceive of this voice of the subaltern as one that fundamentally speaks *against*, that is, one that always speaks in opposition to an oppressive paradigm. This act of speaking against is a constant effort to achieve a “liberatory voice — that way of speaking that is no longer determined by one’s status as object” (hooks, *Talking Back* 15).

hooks therefore seems to be establishing a difference between the voice of the subaltern — that which speaks *as* the other, the subjugated object (in this case, the Black woman) — and the voice of the individual — that which speaks *as* oneself, as an individual subject, and hence

⁸ Positing the idea of a “speaking subaltern” seems to answer the major question of Spivak’s “Can the Subaltern Speak?” in the affirmative. Interestingly, however, hooks does not seem to contradict Spivak’s idea that the subaltern cannot speak *as such*, considering that her following argument posits a “liberated voice” which turns subalterns into speaking *subjects* — and hence makes them no longer subaltern (*Talking Back* 129).

unconditioned and undefined by otherness. The latter seems to be the “liberatory” or “liberated voice”, and this seems to be, according to hooks, the only way in which the oppressed are able to speak directly to the oppressors on equal footing: as hooks puts it, the goal is “the confrontation between women and men, the sharing of this new and radical speech: women speaking to men in a liberated voice” (*Talking Back* 129). Though this confrontation is the end goal, it is in fact the last step in this process of liberation. Firstly, the oppressed individual must enter into dialogue with other subalterns, the ones that listen to those experiences differently: “My words are heard differently by the oppressive powerful. They are heard in a different way by black women who, like me, are struggling to recover ourselves from the ravages of colonization” (hooks, *Talking Back* 16). A white, male audience will never *not* hear voices like hooks’ as that of the other, because such voices speak against it as the oppressive universal subject. However, the same voice is used to speak *to* and *with* Black women, with other social others, and this is a fundamental step to eventually achieve that confrontation. Given that dialogue “implies talk between two subjects, not the speech of subject and object. It is a humanizing speech, one that challenges and resists domination” (hooks, *Talking Back* 131), entering into dialogue with one another is what encourages these others to find their own voices *as* speaking subjects. This can be linked to Brent R. Henze’s concept of individual agency, which he defines as “a person’s socially acknowledged right to interpret and speak for herself” (230). Recovering⁹ voice is therefore inseparable from recovering the sense of one’s agency, and this individual agency is in turn pivotal “for the collective agency of identity groups” (Henze 230). This is because the individual assertion and interpretation of one’s identity and experiences favours the creation of community without needing to rely on an unproblematic conception of fixed, unified sameness (as implied by existing identity categories). This representing and naming of the individual experience, hooks argues, must combine “with critical understanding of the concrete material reality that lays the groundwork for that personal experience” (hooks, *Talking Back* 108). In so doing, these subalterns or ‘others’ become able to communicate their sense of self, and so to define their own identity over those definitions imposed on them by patriarchal, colonial patterns of domination. As Henze already implied, this is the first step for collective movements towards social change to take root: “It would be a grave mistake to suggest that politicization of the self is not part of the process by which we prepare ourselves to act most effectively for radical social change” (hooks, *Talking Back* 109).

The constitution, or recovery, of this liberated voice and this sense of individual agency is therefore fundamental for otherized individuals to be able to represent themselves — that is, to create images of themselves using their particular perspective and situated knowledges, the very images they have been deprived of as socio-political ideological apparatuses work to silence their perspectives. I argue, then, that fictional narratives are one significant mechanism by which these individuals can gain access to self-representation, and thus a medium through which they can recover their voice and become speaking — hence agential — subjects. Teresa de Lauretis’ theory is particularly interesting in this regard, as her idea of “technologies of gender” explains the workings of the representation of otherness under a similar lens. She posits that to represent gender is to construct it (3), and that as such it “is the product of various social technologies, such as cinema, as well as institutional discourses, epistemologies, and critical practices” (De Lauretis ix), a similar idea to Althusser’s ideological state apparatuses as well as

9 Though hooks herself refers to finding one’s voice as an act of “self-recovery”, she does question the implication that “a wholeness of being — named here the self — is present, possible, that we have experienced it, that it is a state to which we can return” (*Talking Back* 30). The word ‘recover’ implies that the oppressed once had a voice prior to this subaltern state, and hooks struggles with the idea that this is a possibility “for the oppressed, the dominated, the dehumanized [...], that the whole self existed prior to exploitation and oppression, a self that could indeed be restored, recovered” (30).

to Judith Butler's theory. In recognizing the hegemony of male discourse and male sexuality, which also dominate the fictional space, De Lauretis develops her theory under the assumption that the creation of alternative constructions and depictions of gender is only possible by operating "*in the margins of hegemonic discourse*" (De Lauretis 18, italics in original). This would mean seizing woman's enforcedly liminal position as an other and subverting it to work for her, instead of against her — making her difference into an advantage to create a "view from elsewhere" that counteracts patriarchal social discourse (25). Interestingly, Althusser himself had also briefly considered the idea that the exploited class of individuals may take advantage of the very same apparatuses being enforced, and use their mechanisms to turn "the weapon of ideology against the classes in power" (21), deconstructing it with its own tools. Judith Butler also put forward a very similar line of thought in *Gender Trouble* by hinting at strategies that may use the very performance of gender in order to subvert it: "if the category [...] is established through repeated acts, then the social action of bodies within the cultural field can withdraw the very power of reality that they themselves invested in the category" (Butler 168). Simply put, if bodily acts create a narrative that construes gender as a category, then the ontology created by this discourse can be deconstructed by re-signifying those same acts, or by performing different ones. As examples, concerning gender, Butler mentions parodic and imitative practices such as drag: in parodying the actions and behaviours which socially construct gender, they "*implicitly [reveal] the imitative structure of gender itself — as well as its contingency*" (Butler 187, italics in original), therefore openly re-appropriating the practice in order to subvert it and thus re-signifying it — "unmasking the spectacle enacted for [our] gaze" (Žižek 119).

The similarities of these arguments to De Lauretis' are interesting precisely because she applies these ideas specifically to fictional representation, thus showing how fictional narratives, despite being used as instruments to reinforce and sustain hegemonic narratives of domination, can also be used conversely — to work against the systems of power in place by creating those "views from elsewhere" (De Lauretis 25). Diana Tietjens-Meyers refers to these as "counterfigurations", which involve contesting hegemonic imagery in order to dislodge culturally normative prejudice (60). Tietjens-Meyers states that "the proliferation of self-generated figurations of socially excluded groups has the advantage of underscoring the contestability of all cultural figurations and thus politicizes them" (107). In other words, the self-representations of social others are able to highlight the constructedness and political nature of existing, hegemonic cultural narratives, exposing their universal applicability as a fraud and hence creating a counteractive discourse. Interestingly, De Lauretis suggests that the problem is not that these counterfigurations — these subversive representations of woman — have not yet been (or cannot be, as Irigaray had argued) produced, but rather "that what we have produced is not recognizable, precisely, as a representation" (De Lauretis 25) due to its limited effects. These individual narratives are not perceived to have repercussions on the status quo, on the symbolic system of grand narratives which orchestrate and constrict the social world; their effect is noticeable only at a smaller scale, at the level of "micropolitical practices of daily life and daily resistances" (De Lauretis 25), at "the 'local' level of resistances, in subjectivity and self-representation" (18).

Thus, the impact of subversive fictional representations works, necessarily, at a local level, often limited to the very marginalities they represent rather than the system as a whole. It is these margins, however, that seem best suited to chip away at the base of the system, as both hooks and Henze suggest. De Lauretis also conceives of them as the perfect site of resistance, though this statement encapsulates a larger site of debate than this work can currently concern itself with. Nonetheless, I would posit that appealing to the very marginalities that need representation by

offering images *from* those same margins is in itself a most subversive act, as such representations are what was lacking to begin with. Henze's own interpretation of the concept of identification comes in handy to elaborate on this point: he differentiates between "imaginary identification"¹⁰, a claim of one's experience as equivalent to another's, and "imaginative identification", a recognition by which "individuals make the political decision to understand their experiences as *like* that of others" (Henze 241, italics mine). This means that individuals make a conscious decision to identify with others on the basis of perceived similarity, yet without attempting to assimilate this into an illusion of complete, seamless sameness. This, Henze argues, is a political choice, one meant to drive the movement of resistance forward by seeking common ground through empathy with the other's experience — by recognizing it as similar to one's own, and hence rendering it understandable. This makes the act of telling, of relaying one's experiences through fiction, acquire a political dimension in two ways: in the telling, which is "performed for [the tellers] themselves (they are informing others of their conditions, their lives) and for their readers" (Henze 240); and in the interpreting of those narratives, because the "process of individual interpretation, drawing on the resources brought together by the group as a whole", is what begins to produce collectivity by fostering understanding (240). Instead of being spoken for, as Ahmed put it, the mechanisms of fictional narratives allow social others to find their ability to speak for themselves and to represent themselves through these images, which work from their perspective to express their position on the grid and what it means to exist in its margins — the images which the authors in Chapter 1 expressed the need for. Such counterfigurations may, of course, have an effect in the hegemonic, privileged subject consuming them, in shifting their perceptions of their privileged position on the grid so that they may "recognize their situatedness in oppressive systems of power even if they do not directly experience those systems as oppressive", and "learn to participate responsibly in them" (Henze 245). In presenting them with otherness in the form of a fictional mind that they are encouraged to identify with, their identification with the social other may begin to transform from symbolic, in Žižek's conception, to imaginative, as per Henze's definition — making these subjects cognizant of difference without attempting to absorb or assimilate it into some form of sameness. Valuable as the possibility of shifting the values and perceptions of the hegemonic subject is, I would still argue that the most significant benefit of fictional narratives lies in these self-representations being oriented and meant for the margins — towards other social others. This is because fictional narratives, in creating or else encouraging the recovery of voice and agency, contribute to altering these others' self-perception as such.

In the first and second chapters it was argued that social others find their process of identity formation impeded by the social and ideological systems which orchestrate their construction as such: they are forced to construct and perceive themselves as 'other', and hence to define themselves in the negative, as fundamentally lacking what would make them agential subjects. Chapter three shows how these others are also denied the positive reinforcement of their identity that subjects gain from fictional narratives, since they are 'other' and hence must identify with a position, a gaze, that is not their own — and which, in turn, makes them adapt to its requirements. This results in an enforced silencing, taking away their ability to self-represent. In order for them to be recognized as subjects in the current social order, as hooks argues, they must first reclaim the voice (and consequently the agency) taken from them. In simple terms, social change is made possible only by first facilitating change at an individual level,

¹⁰ Not to be confused with Žižek's idea of "imaginary identification", which he defines as "identification with the image in which we appear likeable to ourselves, with the image representing 'what we would like to be'", and which contrasts with the aforementioned "symbolic identification, identification with the very place *from where* we are being observed" (116).

the “local level of resistances” which De Lauretis so valued; and fictional narratives can prove useful, if not fundamental, tools to shift that self-perception. Fiction opens a door for the other to self-represent, to create representations — fictional minds — that look, think and *exist* like them: images that are created from their own position and which express their experiences in their own terms. In self-representing, the very idea of otherness is re-signified: they bypass oppressive mechanisms that reinforce its negative perceptions, such as the male gaze, and re-appropriate the parts of their identity that had been seen and told from hegemonic perspectives. This provides a positive reinforcement for these subalterns’ sense of self. The fictional consciousnesses that they can identify with — in the sense of Henze’s imaginative identification, of *seeing themselves, or someone like themselves*, in these images — are incorporated into the self-narratives of those consuming the fictional narrative, a transformative incorporation that favours their movement from other to subject. Kevin Quashie expresses it, thinking specifically of Blackness, as “imagin[ing] a black world” (1):

We do not live in a black world, this is true. But the as-if of such imagining can inspire how we might navigate the world that we indeed live in, the one that is antiblack and that resists and resents and despises our being. We do not live in a black world, but in a poem there is an orientation of such being waiting for us, these poems in our hands as a world of invitation. (154)

The invitation condensed in these “poems”, these fictions, is an invitation “to imagine how we want to be in the world and then to move toward that being” (Quashie 147). For those who are named ‘other’, the very act of identifying themselves as subjects is an act of resistance: once this crucial shift in self-perception is achieved, or proven achievable, these liberated subjects become able to articulate active socio-political resistance against the hegemonic ideologies attempting to enforce their otherness.

CHAPTER 4: FICTION AND THE READER

Art is always made for the other, an imaginary other; it is true, but an other nevertheless. Art is a reaching toward, a bid to be seen and understood and recognized by another.
(Siri Hustvedt)

Even if we accept that fiction has the potential to represent the oppressed as full, recognizable subjects, and hence to encourage them to gain their voice and agency, there is still the question of how such acts of self-representation may gain significance beyond that “local level”, beyond the individuals affected by the hegemonic power structures. After all, if “mass media ignore the figurations that socially excluded groups conceive for themselves, [... h]ardly anyone will be exposed to [them], and [they] will not gain currency” (Tietjens-Meyers 113). Additionally, desirable as it is, widespread exposure to these representations is difficult to achieve and is no guarantee for widespread social change — likely not enough, in itself, to produce any significant shift in the systems at work. One may thus very well wonder what the ‘real’ impact of fictional representations in and beyond the consumer truly is — whether these ideal counterfigurations, in forcing a re-examination and thus eventual deconstruction of grand narratives, can become realized and have noticeable consequences for the fabric of our social and interpersonal primary reality. Reader-response theories seem like the best path towards a possible answer: if fictional narratives are to have extra-textual effects, if an “exchange between fiction and life” is to take place (Andringa 211), it must by necessity — as suggested in the previous chapter — take place through the consumers, the readers. Following the consistency of the mirror image, then, I have selected theories which point to the ways in which patterns of fictional consumption reproduce the specular dynamic, while simultaneously questioning it and its workings. The examination of theories of narrative empathy that follows provides a possible mechanism by which the effects of fiction may extend beyond the individuals in the moment of reading, as well as beyond the individuals’ self-perception into their relationships with the world around them.

4.1 FICTION AND THE READER’S RESPONSE

Roman Ingarden’s theory merits brief consideration, given the significant influence it had on later theorists and particularly on Wolfgang Iser, whose take on reader-response is the focus of this chapter. Ingarden grants the literary work a certain “character of reality”, which is nonetheless “not to be fully identified with the ontic character of truly existing real objects. In represented objectivities there is only an *external habitus* of reality, which does not intend, as it were, to be taken seriously, although, when the work is read, it can often happen that the reader [...] considers to be real intentional objects which only simulate reality” (Ingarden 221). This phrasing seems to suggest that the literary work possesses an ontology of its own, yet importantly, Ingarden still seems to perceive it as a simulation, as lacking some quality which is fundamentally necessary to possess the condition of *real*. In spite of this, it is clear that the

narrative has some effect beyond itself, as a “good representation forces us” to “fictitiously transpose ourselves into the represented center of orientation and wander about in the represented world *in fictione*” (Ingarden 231). Though Ingarden does not clarify what constitutes a “good representation”, it might be deducible from his later statements that he regards it positively if it possesses “objective consistency” — that is, if the representation of the object or individual retains consistency throughout the work in order to properly simulate reality (302). This is similar to Ricoeur’s suggestion that narratives require coherence in order to be effective, and betrays the idea that a good representation is one that simulates reality — in other words, one that is mimetic. While willing to grant the fictional narrative a *character* of reality, Ingarden still conceives of literature as a derivation, an imitation — a reflection of reality, and not an act of ontological construction. Despite these reservations, however, Ingarden seems willing to admit that the work of fiction is capable of having extra-textual effects, at the very least upon the feelings and reactions of the person who consumes it: “The most important function that represented objective situations can perform is in exhibiting and manifesting determinate metaphysical qualities” (Ingarden 293), among which he numbers “the sublime, the tragic, the dreadful, the shocking, the inexplicable, the demonic, the holy, the sorrowful, the indescribable brightness of good fortune”, and so on (Ingarden 290-291). Ingarden argues that we are often oblivious or unable to contemplate these qualities, or experience them properly, due to their rarity and the very condition of our human experience. The work of art, on the other hand, by representing the situation in which the metaphysical quality is produced, allows it to be “genuinely manifested” so that “we are deeply moved by what is represented, even though it may be something that never really occurred” (Ingarden 297). This is again similar to Ricoeur’s idea of imaginative variations, as Ingarden admits that the work of fiction “can give us, at least in microcosm and as reflection, what we can never attain in real life” (293): it is a thought experiment by which we gain access to reflections of other experiences.

In this line, Wolfgang Iser partially builds his theory on Ingarden’s work, but appears to go against previous aesthetic theories by depriving the text of its absolute authority as regards its own meaning. Iser believes that if meaning were already there, simply waiting to be deciphered, the very task of interpretation would be meaningless, as there would be nothing for the reader to do. This conception of interpretation as having the ultimate goal of deciphering meaning is derived from a binary approach to the relationship text/reader, as though it were the same subject/object dynamic previously applied to perception. This makes the meaning of the text into the object, which the reader — the subject — attempts to decode. Iser’s theory is groundbreaking in establishing meaning not as a static, predetermined object, but rather “the product of an interaction between the textual signals and the reader’s acts of comprehension” (*Act* 9). By discarding the binary text/reader, object/subject division, Iser turns the act of reading into a dynamic *process* by which both affect one another, much in the same way Merleau-Ponty turned the act of perception into mutual recognition. This is highly significant, as it establishes an intersubjective dynamic between text and reader where the former *guides* the interpretive act via textual strategies and structures, just as an individual can guide interpretations of their identity through bodily performances; however, unlike previous theories assumed, the text cannot exercise full control over the reader’s actualizations of it (see Iser, *Act* 24-25). This eliminates the idea of a one-sided imposition of meaning, and suggests that the reader is capable of not just interpreting but also of *transforming* the text.

Importantly, Iser recognizes that “fictional texts constitute their own objects and do not copy something already in existence”, which is why “they cannot have the total determinacy of real objects” (*Act* 24). While this “total determinacy” of the “real” is certainly up for debate, it

is in these indeterminacies of the text that its control slips, allowing the reader's input through a "spectrum of actualizations" (24). In other words, it is because these gaps exist that a multiplicity of interpretations becomes possible, which is why each reader is allowed a concretization, as Iser calls it — an interpretation derived from the reader's (dis)position and background. To explain interpretation, Iser develops a so-called theme/horizon structure: the theme is the perspective in the foreground, that which the reader occupies at a given moment during the reading. This could be the narrator's perspective, or that of a character, the plot, or even a specific space which the text designates for the reader to fill. This foreground is, however, always situated before the horizon of other perspectives which the reader occupied prior to the reading, and which now constitute the background of the reading experience. The dialectic between these two kinds of situated knowledges allows to unfold connections between the different textual and extra-textual perspectives, among which readers make a selection that influences their *gestalt* — their "consistent interpretation" of the text, and "a product of the interaction between text and reader" that cannot be traced exclusively back to either (Iser, *Act* 119). This process of selection varies among readers, and is conditioned by many factors, determined in no small part by readers' dispositions and the backgrounds within which they operate, which Iser refers to as interpretive frameworks.

While noticeably similar to the previously described mechanisms of perception and communication, the fundamental difference is that gestalt-forming — interpretation — involves an active role for the reader, who, rather than remaining passive, participates in the creation of textual meaning: "We always stand outside the given object, whereas we are situated inside the literary text. The relation between text and reader is therefore quite different from that between object and observer" (Iser, *Act* 109) because, in reading, become "caught up in the very thing we are producing" (*Act* 127). Such deep involvement is necessarily an illusion derived from the reading, but "we cannot, strictly speaking, watch ourselves having an illusion" (Gombrich, quoted in Iser, *Act* 127). Despite the illusory character which he grants to fiction, Iser therefore makes a similar point to Palmer in declaring that "in reading we think the thoughts of another person" (*Act* 126): "Whenever I read, I mentally pronounce an *I*, and yet the *I* which I pronounce is not myself" (Poulet, quoted in Iser, *Act* 154). Therefore, regardless of its being an "illusion", fiction does alter our perspective, shifting our interpretive framework to adapt and suit that of the fictional world, as well as that of the perspective which we are encouraged to inhabit. This experience of the thoughts of another "must to a greater or lesser degree represent an unfamiliar experience [...] which at any one moment must be partially inaccessible to us. For this reason, our selections tend to be guided by those parts of the experience that still seem to be familiar" (*Act* 126). If fiction-reading is an exploration of the mind of another, Iser is here arguing that we, as readers, attempt to access that experience and to immerse ourselves in it by first looking for what is familiar to us — driven by the "need to familiarize the *unfamiliar*" (Iser, *Act* 43) to facilitate our understanding. This need, and the fact that it is set into motion by the process of identification, shows that the process of consuming fiction may endow us with knowledge that enables the comprehension of another's experience. Furthermore, it makes it so that the text can still have an effect on our emotional and personal responses, despite our awareness of its fictional nature. An illusion it may be, but it is one with considerable power — and with very 'real' consequences.

As a consequence, we do not grasp the text "like an empirical object; nor do we comprehend it like a predicative fact; it owes its presence in our minds to our own reactions, and it is these that make us animate the meaning of the text as a reality" (Iser, *Act* 129). In other words, unlike objects with an empirical existence in primary reality, a text cannot exist — or, at least, its

purpose cannot be fulfilled — without *being read*, without the reader's input. It is only through the reader that the text achieves its full realization, which explains the readers' active role in the interpretive process: far from being limited to the passive absorption and internalization of textual content, the text is a trigger, rather than a source — one that kickstarts a process of reassembling and synthesizing. Though this process takes place *within* the reader in its entirety, it is only consistent interaction with the text that makes this process possible and, indeed, successful. Given this active role of the reader, Iser's theory is of particular interest because the intersubjective structure of fiction-reading whereby text and reader affect one another suggests the possibility that the knowledge gained from the text, despite its fictional nature, is able to influence and even shift the reader's previously held perspectives and ideas. Hence Iser's admission that the text can act as "a kind of mirror" (*Implied Reader* 281), despite his scepticism about reflection as explained in chapter 3. Much like knowledge of another human being, however, one's interpretation of the text is never complete; in fact, Iser goes as far as to claim that "total consumption of the text", the total realization of its meaning, "would itself be ruinous to literature" (*Act* 29), because it would exhaust the possibilities of the text and render it obsolete, finite. Similarly, total knowledge of another individual can never be complete, and indeed it perhaps should not be: assuming that our interpretation of what existing *as* another entails is complete would imply that the other has nothing more to interest us, turning interaction into an unproductive process.

If there is a reflection to be found in fiction, then, it is through the intersubjective relationship which Iser suggests, which places both text and reader in a place of equality and mutual interaction. Thus, the exercise of piecing a text together, of capturing textual signals and using them to fill in the blanks of information, as well as of inhabiting new perspectives for extended periods of time, can constitute good practice for the exercise of intersubjective communication with another individual. However, there are specifics to the act of reading — certain crucial differences which set it apart from actual interpersonal communication, despite the similarities between both processes. In fictional consumption, "there is no *face-to-face* situation" (Iser, *Act* 166), so that it is impossible for text and reader to learn directly from one another in each specific situation: the "text cannot adapt itself to each reader with whom it comes in contact", and the reader "can never learn from the text how accurate or inaccurate are his views of it" (*Act* 166). Furthermore, interaction "has a regulative context" which the interlocutors can reference, yet there is "no such frame of reference governing the text-reader relationship" (*Act* 166), where the frameworks of the text and the reader are not only different, but in many cases conflicting. On top of this, there is the added layer of difficulty that the text is not an active, sentient entity, so that it falls upon the reader to reassemble "the codes which might regulate this interaction [...] before any frame of reference *can* be established" (Iser, *Act* 166). Yet the reader must still bounce off of the text, for to fill its blanks and reassemble an interpretation according exclusively to the reader's own projections is to fail in the communicative process (see Iser, *Act* 167). This makes each concretization of the text not completely subjective, but rather, as mentioned above, guided by textual structures and strategies — so that the text is always the point of departure, regardless of how differently its gaps may be filled and its meanings restructured. The subject's active participation in the text means that this consuming subject constitutes no small part of the narrative that is being consumed, thus allowing for the possibility of interpretive bias; yet the text's guidelines and set-out perspectives are there precisely to limit and direct the reader's input. This is how "the same intersubjective structure of the literary text may give rise to so many different subjective realizations", because readers interpret from different positions, yet "without this structure [of the text] there could be no basis

for comparing and assessing interpretations” (Iser, *Act* 118). The significance of this is that our experience of a fictional mind, as accessed via the fictional text, can also be accessed by others in turn, and therefore compared, criticized, and even altered by their perceptions of our textual experience. This is why interpretations of a text are still subject to change even after the reading ends, because they are influenced by the concretizations of others and their opinions on our own — as well as by one’s own re-readings of the text.

This means two things: firstly, that by composing a literary text, marginalized individuals can include their perspective — their gestalt — within the writing for it to be reassembled by the reader, guiding their interpretation towards a different perception of what it means to exist as this specific marginal identity, and thus partly explaining the importance of making space for the voices and presences of marginalized subjects in creative fields. Secondly, it means that the resulting interpretation may be further questioned and revised in real-world contexts, thus giving way to re-interpretation and critical analysis that develop and dissect the new knowledge obtained through the fiction, thus contributing to its having a more lasting effect or impression on the consuming subject. In turn, this may aid in the deconstruction of dominant discourses around the social position of these marginalized individuals. In fact, Iser holds that the only successful outcome of the reading process is for “changes in the reader’s projections” to be produced: “It is only through readjustment of his own projections that the reader can experience something previously not within his experience” (*Act* 167), and hence acquire useful knowledge that will alter previously-held perspectives. These theories thus support the understanding of fiction as a learning process, a tool which provides an approach to otherness — to another mind, another experience, even another world — which enables a fuller, more complete understanding of difference, and is thus capable of prompting a different response to it. Therefore, the learning process, the new knowledge obtained through the fictional work, implies potential extratextual impact: it may shift the readers’ perceptions, both of their own and of other identities, as well as their social, cultural, and ethical politics and beliefs. In turn, this would become a catalyst — or create the adequate mental state — for further, deeper extratextual changes *beyond* the individual, by making it harder to pass judgement on difference, or depersonalize it, or dismiss it. While reader-response theory does not delve much further on the mechanisms by which the consumer of fiction may be encouraged to take this fictionally-earned knowledge and apply it to real individuals or situations, this argument is precisely what some theorists of narrative empathy (and of empathy in general, as a psychosocial process) have focused on.

4.2 FICTION AND THE EMPATHIC RESPONSE

The following quote encapsulates the major arguments thus far: “We read the world, especially the people we encounter” (Iacoboni 3, italics in original). In interacting with the world around us, and with other individuals in it, we constantly interpret it and are interpreted in turn. There is no perception without interpretation: as we do with fictional texts, we take signals and cues (bodily or otherwise) from others in order to discern what they are doing, what they are thinking, and what they are *feeling*. Science puzzled over human understanding and sharing of feelings up until the discovery of so-called mirror neurons, which it now continues to puzzle over. Experimental evidence has shown that this special kind of neurons would fire both when individuals themselves perform an action, and when the same or a similar action is performed by somebody else, thus *mirroring* the other’s behaviour (see Iacoboni 10-11). Further neurological studies suggest that these neurons may be at the core of the physical mirroring or mimicry which humans and primates perform, and which is a fundamental part of their psychosocial development. Imitation contributes to the development and proper functioning of these mirror

neurons, which seem to “originate early in life when other people’s behavior is the reflection of our *own* behavior” (Iacoboni 134, italics in original). Therefore, empirical data suggests that mirror neurons are at the core of what makes us relate to others, which contributes to the explanation of intersubjectivity and of the self’s primordial need for others from a neurological, scientific point of view: growing up in isolation is shown to render the individual unable “to develop self-recognition” properly, whereas a “rich social context facilitates it”, the crucial factor being “the presence of *others* — the continuous relations and interactions one must have with other individuals” (Iacoboni 139). Indeed, because mirror neurons are only activated through the interaction between self and other, “[s]elf-recognition and imitation go together” (Iacoboni 135). While this study is not concerned with neuroscientific investigation, I bring up the discovery and ongoing research on the workings of mirror neurons not simply because it aptly follows and supports the use of the mirror as a structuring trope for this study, but also because they demonstrate the human predisposition to empathy — given that they are considered to be (one of) the biological source(s) behind empathic response.

Marco Iacoboni describes his own scientific experiments, carried out in pursuit of this hypothesis, in chapter four of his book *Mirroring People*. His results appear to suggest that

mirror neuron areas help us understand the emotions of other people by some form of inner imitation. According to this [...] hypothesis of empathy, our mirror neurons fire when we see others expressing their emotions, as if we were making those facial expressions ourselves. By means of this firing, the neurons also send signals to emotional brain centers in the limbic system to make us feel what other people feel. (Iacoboni 119)

This process is “*effortless, automatic, and unconscious*” (120, italics in original), so that the individual does not actually have the *intention* to understand the other, nor is making a conscious effort to do so. The brain carries out the process almost instinctively: when the neurons fire, the brain behaves in such a way as if it were actually experiencing the same emotion as another — but this, much like the involvement created through fiction, is a simulated response to a perceived trigger. However, the fact that it is a simulation does not take away its power and potential. The brain *acts* and *behaves* as if we were experiencing the same emotion, even down to the biological, organic mechanisms that activate in the experience of empathy. Furthermore, although Iacoboni’s study places a great deal of emphasis on visual perception by focusing on facial expressions (which goes back to the issue of ocularcentrism and its limitations), other experiments suggest that “more abstract situations” where the face, body, and other gestures are not immediately visible can still produce empathy “by mirroring the affective aspect of pain” (Iacoboni 124). In this case, the active areas of the brain correspond to those “that process the emotional aspect of pain”, rather than the “tactile” or “sensory regions” (125), meaning it is still possible to process empathic response even if the individual does not personally feel physical pain *or* directly watch another feeling it. Therefore, this idea offers an explanation for how fiction can trigger empathy, producing emotional and psychological responses in the reader that are similar to those produced by non-fictional individuals and empirical triggers. Iacoboni himself argues that we “have empathy for the fictional characters — we know how they’re feeling — because we literally experience the same feelings ourselves” (4),¹¹ a process which

¹¹ Though there seems to be no direct scientific data regarding how fiction-reading triggers mirror neurons, see a discussion of this possibility in greater depth at Clay, Zanna and Marco Iacoboni, “Mirroring Fictional Others”, in *The Aesthetic Mind: Philosophy and Psychology*, edited by Elizabeth Schellekens and Peter Goldie, Oxford University Press, 2011, pp. 313-329.

mirrors (pun very much intended) the one provoked when we perceive another person's bodily or facial expressions, which our mirror neurons trigger to match with a certain emotion.

This is an idea which other authors, including writers of fiction, have expressed before, as exemplified by Marcel Proust in his novel *Time Regained* (1931):

By art alone we are able to get outside ourselves, to know what another sees of this universe which for him is not ours, the landscapes of which would remain as unknown to us as those of the moon. Thanks to art, instead of seeing one world, our own, we see it multiplied and as many original artists as there are, so many worlds at our disposal, differing more widely from each other than those which roll round the infinite. (116)

With reader-response theories seemingly supporting this idea, empathy therefore appears to be at the root, or one fundamental trigger, of this process of getting to know another — at least in theory. A considerable body of theoretical work is reluctant to acknowledge the value of empathic response in this sense, or to consider it as true knowledge of another; in this vein, it is worth mentioning the questioning of the idea that the process of empathy, and of discerning another's thoughts and feelings, is “effortless” and “instinctual”, as Iacoboni suggested above. This idea comes from the point of view of cognitive science, which has a different frame of reference for “measuring the relative ‘success’ of mind-reading”, as some scholars have dubbed this process (Zunshine 274). To say that “we could effortlessly [...] figure out what the person whose behavior we are trying to explain is thinking” implies that we do so “correctly, unambiguously, nearly telepathically” (274), but to apply this process to fiction shows — from the perspective of literary criticism — that “the process of attributing thoughts, beliefs, and desires to other people may lead to *misinterpreting* those thoughts, beliefs, and desires” (Zunshine 274), and hence is not as straightforward as Iacoboni suggested.

Before delving any further into narrative empathy, however, it is important to note the distinct terms which have been used to designate this kind of emotional response, so as to prevent any confusion due to their shifting meanings. The concept of ‘sympathy’ was originally used to refer to the faculty we nowadays think of as ‘empathy’. During the eighteenth century, sympathy was thought of as a “moral faculty” (Hunt 65) which “made us good citizens” and “tempered our self-interest” (Keen 44), thus conceived of by many authors of the time as the root of altruistic concern (see Keen 42-44, Hunt 65), erasing self-absorption and orienting humans towards each other. In a very similar way, nineteenth-century Romantics continued to employ the term with the same meaning: they would invite their

readers to fuse with themselves and with the objects of their representation. Readers feel with writers and with characters or representations, and readers in the real world regard the objects of their gaze as if they were representations. Writers in the real world do the same thing with their subjects, recognizing and representing them as material for sympathetic identification. (Keen 51)

The term ‘empathy’, on the other hand, was coined more recently, in the early twentieth century and as a translation for the German *Einfühlung*. However, ‘sympathy’ and ‘empathy’ are nowadays not used synonymously — many theorists agree on making a distinction, though not all of them do so on the same terms. Suzanne Keen, for instance, names “the spontaneous, responsive sharing of an appropriate feeling as *empathy*, and the more complex, differentiated feeling for another as *sympathy* (sometimes called *empathic concern*)” (4, italics in original).

Empathy, then, would involve feeling “what we believe to be the emotions of others” (Keen 5), seeking the incorporation of the other’s experience into our own by experiencing a semblance of it ourselves. Sympathy, on the other hand, seems to be a reaction to that perceived experience, “in which feelings *for* another occur” (Keen 5, italics in original). Author Kimberly Chabot Davis also highlights that “[w]hile empathy could be seen as a type of sympathy, empathy usually signifies a stronger element of identification or ‘perspective-taking’ – imaginatively experiencing the feelings, thoughts and situation of another” (403); I will thus be using the term ‘empathy’ throughout this work to refer to this feeling, related to the activation of mirror neurons, of inhabiting or experiencing the same feelings as another.

A great many authors nonetheless suggest that the distinction goes beyond feeling *with* or feeling *for*. Lynn Hunt, for instance, argues that “‘imagined empathy’ serves as the foundation of human rights” because it involves “imagining that someone else is like you” (32), a notion very similar to Henze’s idea of imaginative identification as the basis for collective social justice movements. On the other hand, sympathy “often signifies pity, which can imply condescension, a feeling incompatible with a true feeling of equality” (Hunt 65). In this way, attempts to elicit sympathy towards a situation of inequality or power imbalance may backfire, making it seem as though the oppressed collective is helpless without the aid of the oppressor, who is actually the direct source of or an indirect contributor to these oppressive circumstances. This could easily turn into appropriation of the struggles described, depriving the oppressed of agency, as Sara Ahmed explained in *Strange Encounters*: a subject authorizes itself to speak of and on behalf of an oppressed group “as if they are a singular group (in need of liberation), and hence tend to speak *for them*” (165, italics in original). It is thus that social others find themselves silenced, as hooks put it — their voices stripped from them entirely, or appropriated by the more powerful voices of the privileged, speaking over them to provide a skewed view of their experience. This “fantasy of proximity”, as Ahmed describes it (166), aside from overriding the agency of the other, also consequently leads to a fetishization or commodification of the other’s identity: “the other is radically other than me, but as his being is characterised by such otherness, he is, like me, a being. [...] To describe ‘the other’ as having the character of ‘otherness’ is to recognise the other in a certain way: the other is abstracted from particular others [...]. Through that abstraction, the other becomes a fetish” (Ahmed, *Encounters* 143). This act of fetishization explains the persistence of the notion of otherness since, despite repeated attempts to dispel the negativity around it, there is not as much effort to abolish it as a concept. According to Ahmed, this causes difference to become fixated, keeping the other in place *as* an other: “Although that [other’s] nature is no longer represented as dangerous, this argument still ontologises the stranger, turns the stranger into something that simply *is*” (Ahmed, *Encounters* 5, italics in original). It follows, then, that in order to avoid this fetishization of otherness, fictional narratives ought ideally to seek to elicit empathy, rather than sympathy, in such a way that the images of a marginal other become a way to restore that previously silenced voice, and to be represented not, necessarily, *as* other — but merely as *another* subject. Though it is questionable whether either sympathy or empathy lead to any lasting change or helpful action, representations made to elicit sympathy echo the position of inequality or imbalance associated with the notion of the other, who is somehow helpless. Empathy, on the other hand, would appear to suggest a more equal footing in its equation of another’s experience with one’s own, reminiscent of Henze’s conscious decision to recognize one’s experience as *like* that of another.

There is, however, criticism of empathy as a phagocytizing force — “an imperialistic drive to incorporate the other into the self [...], influenced by the Freudian view of identification as hostile erasure of the other” (Chabot Davis 405). Emmanuel Levinas had a similar point of view,

as mentioned in chapter 2: his ethical typology makes specific reference to the act of empathy as an unethical response, deeming it not an act of communication or understanding, but rather an act of assimilation. Fitting with his idea of the other as fundamentally inaccessible, Levinas holds that our relationship with the other “is not an idyllic and harmonious relationship of communion, or a sympathy through which we put ourselves in the other’s place; we recognize the other as resembling us, but exterior to us” (75). Moreover, we attempt to grasp the other by assuming that our empathic understanding connects us to the other’s experience, which involves the presumption “that the other is knowable, is *like me*, and subsumes the other to one’s own horizon of understanding” (Yi Sencindiver 3, *italics mine*). Our knowledge of the other would therefore be, in reality, a mere assumption that their experience is similar enough to our own to be understandable, and therefore actually eliminates otherness by submitting and assimilating it to one’s own interpretive framework. In Levinas’ words, the “other is known through sympathy, as another (my)self, as the alter ego” (83), by which, considering the above distinction, seems safe to assume was most likely referring to what this work calls empathy — the connection established with the other by which we recognize their feelings are similar to our own or, at least, experienceable by us. This is an idea which Saidiya Hartman also proposes: if the violence exerted upon the body and mind of the other “can become palpable and indignation can be fully aroused only through the masochistic fantasy, then it becomes clear that empathy is double-edged, for in making the other’s suffering one’s own, this suffering is occluded by the other’s obliteration” (19). In other words, “by virtue of this substitution” of one’s own position for another’s, “the object of identification threatens to disappear” (Hartman 19).

However, when regarding empathy as unethical, Levinas is working under the premise that the self is fundamentally narcissistic: that it remains unaffected by the perspectives of others, and thus unchanged by interaction with them. As we now know, this is not the case, for as long as the self remains able to communicate with others, the difference between them is bound to permeate the self’s narratives, so that the self cannot remain the same afterwards. To also contradict Hartman’s argument, it is also important to remember that, if we are to follow Henze’s idea of imaginative identification, the decision to identify one’s experience as similar to another’s is conscious and political: we “familiarize the unfamiliar”, in Iser’s words (*Act* 43) in order to come to a mutual understanding, not necessarily to phagocytize the other’s experience into our own. It is thus that, in Iser’s terms, the encounter with the other (like that with the fictional text) changes our *gestalt* by forcing us to reassess it, reconsidering our background information in light of the newly obtained knowledge. Therefore, the assumption that the same remains unchanged by the other, only replicating itself instead of acknowledging difference, can be deemed especially untrue of fiction. As already shown by Iser’s inclusion of a variety of perspectives within the text, and as Mikhail Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia further illustrates, a fictional text (like the self) is not a single, unified entity. It condenses a multiplicity of heterogeneous voices and speech types, both intra- and extra-textual, a multiplicity replicated by language as a whole. The language of the author enters a dialogue with many others — that of the narrator, the characters, the genre, and so on, so that the nature of literature is dialogic:

Everything means, is understood, as part of a greater whole – there is a constant interaction between meanings, all of which have the potential of conditioning others. [...] This dialogic imperative [...] insures that there can be no actual monologue. One may [...] be deluded into thinking there is only one language, or one may [...] seek in a sophisticated way to achieve a unitary language. In

both cases the unitariness is relative to the overpowering force of heteroglossia, and thus dialogism. (Bakhtin 426)

Fiction cannot, then, “mediate the voice of the same” (Yi Sencindiver 5), as Levinasian ethics would have suggested. While the representation of otherness is indeed fundamentally limited by a subject’s inability to fully know the other, the representation of the same is equally restricted: it cannot be repeated as such again, because difference will have already permeated and altered it. On the other hand, while it may not be possible to fully know or understand the other, fictional representations — and fictional minds — allow pieces of that different experience to be gathered, working in such a way that said experience can be conveyed successfully and, furthermore, difference becomes integrated in the individual’s vision of the world. Not absorbed and turned into sameness, or not necessarily, but rather incorporated as counterpoints which alter and redefine what was previously known. This potential, direct effect over subjectivity, at the level of self- and interpersonal perception, is often considered a threat to the status quo. It implies the possibility that such an effect may materialize at a larger level, in social and collective change.

This is where agential realist theories of identity, like Paula Moya’s,¹² become useful: in considering discourse and matter as complementary entities, neither of them prior to nor reducible to the other, there can be no “eternal objective reality of otherness existing a priori and independent from its discursive articulations and localized material conditions” (Yi Sencindiver 8). This echoes Butler’s idea that the repeated performance of regulatory discursive practices generates “the effects of fixity and discrete boundaries”, which come in the end to be understood as substance — as something objective, preceding the influence of discourse (Yi Sencindiver 8). Fiction can thus become a way to unmask these mechanisms, to teach the individual to conceive of experience as embodied and localized within the intersection and interaction of different psychosocial factors. This, in turn, offers a possible explanation of how literature can *become*, or materialize into, change in the extraliterary world. Empathy would thus establish itself as a significant part of this process. Chabot Davis conceives of empathy as “an active cognitive process of imagination that can play an important role in catalyzing action” (404), since, while

sympathy may involve power relations between subject and object, and may keep hierarchies firmly in place by granting the sympathizer a feeling of benevolent largesse and by denying agency to the sufferer [... e]mpathetic experiences of seeing from the vantage point of another can lead to a recognition of that person’s subjecthood and agency, and can lead [...] to not only become critically aware [...] but to desire to work against the structures of inequality where [one’s] own power resides. (Chabot Davis 405)

Empathy is then the ideal response — the trigger for recognizing otherness as nothing but a different kind of subjectivity, which in turn would prompt a desire to contribute to a change in the power dynamics which have rendered the ‘other’ position powerless and voiceless. Empathy is the mechanism prompting the change in the individual that might, in turn, lead to wider social action, as Henze and hooks posited.

12 In *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (2007), Karen Barad delves deeper than Moya into the intersection between discourse and matter, proposing “agential realism” (146) as a middle ground between discourse theory and objectivist theories. This emphasis on realism and positionality in both Barad’s and Moya’s ideas can easily be traced back to Cherrie Moraga’s notion of “theory in the flesh”, highlighting the importance of the individual’s positionality in relation to systems of oppression which are not fixed, but continually shift and interact, provoking in turn changes in individuals themselves.

The *actual* response produced by fiction is difficult (or even impossible) to measure, given the individuality and specificity of the process. Current research suggests that, aside from being subject to the circumstances surrounding each text (genre, time period, etc.) and the position of each consumer (individual disposition, age, sociocultural and temporal location, personal prejudice...), narrative empathy does not require for the text to be particularly intent on prompting an emotional response. Neither does it need complex or particularly detailed characterization — “only minimal elements of identity, situation, and feeling” (Keen 69), though the empathic response may be stronger if the text is more detailed. Furthermore, as already suggested by Iser’s theory, as well as by Andringa’s types of identification, a consuming subject is able to identify even with characters and situations that differ considerably from their own (Keen 70). In fact, Suzanne Keen argues that “the opportunity to share feelings underwrites character identification that transcends difference”, so that the opposite hypothesis also holds true: “spontaneous empathy for a fictional character’s feelings opens the way for character identification” (70). Then, if empathy precedes identification, the response must be understood “as a faculty that readers bring to their imaginative engagement with texts” (Keen 70), whereas if “character identification opens the opportunity for empathy [...], then representation of characters with strong differences might be used didactically, to develop a reader’s moral sense” (71). This suggests a degree of freedom or openness to the empathic response, since it need not limit itself to following the guidance of the text, to “what the author appears to set up or invite” (Keen 75), and can take place with most anything — regardless of degree of resemblance or even the amount of attention given to the character or situation in question. Keen also argues that a “reader’s perception of a text’s fictionality plays a role in subsequent empathetic response, by releasing readers from the obligations of self-protection through skepticism and suspicion” (88). This is why an individual may respond with greater emotion to a fictional situation or character than to a non-fictional one: the underlying knowledge of its character as fiction means that it does not require the cautious reasoning or consideration of possible consequences which may inhibit the emotional response in the primary world (Keen 28). While the connection established with a fictional mind produces a similar response to that of connection with a non-fictional other, as Palmer argued, the character of fiction gives a sense of safety — of departure from the immediate perceived primary reality — that makes individuals less guarded, and hence more receptive to greater emotional intensity.

Readers seem, nonetheless, to “internalize the experience of empathy in a way that promises later real-world responsiveness to others’ needs” (Keen xiv). Theorists such as Lynn Hunt and Martha Nussbaum have emphasized the value of narrative empathy as an imaginative exercise — in the way of Ricoeur’s imaginative variations — which encourages the extension of love and compassion towards others (see, for instance, Nussbaum’s *Cultivating Humanity*, 1997). This suggests that “imaginative extension” is able to “open readers’ hearts and minds to markedly different others”, which “invites an understanding of storytelling as a moral technology”, even if its effects are not immediately noticeable at a social level (Keen 105).

4.3 THE LIMITATIONS OF NARRATIVE EMPATHY

Conceiving of fiction as a moral technology in this way can quickly become problematic, however. On the one hand, running contrary to popularized assumptions regarding empathy and the importance of fiction for the individual’s moral development is the argument that fiction may just as easily have a negative impact on the individual. After all, while fiction may be used as a channel for solidarity and the defence of human rights as Lynn Hunt proclaimed, there is no doubt that it has, historically and consistently, been used as a channel for the voice of the

oppressor — for the perpetuation of stereotypes, prejudice, and hatred towards everything and everyone deemed ‘other’. Althusser included literature among the institutions he regarded as ideological state apparatuses (see Althusser 24), showing how it may be placed at the service of the status quo. Furthermore, as Zunshine argued, it is easy for the thoughts and feelings of the other to be misinterpreted (274), whether wilfully or not; and “the insights and convictions that we garner from reading fiction may be dead wrong. We may learn prejudices from fiction as we share others’ biased perspectives” (Keen 102), and as the fictional premise may encourage identification with amoral or immoral characters, leading to the defence of authoritarian, hegemonic, or otherwise oppressive social models. On the other hand, many feminist and postcolonial critics have argued against the case for narrative empathy, as was already briefly mentioned: not only because of its plausible negative consequences, but also due to, once again, suspicions of essentialism. The departing premise that human emotion is universal, and hence universally understandable, makes empathy “yet another example of the Western imagination’s imposition of its own values on cultures and peoples that it scarcely knows, but presumes to ‘feel with’” (Keen 148), erasing cultural difference in favour of a colonial endeavour to place every culture under the same emotional umbrella. Chabot Davis further describes how “[c]ritics often view sympathetic feeling as either an impediment to political change or a colonizing force that erases cultural differences” (403), criticizing this tendency of “privatizing the political” (Lauren Berlant, quoted in Chabot Davis 404) by giving undue importance to individual feelings: this “sentimental culture” would then be nothing but “a consumer distraction, a form of compensatory fantasy that inhibits political action” (Chabot Davis 404). Feeling sorry for the described plights and limiting ourselves to private, individualized responses in an attempt to make up for the lack of widespread social action proves insufficient and, indeed, often participatory of and complicit in systemic injustice.

There are still other limitations to the idea of empathy’s boundary-crossing power. Among them is, in fact, the very condition of fictionality. The fact that fiction gives the aforementioned sense of safety by virtue of its condition as not-real is in a way positive, as “the contract of fictionality offers a no-strings-attached opportunity for emotional transactions of great intensity” (Keen 168) which facilitates and encourages empathic response. And yet, this sense of safety may come “in part because it [fiction] cannot make direct demands for action” (Keen 106). The empathic effect may thus be limited to the moment of consumption and, furthermore, induce the reader to disbelief: after all, if this is a fictional premise, it becomes easy to disregard it as something that would not take place in the ‘real’ world, or alternatively to construe it as something that is no longer happening and so no longer requires further action — thus numbing the empathic capacity to extrapolate the fictional premise to non-fictional situations. Over-exposition to empathy, or “empathic over-arousal” as Martin Hoffman calls it (197), has also become an issue: by being consistently exposed to images or appeals meant to induce empathic response, the individual’s capacity to experience empathy may be reduced or even annulled entirely. Personal distress induced by excessive exposure to empathic distress may “move the person out of the empathic mode entirely” (Hoffman 198), causing them to react with “aversion to the source of the negative feelings”, and thus, by extension, “to the victims or to the source of information” (Keen 19). Victims of empathic over-arousal thus seek to avoid any content of the same kind in the future, due to the distressing or uncomfortable emotions and mental states it produces. Furthermore, Hoffman’s research shows that empathy is inhibited by individual bias: “most people empathize with and help others in distress, including strangers [...], but there is also evidence that most people empathize to a greater degree [...] with victims who are family members, members of their primary group, close friends, and people whose personal needs and

concerns are similar to their own” (197).

I would, nonetheless, argue that this need not be an impediment in the case of fiction, precisely due to the particular relationship which fiction establishes with the individual: character identification can provoke an illusion of closeness similar to that experienced with non-fictional people who are dear to the individual, as the reader comes to develop an affective relationship with these fictional minds in the process of consuming their narratives of being. In fact, this is a selling point for much fiction: Keen suggests that “novels inviting empathy do better in the marketplace”, as people seek content that will make them care for the characters, and hence “that will allow them to feel *with* characters” (104-105, italics mine). This implies that the importance of narrative empathy may be not so much “as an effect of reading” than as “a sought-after experience” (Keen 105). This experience, though individual, may still find itself limited by social perceptions of it. Keen’s own research, carried out on her own university-level students, shows that identifying with the ‘wrong’ characters (meaning any character that is not presented as a hero or possesses qualities that are morally questionable, risible, or otherwise negative) or responding to fiction in socially unacceptable ways (such as too naïvely or sentimentally) “may produce discomfort, shame, or self-censorship” and can alter the original response as individuals grow afraid of mockery or censure (Keen 76). Indeed, “[t]he effects of conscious or unconscious desires to please can even occur when anonymity and privacy are guaranteed” (78), so that disclosure of one’s feelings for a piece of fiction becomes also determined by social norms and expectations regarding one’s gender, race, social class, and so on. For instance, women may be generally expected to respond more emotionally to romance novels, which leads to mockery on the basis of over-sensitivity.

The concluding outlook is therefore not as optimistic as my previous chapters and their belief in the powers of fiction would suggest. The ideal response to fiction — the empathic connection leading to a shift in one’s beliefs, and hence a change in one’s behaviour — is rare, and may have in fact little to do with the act of consuming fiction itself. There is little solid or consistent evidence that narrative empathy may be at the root of prosocial action or change, not least because it is incredibly difficult to measure the impact of one’s reading habits on one’s participation in movements and projects towards social change, when it is possible to establish a link between them at all. Even so, the fact is that “narrative empathy need not definitively perform renovations of civic virtue nor of individual behavior to be recognized as a core component of emotional response to fiction” (Keen ix). Its importance as part of the desired — and desirable — response to fiction, and as an explanation for the appeal fiction holds over the general public, remains undeniable. However, the overwhelming lack of evidence in support of the wide belief in narrative empathy’s transformative power does mean that

for novels to change attitudes about others and inspire prosocial action requires more than just reading. [...] The development of social and moral understanding requires discussion [...]. The affirmation and challenge to convictions that can occur when readers discuss fiction, especially with the guidance of a teacher that connects the dots between reactions to fiction and options for action in the real world, can be considerable. (Keen 146)

I would still sustain that this belief can coexist with the thought that fiction and its ability to produce an empathic response have power. If we follow Keen’s above premise, the existence and persistence of narrative empathy would be based on constant intersubjective communication, a constant dialogue with another: firstly, through the reading of fiction itself,

and afterwards through its dissection and discussion in pedagogical and social environments, be it classrooms, book clubs, or even social media — anywhere involving some sort of guidance in the examination of one's responses. While this discussion with others is not free of the aforementioned social judgements and preconceptions which may constrain one's responses, rather than guide them, this creates the premise that even interaction with fiction requires and benefits from the presence of the other. While the response may be hindered or concealed in these social interactions, shifting the emphasis to what happens *after* the moment of reading avoids placing the burden of social responsibility and calling to action on the fiction itself. It places its weight instead on the reading individual and the pedagogical processes taking place *around* the fiction, so that the power often attributed to fiction lies instead in who is consuming it and *how*: "living people bring empathy to the novel, and they alone have the capacity to convert their emotional fusion with the denizens of make-believe worlds into actions on behalf of real others. That they rarely decide to do so should not be taken as a sign of fiction's failings" (Keen 168). In the same vein, Chabot Davis argues that, though "people may feel sympathy without becoming political actors", this is not "a fault inherent in the emotion, [...] but rather stems from multiple causes" — not the least of which being the "loss of faith in the power of the individual to effect change" (404). The capabilities of narrative empathy to create change lie, then, at the individual, "local level of resistance" emphasized by De Lauretis; to underestimate the importance of this individual understanding is to "give up on empathy's promise of fostering cross-cultural understanding and desires for social justice and equality" (Chabot Davis 406), a blunder which "left-oriented scholars cannot afford to" commit (406).

Furthermore, the above theories (Keen's, Nussbaum's, Hunt's, and even Chabot Davis') all presumably refer to the potential effects of empathy over hegemonic subjects, to its effect in opening their minds to the presence of otherness and helping them understand it — which, in turn, alters the hegemonic view of difference as inherently negative or inferior. In my opinion, the importance that empathy towards a representation of a fictional mind *like* oneself — one that shares the individual's otherness in terms of identity — can have for a social other, for one who is taught by the ideologies at work to perceive themselves as inferior, as insufficient, or worse, as inherently associated with negative traits that cannot be left behind or ignored. For an other like woman, who, as explained in chapter 2, is made into the object of the male gaze, into a "total object of fantasy" (Rose 74), to identify and be able to empathize with an image and a narrative of woman is already a deconstruction of her symbolic identification with the male gaze. And to have a female character that is neither vilified nor elevated, as an other would be, but simply *represented*, is extremely valuable for her process of identity formation.

If narrative empathy therefore proves able to contribute to a healthier process of identity formation for marginalized individuals, whether through the validation of their own difference or through a better understanding of another's, that very act has transformed the world in a way that was not previously present — which at least partly explains why representation truly matters. It is not so much meant to produce empathy on the hegemonic subject. Though a welcome side effect, research clearly shows that it will produce no foreseeable result without a pedagogical and social background to support and enhance prosocial action beyond the point of reading. Rather, representations are meant precisely to reflect — and give a voice to — the individuals that had been deprived of a reflection, and that were in fact relegated to the status of one within the specular power dynamic. Those that are marginalized, displaced, otherized, are the ones who can benefit the most from fictional representations that produce narrative empathy; not for another, necessarily, but empathy for *themselves*. Connection with a fictional image in this way — the recognition of their experiences and feelings as *like* those of another

— can help in establishing an empathic relationship with their own identity-as-other, and allow them to understand that this difference that has rendered them other is exactly that — difference, not inferiority, nor contemptible or reprehensible abnormality. It teaches these individuals to perceive themselves not as specularized others, but as complex subjects worthy of the name.

CHAPTER 5: THE NARRATIVES OF FANTASY

There are only two worlds -- your world, which is the real world, and other worlds, the fantasy. Worlds like this are worlds of the human imagination: their reality, or lack of reality, is not important. What is important is that they are there. These worlds provide an alternative. Provide an escape. Provide a threat. Provide a dream, and power; provide refuge, and pain. They give your world meaning. They do not exist; and thus they are all that matters.
(Neil Gaiman)

Having reviewed the particularities around fictional narratives and fictional minds, as well as their potential extra-textual effects of deep significance for identity construction, it is now time to delve further into the peculiarities inherent to fantasy fiction, the object of study at the core of this work. As with previously revised concepts, such as ‘representation’ and ‘identity’, the word ‘fantasy’ conceals a long and complex history that shall not (could not) be revised in its entirety. In the interest of clarity, this chapter will briefly review the terms ‘fantasy’ and ‘the fantastic’ as discussed throughout several major theories, arranged in approximate chronological order. In so doing, I hope not only to illustrate the kind of fictions that fall under these umbrella terms, but also to offer a characterization of fantasy that will serve to describe the case study I analyze in later chapters. Furthermore, these theories consider the subversive political potential which the particularities of fantasy hold, and as such make up the bare bones of the argument introduced in subsequent chapters.¹³

Moving directly forward, then, one of the most famous theoretical attempts to define, or perhaps more exactly *categorize*, fantasy is Tzvetan Todorov’s. Despite its alleged limitations, his definition remains quotable today because of how it localizes the fantastic not necessarily as a feature of the text itself, but rather as part of the consumer’s, the reader’s, response to it:

In a world which is indeed our world, [...] there occurs an event which cannot be explained by the laws of this same familiar world. The person who experiences the event must opt for one of two possible solutions: either he is the victim of an illusion of the senses [...] and [the] laws of the world then remain what they are; or else the event has indeed taken place, it is an integral part of reality — but then this reality is controlled by laws unknown to us. (Todorov 25)

 13 I will not here be surveying the roots of fantasy in detail; they can be traced down to mythology and oral lore, and thus extremely far back, so that they shall only be briefly mentioned further on as part of the manifold influences structuring the current fantasy canon.

Thus, the fantastic implies a suspension of the rules of the known, natural world, which are interrupted by contact with the impossible — “an event [...] which reason”, or at least reason derived from the knowledge we possess, “can no longer explain” (Todorov 28). It is “always a break in the acknowledged order, an irruption of the inadmissible within the changeless everyday legality” (Roger Caillois, quoted in Todorov 26). Indeed, explanations are often useless when it comes to the fantastic: “It is sometimes necessary to keep a loophole for a natural explanation, but I might add that this hole should be small enough to be unusable” (M. R. James, quoted in Todorov 26). This unexplainable event is what leads to hesitation, to doubting one’s own perception and knowledge; the Todorovian experience of the fantastic, then, lasts only for as long as this uncertainty between two possibilities does. This is thought of as describing the encounter with the fantastic, meaning the moment when the reader first comes into contact with the impossible, forcing a reassessment of their previous knowledge in order to accommodate this new apparent impossibility: “Either total faith or total incredulity would lead us beyond the fantastic: it is hesitation which sustains its life” (Todorov 31). However, we now face the question of *who* must hesitate to sustain the fantastic, since this uncertainty can be localized within the characters of the narrative as well. If the reader (not the actual reader, but rather the implied reader figuring as a role or perspective within the text [see Todorov 31]) were to know the truth of the matter — that is, if they already knew whether the event was an illusion or truly supernatural, the reader’s role would only be that of an observer of the characters’ journey to come to conclusions that they already knew beforehand. Hesitation would no longer be sustained. This is why Todorov holds “*the reader’s hesitation*” as “the first condition of the fantastic” (31, italics in original), because it is a necessary condition that the reader be made to hesitate, whereas the characters may not necessarily share the same doubt. However, Todorov’s “rule of identification” seems to imply that characters in the fantastic commonly represent the same experience of uncertainty within the work (Todorov 32). Thus, the second, optional condition is that the narrative may have a character experiencing this same hesitation, entrusting “the reader’s role [...] to a character” (33). The third and final condition of the fantastic is, according to Todorov, localized in the reader’s attitude towards the text: they “will reject allegorical as well as ‘poetic’ interpretations” (Todorov 33), because such readings imply not taking the supernatural events literally, but rather metaphorically, which prevents questioning their nature — and hence, uncertainty.

Of course, any narrative can be understood as fantastic to this extent. All narratives demand a suspension of known rules in order to accommodate the fictional premise: even realist fiction, which makes a point of its resemblance to reality, must deviate from it in order to develop its fictional events. Terry Eagleton phrased it quite aptly in his description of Dickens’ London: “The imaginary London of *Bleak House* exists as the product of a representational process which signifies, not ‘Victorian England’ as such, but certain of Victorian England’s ways of signifying itself [...]. Fiction[’s ...] ‘history’ is imaginary because it negotiates a particular ideological *experience* of real history” (Eagleton 77, italics in original). While fantasy may be argued to push this further, since it requires the acceptance of what is thought of as impossible, it is nonetheless “not possible to define the fantastic in terms of opposition to the faithful reproduction of reality, or in terms of opposition to naturalism” (Todorov 36), because the fantastic *requires* the real in order to produce its effect of hesitation. Such hesitation must either take place between the real and the “*illusory*”, the uncertainty “not that the events occurred, but that our understanding of them was correct” or else only “a trick, or an error of perception” (Todorov 36); or between the real and the “*imaginary*”, whether “what we believe we perceive is not in fact a product of the imagination” (36), so that the event may not even have occurred at all. The ambiguity,

the consistent reference to known reality, must be maintained throughout the text. However, by the end of the story, “the reader makes a decision even if the character does not” (Todorov 41): if the decision is towards incredulity, and the text permits an explanation of the events, we move into the genre of the uncanny; on the other hand, if the reader leans towards faith, and believes that known laws need to be adjusted, we enter the marvellous (Todorov 41). These two tendencies are perfectly exemplified in eighteenth-century Gothic novels: “the supernatural explained (the ‘uncanny’), as it appears in the novels of Clara Reeves and Ann Radcliffe; and [...] the supernatural accepted (the ‘marvellous’), which is characteristic of the works of Horace Walpole, M. G. Lewis, and Maturin” (Todorov 42). With this in mind, Todorov creates a gradation of sub-genres: the pure uncanny, the fantastic-uncanny, the fantastic-marvellous, and the pure marvellous (see Todorov 44). The fantastic “in its pure state” would be, to him, located at “the medial line separating the fantastic-uncanny from the fantastic-marvellous. This line corresponds perfectly to the nature of the fantastic, a frontier between two adjacent realms” (Todorov 44).

This Todorovian approach has extensively influenced subsequent criticism, although a major objection — posed particularly by Rosemary Jackson — was that Todorov did not sufficiently engage with the political implications of literature. In other words, he did not contend with the fact that the fantastic could express that which is unsaid and unseen, and in doing so voice transgressive impulses which threaten the status quo of primary reality. Yet Todorov *does* mention how “the fantastic permits us to cross certain frontiers that are inaccessible so long as we have no recourse to it” (158), meaning that it allows the exploration of themes that are censored, censured, or otherwise condemned or silenced (for instance, sexuality, madness, and other taboo topics). In fact, he goes as far as to assert that the fantastic has been rendered useless by the appearance of psychoanalysis, which has made these topics allowable, shifted the taboo so that many of these themes may now be dealt with openly: “There is no need today to resort to the devil in order to speak of an excessive sexual desire, and none to resort to vampires in order to designate the attraction exerted by corpses” (Todorov 161). He does also briefly interrogate “the function of the fantastic itself: which is to say, not the function of the supernatural events, but the function of their reactions they provoke” (Todorov 166), thus effectively locating the fantastic within the *reaction* to the text, rather than the fantastic being a quality inherent to it. Such a focus on response was already suggested in his emphasis on the reader’s attitude towards the text. However, Todorov raises these topics near the very end of his study, so that there is little time for him to explore them further. Not only that, he goes as far as to argue that the fantastic no longer exists, since “the last aesthetically satisfying examples of the genre” are located, according to Todorov, “in Maupassant’s tales” (166). No texts from nineteenth-century literature onwards, he argues, are able to produce the same hesitation, precisely due to the changes in the social and literary climate: “we can no longer believe in an immutable, external reality, nor in a literature which is merely the transcription of such a reality. Words have gained an autonomy which things have lost” (Todorov 168). Fantastic literature depends on postulating “the existence of the real, the natural, the normal, in order to attack it subsequently” (Todorov 173), but literature like Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (Todorov’s own chosen example) has already transcended the real — in its world, “the fantastic becomes the rule, not the exception” (173) and so hesitation no longer happens. One might argue, however, that Todorov’s patent inability to admit more modern literature within the fantastic, or even his broader genres of the uncanny or the marvellous, points to a flaw inherent to his theory rather than to an aesthetic flaw of the texts themselves. Indeed, despite its consistent usefulness as the first study “which refuses to borrow from extraliterary categories to ‘account for’ or explain the emergence and

existence of the [fantastic] form” (Jackson 26), Todorov’s theory of fantasy displays limitations — not only because it does not take the sociopolitical function of literature into consideration (or only does so very briefly), but also because it invites a rather rigid classification of texts into a limited number of categories which inevitably fail to account for the variations and changeable nature of the fantastic. His extraordinary emphasis on hesitation contributes to this impression, excluding — as he himself had suggested — much modern fantasy from being considered as such, which quickly evidenced the need for more flexible theories of the fantastic.

Attempting to make up for Todorov’s perceived failings, Rosemary Jackson developed her own theory of fantasy a few years later in *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* (1981). Here, she considers fantasy as a mode, as a set of “structural features underlying various works in different periods of time [...] from which a number of related genres emerge” (Jackson 7). This means there is no one single definition for fantasy, since it is not a single entity — a single genre — which may be delimited and described with exactitude, but rather a range of works which share a set of features and structures in both form and content, which link them as “generated by similar unconscious desires” and therefore allow their association (Jackson 8). Interestingly, Jackson is very much against conceiving of fantasy as a way to escape or transcend reality, thus “fulfilling a desire for a ‘better’, more complete” one (Jackson 1); on the contrary, she argues that fantasy “is not to do with inventing another non-human world”, but rather “with inverting elements of this world, re-combining its constitutive features in new relations to produce something strange, unfamiliar, and apparently ‘new’, absolutely ‘other’ and different” (Jackson 8). Thus, fantasy in the Tolkienian line (Jackson cites such authors as C. S. Lewis and Ursula K. Le Guin, aside from Tolkien himself) would be closer to “faery, or romance literature” due to the “moral and religious allegories, parables and fables” that, Jackson argues, inform them (9). She establishes a distinction between these religious, supernatural fantasies, and secularized ones, which constitute what she would consider the ‘pure’ fantastic. In a supernatural economy, she argues, the source of difference is presented as otherworldly, as being outside or above the human, and often as an evil force, which constitutes “a displacement of human responsibility”, since these kinds of romance or fairy fantasies confine otherness to the supernatural, which Jackson traces back to their aforementioned roots in religious myth (Jackson 53). On the other hand, a natural economy describes otherness as “an externalization of part of the self” (55), a manifestation of the self’s own desires, guilt, and so on — so that other and self become closer, much more intimately related. Although in both kinds otherness is what threatens the world (the ‘real’) with dissolution, in a secularized fantasy otherness is “neither supernatural nor evil but [...] that which is *behind*, or *between*” what is known (Jackson 57). Hence Jackson’s turn to psychoanalysis to describe her conception of the fantastic, since she holds it as a literature that deals repeatedly with unconscious and repressed material (see Jackson 61): this projection of the self’s own fears and desires unto others results in the Freudian uncanny, which in fantasy becomes materialized through the supernatural occurrence. This produces a feeling of estrangement, of the familiar becoming suddenly unfamiliar and confusing not by any essential change, but by revealing what is normally concealed. In Jackson’s own words, “[f]antastic literature transforms the ‘real’ through this kind of dis-discovery. It does not introduce novelty, so much as uncover all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably ‘known’. Its uncanny effects reveal an obscure, occluded region which lies behind the homely (*heimlich*)” (65).

This makes it so that, significantly — and perhaps similarly to Todorov’s conception —, the fantastic cannot exist apart from the real. It “takes the real and breaks it” (Jackson 12), but to do so it first needs to *assert* reality, to begin from the mimetic, in order to subsequently

break with it and its familiarity. However, regardless of how much fantasy may recombine or invert or alter the real, it still “cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (Jackson 20). Jackson thus agrees with the Freudian conception of imagination, which holds it as “quite incapable of *inventing* anything” (quoted in Jackson 8, *italics in original*), when it was upheld as limitless. This appears to present a limitation to the possibilities of the fantastic which may not be present in other typologies, but such a limitation is quite inescapable: fantasies do not exist in a vacuum, since no fiction at all can exist apart from the world which produces and surrounds it. Any human production is automatically overdetermined by its social and cultural context, by the predominant ideologies of the author’s time and location, by the author’s own particular ideas and prejudices, and so on. Rather than look upon this as a constraint, however, this unavoidable tether to reality is what enables and enhances the political dimension of fantasy. Jackson posits that this connection to the real is what allows the fantasy to problematize and question it through its own difference. Fantasy’s function, as a literature of desire, is thus twofold: it may express this desire, “*tell of, manifest or show*” it, or it may “*expel* desire, when this desire is a disturbing element which threatens cultural order and continuity” (Jackson 2, *italics in original*). Indeed, many times fantasy fulfils both functions at once, since hidden or silenced desires may be expelled *by* being expressed, through the vicarious experience which expression can provide. This condenses Jackson’s major point — the subversive function of fantasy, as a literature intimately tied to extra-textual politics and the interrogation (and implicit threat) of existing social norms. This notion runs through the entirety of Jackson’s argument, as she holds that the systems already in place (ideologically, culturally, socially) can only be overturned, subverted, rather than replaced with something new.

Since this is the case, it can be concluded that fantasy is not able, nor does it seek, to replace the real: it rather exposes it, uncovering the parts of reality that remain hidden or censored, thus betraying an innate dissatisfaction with, and a refusal to account for or conform to, what is commonly known as ‘real’ or ‘possible’. In fact, much of the time, such a refusal amounts to direct opposition. Fantasy’s concern with trying to make visible what is culturally invisible introduces an absence, an otherness, for which there is no language: “There can be no adequate linguistic representation of this ‘other’, for it has no place in life”, and this tendency “towards non-signification [...] represents a dissolution of a culture’s signifying practice, the very means by which it establishes meaning” (Jackson 69). As Todorov had already mentioned and Jackson reasserts here, the uncanny in fantasy permits the articulation of taboo — the expression of what must be repressed for cultural continuity, thus threatening to significantly undermine cultural stability. On the other hand, Jackson does very briefly remark on the possibility that it might do the opposite. In vicariously fulfilling these taboo desires, fantasy may actually contribute to maintaining social norms: “they [fantasies] frequently serve (as does Gothic fiction) to re-confirm institutional order by supplying a vicarious fulfilment of desire and neutralizing an urge towards transgression” (Jackson 72). She does not elaborate any further upon this point, however, since her analysis focuses on fantasies which do betray this fundamental dissatisfaction with reality, dissolving, interrogating, or transgressing it. Interestingly, Jackson returns to the problematic of the visual as one of the major themes of fantasy, since — as discussed in chapter one — it is one of the pillars which sustain our notion of reality:



An emphasis upon invisibility points to one of the central thematic concerns of the fantastic: problems of vision. In a culture which equates the ‘real’ with the ‘visible’ and gives the eye dominance over other sense organs, the un-real is that

which is in-visible. That which is not seen, or which threatens to be un-seeable, can only have a subversive function in relation to an epistemological and metaphysical system which makes 'I see' synonymous with 'I understand'. (Jackson 45)

With this emphasis on distortion, blurriness, and other difficulties or hallucinations relating to visual perception, the image of the mirror makes its appearance once more. Not only as a portal, though "many of the strange worlds of modern fantasy are located in, or through, or beyond, the mirror", but rather as a means "to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar" (Jackson 43), especially as concerns the relationship between self and other. As is implied by Jackson's consistent mentions of otherness and difference, fantasy consistently problematizes the self/other dichotomy *through* the mirror itself: it is used consistently throughout many fantasies as "a metaphor for the production of other selves. A mirror produces distance. It establishes a different space, where our notions of self undergo radical change", where "versions of self [are] transformed into another", which suggests the instability of both reality as a whole and of the unitary identity which the self continuously constructs for its own benefit (Jackson 87). In fact, Jackson invokes Lacan's theory of the mirror stage as explanatory of the process of ego formation which fantasies actually try to reverse: "The fragmentation of 'character' in fantasy deforms a 'realistic' language of unified, rational selves. [...] Fantasies try to *reverse* or rupture the process of ego formation which took place during the mirror stage, i.e. they attempt to re-enter the imaginary. Dualism and dismemberment are symptoms of this desire" to be reunited with the other, to return to a self prior to the fragmentation created through the mirror stage (Jackson 90). In Jackson's (and Lacan's)¹⁴ typology, however, this attempt is automatically doomed to failure, since an imaginary realm cannot be articulated or represented, because it "is non-thetic, it has no 'human' discourse" (Jackson 90), which is why so many fantasies have a tragic or deadly ending — because "'self' cannot be united with 'other' without ceasing to be" (91).

While extremely useful in its conception of fantasy as a subversive literature, Jackson's typology of fantasy seems odd insofar as some of the best-known — or, as she herself puts it, "popular" (9) — fantasists of the time find no place within it. While she does stop to consider Tolkien's work in particular, Jackson has no place for it in her account of the purely fantastic, maintaining that the expression of desire condensed in such fantasies is but romance and nostalgia, a supernatural economy of conservative and highly religious influence. To do so, however, seems unnecessarily reductive as well as actively exclusionary — and indeed, diametrically opposite to some of the more recent conceptions of what these works of fantasy achieve. To be entirely fair towards Jackson's assessment, however, Tolkien *did* himself refer to fantasy as "fairy-story" in his seminal essay *On Fairy Stories* (1947), although he did so as a reference to the realm of dreams and fantasy, which he calls "*Faërie*" (Tolkien 32), and not so much in reference to the fairy tale as a genre. Even so, Tolkien was very much aware of the influence which such an ascendancy exerted upon his work and his idea of fantasy, establishing how old "legends, dwindling down, became folktales, *Märchen*, fairy-stories — nursery-tales" (42), a closeness which Jackson is critical of. This critic insists that "fairy tales function differently from fantasies", that they "are neutral, impersonalized [...]. *Structurally, too, fairy tales discourage belief in the importance or effectiveness of action* for their narratives are 'closed'" (Jackson 154, italics in original), and therefore fail to be subversive, because they encourage the reader to remain "a passive receiver of events" (154) before the narrator's

¹⁴ Jackson makes her point here by relying on Lacan's famous distinction between the two categories of the imaginary (*imaginaire*), and the symbolic (*symbolique*). The imaginary, as Jackson says, cannot be articulated because language, in Lacan's terms, pertains to the realm of the symbolic.

authoritative position of omniscience. Furthermore, fairy tales make the promise of “wish fulfilment, magical satisfaction” (154), which she is undoubtedly dismissive of: “these more conservative fantasies simply go along with a desire to cease ‘to be’, a longing to transcend or escape the human. They avoid the difficulties of confrontation, that tension between the imaginary and the symbolic” (Jackson 156).

It strikes as ironic, however, that Jackson would hold the fairy tale (and its derivatives) to be a conservative form compliant with the status quo when there is so much argument to the contrary. Alison Lurie has famously argued that fairy tales “are among the most subversive texts in children’s literature. Often, though usually in disguised form, they support the rights of disadvantaged members of the population [...] against the establishment” (32). Since they stem from orally transmitted folklore, Lurie argues, fairy tales have always been in contact with the lower, discriminated spheres of society: their protagonists belong to marginal social groups (poor, orphaned, female...) and their plots often deal — in more or less covert ways — with “sex, death, low humor, and especially female initiative” (Lurie 37), offering precisely the kind of commentary that engages with social reality and threatens the status quo. Of course, much like Jackson herself argues of fantasy, this is a double-edged sword: the fairy tale may, and often does, reproduce the very norms it threatens. Concerning gender, for example, fairy tales may mirror gendered myths and perpetuate archetypal images of masculinity and femininity through what Cristina Bacchilega calls a “naturalizing technology”, meaning that the genre is employed to normalize the “ideological expectations and unspoken norms” of sociocultural hegemony (29). Nonetheless, arguments for the subversiveness of the form continue to be made, especially through retellings and reworkings of traditional fairy tales at the hands of contemporary writers, which display a capacity for experimentation and subversion distinguished by an “strident antisexist and antiauthoritarian perspective” (Zipes 2006, 178-179).¹⁵ Even forms that differ greatly from the uncanniness which Jackson favours are capable of subversion, which exposes the major issue with her typology of fantasy: in refusing to adapt her theoretical standards, Jackson’s theory is unable to account for Tolkien’s fantasy (as well as that of his contemporaries and successors) as anything but a failure. And yet, despite having been written earlier than both Todorov’s and Jackson’s theories, Tolkien’s *On Fairy Stories* presents some striking similarities to the ideas of these later critics. Much like Jackson, Tolkien establishes his so-called fairy-stories as “not primarily concerned with possibility, but with desirability” (Tolkien 55): the concern is not with whether the events of the narrative *could* or *would* plausibly happen, but with awakening in the reader a desire for something beyond the real, beyond “the social inhibition of such [psychological] drives” as Jackson describes (Attebery 21). However, unlike Jackson, Tolkien states that fantasies are successful if “they awakened desire, satisfying it *while often whetting it unbearably*” (55, italics mine). That is, their function is not only that of expelling or expressing desire, but also awakening it in the first place, and even intensifying it. In the words of C. S. Lewis: “fairy land arouses a longing for he [the child] knows not what. It stirs and troubles him (to his life-long enrichment) with the dim sense of something beyond his reach and, far from dulling or emptying the actual world, gives it a new dimension of depth” (29). Both Tolkien and Lewis conceive of such desire positively, though this may be interpreted in religious terms in their case — as a desire for an encounter with or an experience of the divine. This does not necessarily make their thoughts any less applicable, however. As Attebery puts it, “longing engendered by fantasy has its roots in the various physical and emotional hungers we have all experienced from infancy”, and regardless of its origins, it remains “an

¹⁵ For more on the modern fairy tale and its subversive uses, see Jack Zipes’ 2006 study *Fairy-Tales and the Art of Subversion*.

important component in the cognitive shift toward wonder engendered by successful fantasy” (*Strategies* 23).

However, the major shift marked by Tolkien’s theory with respect to the previous ones relates to the relationship of fantasy with the real. Jackson and Todorov mostly agreed on considering fantasy as not only fundamentally linked to the real, but also taking place *within* it, whether as an undercurrent beneath or behind the known world, or shifting its precepts in some way. Tolkien, on the other hand, entirely differentiates the ‘real’ world from the world of the fantasy: “He [the writer] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world. You therefore believe it, while you are, as it were, inside. The moment disbelief arises, the spell is broken [...]. You are then out in the Primary World again” (52).¹⁶ The primary world is then the world we know and which we commonly refer to as ‘real’; upon entering the fantasy, this primary world recedes to the background (much like Iser’s theory of reader response suggests), and the fantastic events take place within the secondary world created by the author. Whether the fantasy starts out as mimetic — imitating the primary ‘real’ with only the exception of the magic or supernatural element —, or whether it builds a different world altogether, it always takes place within a secondary world where elements that are “not only ‘not actually present’, but which are indeed not to be found in the primary world at all”, can exist (Tolkien 60). This is in fact why Jackson thinks of Tolkien’s fantasy as almost completely disconnected from reality: she understands this secondary world as a “secondary, duplicated cosmos” that is “relatively autonomous, relating to the ‘real’ only through metaphorical reflection and never, or rarely, intruding into or interrogating it” (Jackson 42). This escapist conception of Tolkien’s work and its derivatives is why Jackson’s typology cannot conceive of it as subversive. However, Jackson herself had already argued that no fantasy can exist untethered from the real, and I do not believe it reasonable to argue that Tolkien was actually attempting to separate the world of the fantasy from what he calls the primary world, particularly with how full of veiled commentary on his contemporary reality his own work is. Rather, this typology of primary and secondary worlds is, I believe, an attempt to establish a relationship between the real and the fictional along lines similar to possible world theory.

Lubomír Doležel’s seminal *Heterocosmica* (1998) establishes a clear difference between the “strong links between fiction and actuality” and “the doctrine of mimesis, a theory of fictionality that claims that fictions are imitations or representations of the actual world, of real life”, which is a “reductive” practice (Doležel x). Such a doctrine is based on what Doležel terms the one-world frame, “the assumption that there is only one legitimate universe of discourse (domain of reference), the actual world” (2). Such an assumption can be seen, for instance, through Jackson’s assertion that the realm of the imaginary which fantasy seeks is unrepresentable, because it lies outside of or beyond human discourse. Doležel reviews the ideas of several theorists of one-world referential semantics, among them Bertrand Russell and Ferdinand de Saussure, and describes how the mimetic doctrine relies upon assigning “to a fictional entity an actual prototype” (Doležel 6), meaning that it attempts to assign a real, actual counterpart to each fictional character, setting, and so on. However, because there are no actual particulars behind many of the fictional entities, “mimetic criticism is forced into an interpretive detour: fictional particulars are taken as representations of actual universals — psychological types, social groups, existential or historical conditions” (Doležel 7). Against this form of interpretation, which is doomed to failure since “the actual world cannot be the

¹⁶ It is worth mentioning that George MacDonald had written something similar to this idea already, back in 1893: “man may, if he pleases, invent a little world of his own, with its own laws; for there is that in him which delights in calling up new forms — which is the nearest, perhaps, he can come to creation” (MacDonald, “The Fantastic Imagination”, published April 2021 at www.george-macdonald.com).

domicile of fictional particulars” (9), Doležel conceives of the exchange between fiction and reality as bidirectional: “in constructing fictional worlds, the poetic imagination works with ‘material’ drawn from actuality; in the opposite direction, fictional constructs deeply influence our imaging and understanding of reality” (x), thus establishing a deep connection and a mutual influence between fiction and mimesis while avoiding *reducing* the former to exclusively mimetic representation. This resembles Robert Scholes’ idea that “[a]ll writing, all composition, is construction. We do not imitate the world, we construct versions of it. There is no mimesis, only poesis” (quoted in Hume 24). To avoid the impasses and lacks of mimetic interpretation, Doležel proposes “replacing the one-world frame with a multiple-world frame” (Doležel 12), which is what is commonly known as possible-world theory, inspired by logical semantics. Possible worlds are “constructed by the creative activities of human minds and hands” (Doležel 14), and as such are human constructs. The possible worlds of fiction are produced by “aesthetic activities” of composition and creation, and thus fictional entities can be “treated as constituents of a higher-order, ‘emergent’ structure, the fictional world” (15). Fiction’s ability to create possible worlds, where all fictional particulars share the same ontological nature, means that “literature is not confined to imitating the actual world”, which provides “a much larger space for literary fiction than the one-world frame. It does not exclude fictional worlds analogous or similar to the actual world, but it also accounts for the most fantastic worlds, far removed from, or contradictory to, reality” — and therefore eliminates any justification “for two semantics of fictionality, one designed for ‘realistic’ fiction, the other for ‘fantasy’” (Doležel 19). This is reminiscent of Mark Wolf’s idea that a fictional world is located along a spectrum of what Wolf calls “secondariness”, depending “on the extent to which [it] is detached from the Primary World and different from it, and the degree to which its fictional aspects have been developed and built” (26) — that is, depending on how attached or reliant the fictional world is on the actual one. Furthermore, Doležel argues that these fictional worlds “are shaped by historically changing aesthetic factors, such as artistic aims, typological and generic norms, period and individual styles” (19). This dismisses possible criticism by way of arguing a disconnection of these possible worlds from the actual, as they remain influenced by the constraints and sociocultural context surrounding the individual responsible for their creation. Remarkably, however, “material coming from the actual world has to undergo a substantial transformation at the world boundary” by which “actual-world entities have to be converted into nonactual possibles” (Doležel 21), so that the ontological consequences of such a shift must also be taken into account.

Possible-world theory thus broadens the scope of previous fantasy theories like Todorov’s and Jackson’s, expanding the fictional scope beyond those works which somehow imitate or rely upon the actual. It is also very likely to be similar to what Tolkien had in mind when he described his idea of a secondary world, given the striking similarities between the secondary world as he describes it in *On Fairy Stories* and possible worlds as Doležel defines them. The “story-maker [...] makes a Secondary World which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is ‘true’: it accords with the laws of that world”, Tolkien wrote (52); “By composing a written or oral text, the author creates a fictional world that was not available prior to this act. Textual poesis [...] constructs fictional realms whose properties, structures, and modes of existence are, in principle, independent of the properties, structures, and existential mode of actuality”, Doležel argues (23). Doležel’s insistence that “[f]ictional worlds are not constrained by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness, or plausibility” (19) resembles Tolkien’s argument that secondary worlds produced by the human mind are free “from the domination of observed ‘fact’” (60), and that the best fantasies are indeed those “founded upon [...] a recognition of fact, but not a slavery

to it” (Tolkien 65). These ideas regarding the existence of multiple narrative worlds would fundamentally impact critical understandings of narratology, and would influence later theorists (such as Brian McHale, Uri Margolin, and Mark Wolf), possibly especially through Tolkien’s ideas. John Clute often employs “otherworld” as a synonymous term: both otherworld and secondary world “designate autonomous worlds that are not *bound* to the mundane world [...] and which are *impossible* in terms of our normal understanding of the sciences and of history” (Clute 738, italics in original). However, Clute does make two distinctions between them: “(a) The term ‘otherworld’ may refer to any sort of autonomous impossible world, including faerie and wonderlands, while the secondary world is not normally thought of as being governed by the arbitrary rules that” usually govern said wonderlands; on the other hand, “(b) A secondary world may or may not have some sort of connection to the mundane world through, for instance, the portals and crosshatches which are so common in fantasy, but otherworlds certainly have some sort of connection with mundane reality” (Clute 738). This work will be adhering to Tolkien’s original terminology, using *primary* and *secondary world(s)* to avoid any further confusion.

It is important to establish, however, that despite the wide applicability of his theory, Tolkien wrote fundamentally about and within a very marked type of fantasy. To attempt to refine its particularities, it is necessary to go back to the distinction between fantasy as genre and the fantastic as a mode, as well as the various definitions that have been proposed for both. As suggested through Doležel’s theory, many modern theorists contrast the fantastic with the mimetic as differentiated strategies or *modes* of storytelling. Kathryn Hume, for example, referred to them as the two *impulses* behind literary creation, establishing the mimetic impulse as a “desire to imitate, to describe [...] with such verisimilitude that others can share your experience”, whilst fantasy implied “the desire to change givens and alter reality — out of boredom, play, vision, longing for something lacking, or need for metaphoric images” (Hume 20). Once again, Hume speaks of desire, but it no longer drives fantasy alone — it also drives the mimetic impulse, in what Hume seems to presume is a desire to make oneself understood across visions of what is, in appearance, the same reality. This approach is useful because it stems from a rethinking of the assumption under which, Hume holds, previous theories of literature in general and of fantasy in particular were constructed: the assumption “that the essential impulse behind literature is mimesis”, and fantasy remains on the margins as “a separable and peripheral phenomenon [...] best defined by exclusion” (20). When creating a definition for fantasy, then, she strives to be as inclusive as possible, since definitions that “embrace more of the contextual system are more readily usable”, and thus more useful (Hume 19). However, the conception of literature as a blend, in whatever measure, of these two impulses, makes it so that fantasy cannot possibly be — in Hume’s terms — *isolated* within a genre or even a mode. Rather, “most literature includes fantastic elements, even as it includes mimesis” (Hume 22), so that, as has already been suggested, all kinds of literature could be deemed fantastic in some measure. This, of course, suits Hume’s own aims of making her definition as flexible and inclusive as possible: her working definition as she gives it is, simply, “[f]antasy is any departure from consensus reality” (21, italics in original). This includes “transgressions of what one generally takes to be physical facts, [...] technical or social innovations which have not yet taken place [...], alternate worlds and universes [...], miracula or things to be marvelled at, precisely because they are not everyday occurrences”, and those texts which place their events “somewhere else or once upon a time. Such distance and time markers commonly denote an awareness of fantasy” (Hume 21). This broad conception of fantasy is remarkably akin to Brian Attebery’s famous statement that “[a]ny narrative which includes as a significant part of its make-up some violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law – that is fantasy” (*Fantasy Tradition* 2). Attebery,

however, attempts to find a middle ground between this broad definition and the rigid sets of features which had limited the scope of the outlined preceding theories.

Attebery makes a distinction between what he terms fantasy as formula, which is “escapist literature” and “a mass-produced supplier of wish fulfillment”, and fantasy as “mode of storytelling” (*Strategies* 1). The former implies “consistency and predictability” and is as such “relatively easy to describe”, whereas fantasy as mode “is a vast subject, taking in all literary manifestations of the imagination’s ability to soar above the merely possible” (*Strategies* 2), much like Rosemary Jackson had already mentioned (7) and, as Hume points out, appears as “*an element* in nearly all kinds of literature” (xii, italics in original). To consider fantasy as formulaic thus implies consistent limitations and constraints, whereas the notion of mode is equivalent to Hume’s *impulse*, affording a much more flexible and inclusive parameter as a set of overarching features found across otherwise wildly different works. In Attebery’s words, it is “a stance, a position on the world as well as a means of portraying it” (*Strategies* 2), which once again ascribes political implications to the form. Similarly to Doležel and Hume, Attebery continues to assert that the relationship between mimesis and fantasy is one of mutual exchange: “there are no purely mimetic or fantastic works of fiction. Mimesis without fantasy would be nothing but reporting one’s perceptions of actual events. Fantasy without mimesis would be a purely artificial intervention, without recognizable objects or actions” (Attebery, *Strategies* 3), and therefore effectually devoid of meaning, since fantasy “depends on what world-1 [in Hume’s terminology, the world surrounding the author, which Tolkien had termed Primary] has conditioned the author to think of as real” (Hume 23). The term *mimesis* is still preserved by both Attebery and Hume, not in Doležel’s sense of mimetic interpretation, but rather as a sort of quality found in certain texts which make little or no use of the fantastic. Both authors seem to agree that it is “possible to recognize an imitative and realist intention in narratives”, making for stories that are fiction but “use no fantastic elements and hew to consensus reality” (Hume 24-25).

This consideration of fantastic and mimetic modes is useful because it “provides, first, a means of classifying and, second, a basis for evaluation” (Attebery, *Strategies* 4), but it does entail some disadvantages. There has been, as Attebery points out, widespread disagreement as to what theoretical bases should be used, or could be used, to study fantasy (*Strategies* 4-8). To offset the broadness of the mode, and thus the difficulty of studying fantasy from a theoretical critical standpoint, Attebery offers the aforementioned middle ground: fantasy as rigid formula coexists, in his typology, with fantasy as mode, and both coexist with the notion of genre as a midpoint, applicable to stories “that are more alike than required by the mode, and yet less uniform than dictated by the formula” (*Strategies* 11). Stories in the genre of fantasy may then follow and employ rules and conventions attached to the formula, but not as firmly and consistently as the designation requires. To avoid falling into the same mistakes as his predecessors, however, Attebery conceives of genre as a “fuzzy set”, meaning that it is “defined not by boundaries but by a center” (*Strategies* 12): the prototypical examples of a given genre would be at its centre, whereas more problematic or diffuse instances would grow further and further away from it, towards its margins. This allows the imposition of certain limitations without being particularly strict in their application, thus avoiding the major pitfall of previous theories — the establishment of a rigid system of classification where certain kinds of fantasy could not be made to fit. Attebery’s theory thus manages to account for what had been previously unaccounted for, describing Tolkien’s brand of fantasy as a particular genre within the mode, featuring a series of characteristics which have become a “mental template” for later generations as to what fantasy *is* (*Strategies* 14), which explains the importance of the

notion of genre — since not all fantasies follow these Tolkienian features, but may still share enough characteristics for the mode to be too broad a descriptor. Still, Attebery holds that all subsequent fantasy *was* fundamentally influenced by it, an influence which will be discussed further later on.

This examination of Tolkien's work allows Attebery to come to a delineation of three fundamental features, necessary to include a work within what he calls the fantasy genre: the first is the presence of the impossible, the "violation of what the author clearly believes to be natural law" as mentioned before (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 2). This impossibility or impossibilities are treated completely and "without hesitation [...], without any attempt to reconcile them with our intellectual understanding of the workings of the world" (*Fantasy Tradition* 2). Tolkien had already expressed something similar when he mentioned that nothing within the narrative must suggest that the "story is a figment or illusion", even if the reader knows this is the case (Tolkien 52). Secondly, according to Attebery, fantasy has a "comic" structure, meaning that it "begins with a problem and ends with a resolution" (*Strategies* 15); even if such a resolution is tragic, "structural completeness" (*Strategies* 15) is always present. Finally, the third feature of fantasy relies on the reader's response, which is that of "wonder" or "estrangement", or "restoration", as some critics have termed Tolkien's idea: "We need, in any case, to clean our windows, so that the things seen clearly may be freed from the drab blur of triteness or familiarity — from possessiveness" (67)¹⁷. This means that, "rather than making familiar objects seem disconcerting or alien", as happens in Jackson's uncanny fantasies, fantasy can make us notice them anew, seeing them from a new angle or restoring "them to the vividness with which we first saw them", resulting in an "affirming, reordering narrative" (Attebery, *Strategies* 16). All or some of these three features do show up across many of the definitions of fantasy as posited by other authors, especially the fundamental requirement that the fiction deal with the impossible, with what contradicts agreed-upon reality.¹⁸ Nonetheless, despite this variety of theoretical approaches, it is still not "quite certain whether 'the fantastic' describes a group of texts, something that happens within a text (or at what level it happens), or something that happens to the reader encountering the text" (Wolfe xiii). Truthfully, fantasy (or the fantastic, in its broader conception) *can* be all of these things at once, encompassing the text, its creation, and its reception. One might then ask whether this long-standing debate regarding its definition is all for naught. The answer would be no, even if the discussion does seem to always lead to the concept eluding us: the existence of these theories, and the constant dialogue among them, has created a "fuzzy set" of theoretical tools, "of critical definitions of fantasy" among which scholars can "pick and choose [...] according to the area of fantasy fiction, or the ideological filter, in which they are interested" (Mendlesohn xiii).

Indeed, more recent theory no longer struggles to define fantasy or find its distinction from other kinds of literature, since such a distinction is made viable through the use and combination of previously outlined theories. Rather, recent research focuses on filling the gaps found on previous critical approaches. For example, focusing on the notion of possible or imaginary worlds, Mark Wolf points out that these previous theories tend to be "either medium-oriented (looking at a particular medium, and its form) or narrative-oriented (where the focus is on story, or content), or some combination of these" (7). Instead, Wolf offers his own approach considering the worlds themselves as objects of study, maintaining that "worlds function apart from the narratives set within them, even though the narratives have much to do with the worlds

¹⁷ Very similarly, Wolfgang Iser also claimed that fiction's "use of simulated reality does not merely denote the desire to copy a familiar reality; its function is to enable us to see the familiar reality with new eyes" (*Act* 181).

¹⁸ See Gary K. Wolfe's entry on "Fantasy" (38) for a compilation of many of these instances.

in which they occur, and are usually the means by which the worlds are experienced” (11). Wolf recovers Tolkien’s idea of “sub-creation” to describe the process of creation of fictional worlds: in Tolkien’s typology, God is the primary creator of the primary world, creating *ex nihilo*, whereas “human beings are limited to using the pre-existing concepts found in God’s creation” (Wolf 23), and hence the use of sub-creation, “creating under”. This process “involves new combinations of existing concepts, which [...] become the inventions that replace or reset Primary World defaults [...]. The more one changes these defaults, the more the secondary world becomes different and distinct from the Primary World” (Wolf 24). It follows, as already suggested by Jackson and others, that possible worlds will always resemble the actual or primary one, “not only because it is the source of material, but also because it is this familiarity that lets us relate to a secondary world” (Wolf 24). This means that, when first confronting the new, secondary world, the audience carries “the same default assumptions” as when confronting the primary world, “except where the author has indicated otherwise” (24). This is strikingly similar to what Iser had already implied, saying that our selection of textual perspectives is first “guided by those parts of the experience that still seem to be familiar” (Iser, *Act* 126). What is unfamiliar about the secondary world — the fantastic elements, such as dragons or hobbits — can be introduced through settings, images or objects that are recognizable for the readers — such as a pastoral, natural landscape featuring goats —, fitting into the assumptions they bring into the reading from primary reality, thus allowing them to “familiarize the unfamiliar” (Iser, *Act* 43).

Wolf’s notion of defaults comes across as useful when considering the audience’s stance as it relates to the fantasy world, because this secondary, fictional world will always constitute a defiance or alteration of these defaults which will (as Iser also pictured in his description of the reading process) force the audience to alter their own expectations and knowledge accordingly. It is interesting to see recent theorists turn back towards the audience for their critical examinations, as it fits with recent developments that think of genre as a notion having more to do with audience expectations than textual features. Farah Mendlesohn follows a similar idea in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), where she holds that “a fantasy succeeds when the literary techniques employed are most appropriate to the reader’s expectations of that category of fantasy” (xiii). Throughout her study, Mendlesohn attempts to describe “the way in which a text becomes fantasy or, alternatively, the way the fantastic enters the text and the reader’s relationship to this” (xiv), asking a basic question: “Where are we [as audience] asked to stand in relationship to the fantastic?” (xviii). To answer it, she creates a taxonomy of four basic ways for the fantastic element to enter the narrative, which also try to determine the reader’s position within it: the portal-quest, the immersive, the intrusive, and the liminal. I will offer a brief outline of these four types, so that it may serve as reference for the future use of these terms throughout my work.

The portal-quest fantasy, as its name suggests, involves “a fantastic world entered through a portal” (Mendlesohn xix); it is about “entry, transition, and negotiation” from a mundane life into the fantastic (xix), so the portal need not be a literal image. In fact, despite building a “full secondary world” (xix) which may make them appear to be what Mendlesohn calls immersive, many quest fantasies employ strategies and structures characteristic of portal fantasies: they position “both protagonist and reader as naive”, moving together from “a small, safe and *understood* world into the wild, unfamiliar world” of the fantastic (Mendlesohn 2), which justifies the blend of both through the term portal-quest. In an immersive fantasy, on the other hand, the fantastic world is the norm: it commonly employs what Mendlesohn calls “irony of mimesis”, which means that the narrator and characters do not express any

surprise or amazement, relying instead on an assumption of realism which “denies the need for explication” in giving the fictional world cohesion in its own right (xx). This means that the audience shares “the assumptions of the world as much as a contemporary reader of Jane Austen shared the assumptions she presented in *Pride and Prejudice*” (Mendlesohn 59), meaning that the audience and characters are both supposed to share the defaults of the secondary world. This kind of fantasy, unlike Mendlesohn’s three others, does not require “that belief in the dividing line between the real and the not-real to function” (61), and seems to be the only one where a fantasy world in which no magic occurs becomes possible — so that Mendlesohn thinks of science fiction as a particularly illustrative example of this category (62). In turn, in intrusion fantasy, “the fantastic is the bringer of chaos” (Mendlesohn xxi), so it departs from the base of a “normal” world, and assumes its normality to be organized and predictable, which the fantastic interrupts. Intrusion fantasy can be set both within the actual world and a fictional one, and can thus begin from the category of the immersive, because intrusion is only dependent on the protagonist, not on the reader, recognizing normality as such. The position of both protagonist and reader is that of confusion, with no control of the events that unfold just below the surface level and continue to escalate throughout the narrative. Finally, liminal fantasy is the rarest in Mendlesohn’s typology, since it involves an invitation to cross the threshold into the fantastic, but choosing not to do so, so that the fantastic leaks through the portal instead (see Mendlesohn xxiii). The locus of the fantastic is thus the liminal moment, calling back to Todorov’s hesitation — except, Mendlesohn points out, liminal fantasy “is very clear that magic, or at least the possibility of magic, is part of the consensus reality” of this fictional world (xxiii). The liminal fantasy thus begins from what looks to be the primary, actual world, but as events of magical origin unfold, they do not surprise or alienate the characters. Resembling the concept of magical realism, this category therefore “casualizes the fantastic within the experience of the protagonist”, and in the meantime “estranges the reader”, the only one who hesitates before the fantastic (Mendlesohn xxiv).

As can be seen, Mendlesohn’s concern with the standpoint or role which the audience is invited to take in each kind of fantasy returns, once again, to the importance of the consumer’s input. Even so, while Mendlesohn believes it possible for the audience to take any of the above-outlined positions, she argues “that the author seeks to control these choices, even while understanding the polysemous and proactive position of the reader” (Mendlesohn xviii). The relationship author-consumer, then, becomes once again dialogical, a blurred boundary. Clearly, however, Mendlesohn’s typology does not resemble previous classifications of fantasy: it does not have clear boundaries, like Todorov and Jackson had tried to impose, as its intent is not to create an all-encompassing typology. Rather than standing as an end in themselves, Mendlesohn’s categories are meant as tools to work across different genres and subgenres of fantasy. These four basic relationships may be modified, distorted, or combined, even within the same text. Mendlesohn herself goes over some examples of texts that do so, making these exceptions to her own rules useful in showing that “no theory that claims universal applicability is worth a damn” (Mendlesohn xvi). As Wolf’s and Mendlesohn’s approaches suggest, then, recent theories have become aware of their function as fallible descriptors, and stand out from their predecessors in rejecting any claim to such “universal applicability” — meaning not to create a categorization of fantasy, but to explain some of its overarching features, as well as how these kinds of texts relate to the audience. It is easy to conclude that fantasy as genre, and the fantastic as a mode, ought both to be looked at as “fuzzy sets”, combinations of features that elude exact definition; however, it is still possible to use the afore-described typologies as applicable tools to work with both the genre and the mode from a critical perspective.

The fantastic as mode, though much more inclusive, appears across too broad a variety of literatures to work as a useful descriptor for my current purpose. Still, it does not seem productive to offer here a delineation of what the fantasy genre itself entails. An “over-exact definition” would be more limiting than useful, perhaps “giving the name fantasy to what is only a minor subtype of fantasy” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 3), which seems indeed to have been the case for much of its history since the apparition of Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* in 1954. This work will thus be adhering to the idea of fantasy as a fuzzy set of works that defy the boundaries of known reality, based on the conceptions of Attebery’s and Mendlesohn’s theories — though all of the above have informed my own understanding of fantasy as a whole, as well as of the trilogy I analyze here. Speaking of, while I offer here a description of the theories surrounding the genre and its possibilities for political subversion, there is reoccurring mention of Tolkien over my own chosen case study, Nora K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth* trilogy. The fact is that Tolkien’s work has had an extremely extensive, almost inescapable influence over both fantasy theorists (given Tolkien’s own theoretical essays on the subject) and the literary fantasy scene, so that any discussion of fantasy that does not mention his particular brand of the genre and its long-standing repercussions seems incomplete. With this in mind, I turn now to describing the fantasy canon from a literary standpoint, so as to trace the Tolkienian influence on the literary tradition which surrounds Jemisin’s own work — as well as to understand in what ways the presence of this tradition constrains or limits current conceptions of fantasy literature.

5.1 THE CANONS OF FANTASY

As noted in the previous chapter, this work adheres to Attebery’s use of the term *fantasy* to refer to the genre, and specifically to more modern versions of the genre as popularized after Tolkien during the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. However, its discussion in terms of a literary tradition is inevitably complicated by its being a relatively recent, mutable form. Its shifting literary landscape and status as a “still ongoing cultural phenomenon” (Moran 1) in continued evolution has made many critics opt for a generalized understanding of fantasy on a “we know it when we see it” basis (Wilkins 4), opting to classify certain works as fantasy based on paratextual information — “such as jacket design and internal map illustrations” as far as the physical book is concerned, or the works “being stocked in specialist fantasy bookstores”, or being “discussed [...] as fantasy by readers” (Wilkins 5). This conforms with the aforementioned development of the genre’s limitations being marked by consensus among readerships, by paratextual features or by marketing strategies, rather than by any intratextual parameter, yet also implies that the very peculiarities of fantasy have prevented the fixing of a clear canon, further complicating the discussion of the genre. A reassessment of the notion of ‘canon’ is thus required in order to discuss the literary tradition of fantasy. Here, Patrick Moran’s work on *The Canons of Fantasy* comes in useful, since he traces the notion as it specifically relates to the fantasy genre, and thus takes its particulars into consideration. A canon, Moran writes, can be seen as both descriptive and prescriptive: on the one hand, it includes the “most *prototypical* works: those which best embody the characteristics of the genre and which bring them to their highest degree of excellence” (Moran 7); on the other, it also assigns “value to individual works and authors” and “to a genre as a whole” (Moran 3), which “implies the idea of a rule, of a curated choice” of works “that deserves to be retained, studied and imitated” (7). This condenses the problematic of the literary establishment itself, which has received as much spirited defence as scathing critique: even when attempting to describe, a canon ends up prescribing, as it is “ultimately based on a criterion of quality, and on the belief that this quality is, to some extent, objective” (Moran 30). Texts elevated to a canonical position simultaneously

become a “standard through which to assess other texts in the genre” (31), a measure of value and adequacy that serves to exclude certain texts in favour of others. Inevitably, such favoured texts will be those which resonate with the hegemonic ideological apparatuses at work, which explains the consistent criticism the idea of a canon has received from postcolonial, feminist, and Marxist theories, which reject the establishment (and the idea that it is at all needed) on the basis of its exclusionary and elitist prerogatives.

Taking this into account, Moran argues that a canon for fantasy ought to be treated like the genre itself, in terms of fuzzy sets or “gradients”, as he calls them: on the one hand, a “membership gradient”, by which “some texts are more obviously fantasy than others [...], and the Venn diagram of genres inevitably creates fuzzy areas where categories overlap” (Moran 24); on the other, a “centrality gradient”, by which “some authors and some works are commonly perceived as being more central, more representative of the entire genre — more canonical” (Moran 24). By regarding the boundaries of the canon as fuzzy, its creation becomes the result of a consensus among several different factions, rather than a monolithic list of authors or works after the Harold Bloom fashion, curated by a few academic and critically-oriented individuals and chosen through prescriptive (and subjective, hence biased) criteria of excellence. The latter is much more restrictive, whereas conceiving of the canon as a fluid, mutable notion rather than a limited set can make the canon itself more varied and inclusive in terms of its selected works.¹⁹ Of course, the traditional factors still play a role: academic interest, for one, elevates texts to prestigious positions as worthy of analysis and critical attention — which arrived rather late for fantasy, only after Tolkien was published (see Moran 10); for another, publishing houses and booksellers continue to determine which texts are more valuable in terms of their success in the marketplace, since, after all, market value is still value. Nonetheless, Moran also highlights the role of authors, who have their own ideas about what a genre entails or should entail: their own acknowledgement of previous influences contributes to placing some works closer to the centre than others, which once again complicates things — for example, many mainstream authors are reluctant to apply the label of “fantasy” to their works (see Moran 9), which speaks to the genre’s marginalized position in terms of critical attention. Importantly, readers’ voices have acquired significant weight in the constitution of canonical works in recent years, becoming another factor to be taken into consideration. This is particularly so thanks to the Internet and its facilitation of interaction among audiences and the creation of community (Moran 10), and in no small part thanks to fan-voted awards like the Hugo. The increasingly transmedial and interactive nature of literature growing beyond books to encompass videogames, role-playing, and so on, has also been particularly significant where fantasy is concerned. This newfound inter- and transmediality has problematized the very “question of canon by warping our definition of what an *author* and a *work* are and by creating universes that live more in the readers’ imagination than in the written word alone” (Moran 56), so that the very idea of a canon being necessary is questioned more than ever. Such questioning, of course, easily extends to the question of whether fantasy has any need, or use, for a canon at all. The genre’s flexibility necessarily makes it difficult to define and study, yet it is also its great asset: it is what allows for its evolution and supports its subversive uses. It then stands to reason that attempting to impose a canon over it — and thence to impose unnecessary criteria of value and standing over its texts — would not really mean an improvement, but rather the opposite.

Yet to trace a canon of any genre proves useful in one particular way: it allows to revise a history of significant works within the genre, and thus to create a sense of a continuing,

19 An idea famously suggested by Terry Eagleton in the first chapter of *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (University of Minnesota Press, 1996, first published 1983).

interrelated tradition. Given that this work deals with contemporary fantasy novels, it becomes especially important to understand such a tradition, if indeed one is to be found, in order to understand where these newer works stem from and how they are influenced by the genre's history — or, on the contrary, in what ways they attempt to deviate from it. This attempt to trace a canon of fantasy is therefore nothing but an attempt to draw on its history, and only one answer to a multifaceted question that is as mutable as the genre itself. To begin with the seventeenth through to approximately the nineteenth centuries, Todorov's and Jackson's theoretical works offer a good overview of the critical and academic conceptions of fantasy during that time. Mostly, it comprised what is nowadays known as "weird fiction", a literature concerned with the uncanny and the grotesque, including works encompassing "fantasy, supernatural fiction and horror tales embodying transgressive material: tales where motifs of thinning and the uncanny predominate" (Clute 1000). Thus, the authors whom Todorov and Jackson mention as canonically fantastic are E. T. A. Hoffmann, Edgar Allan Poe or even Ann Radcliffe and other eighteenth-century writers in the Gothic and horror tradition, as well as Franz Kafka for early-twentieth-century experimental literature. Nowadays, these authors would doubtlessly be considered to write within the fantastic mode, but not necessarily within *fantasy* as a genre. The turning point in the general conception of fantasy can in fact quite easily be traced back to the popularization of J. R. R. Tolkien's literary work, particularly *The Lord of the Rings*. It represented a stark departure from the aforementioned works in form, style, and content, and perfectly embodied the kind of fantasy that seemed to elude or fall outside Jackson's and Todorov's typologies. Furthermore, despite no canon having been established for the genre and its being an elusive notion in itself, Tolkien's work is widely regarded to be the only one constant at the core of the genre since its publication, an absolute, central position which has had manifold consequences for fantasy as a whole.

As mentioned in the previous chapter, Tolkien's is a very specific brand of fantasy, with a peculiar set of features that has created what Attebery would term a sub-genre known, perhaps most commonly, as high fantasy. This term was first used "by Lloyd Alexander in a 1971 essay on 'High Fantasy and Heroic Romance'", and subsequently further delimited by Zahorski and Boyer (Stableford 198). By contrast, these authors use low fantasy as "an antonymic description of fantasies not set in secondary worlds, nor elevated in their literary style" (Clute 597), thus approximately equivalent to Mendlesohn's intrusion fantasy (see Stableford 256). John Clute's definition of high fantasy also relies on this same typology: "Fantasies set in otherworlds, specifically secondary worlds, and which deal with matters affecting the destiny of those worlds" (466), he writes in *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. This is but one of the many denominations the sub-genre has received, "heroic fantasy" and "epic fantasy" being used particularly often. However, as per Clute, such terms have more specific implications of "larger than life quests" (7) and the presence of so-called "sword and sorcery", although this denomination is often thought to lean towards formulaic pulp, "featuring muscular heroes in violent conflict with a variety of villains [...] whose powers are — unlike the hero's — supernatural in origin" (Clute 915). Additionally, Clute does suggest the term "adventurer fantasy" as an umbrella to encompass all of these sub-genres, including the formulaic sword and sorcery as well as other "stories whose protagonists need not be heroes", but who are "men and women of all degrees (except the highest) attempting to survive, and make their livings" in fantasy worlds (Clute 915). This would avoid the "derogatory sting" Clute perceives in the concept of sword and sorcery, and bypass the more legendary dimensions of the words *heroic* and *epic*, but his term has yet to spread its use (Clute 7). In Mendlesohn's typology, this sub-genre would most resemble her portal-quest fantasy, though this denomination is far too broad a descriptor —

being, of course, intended to suit a wider range of works. This makes it so that both theorists and audiences mostly stick to high fantasy or epic fantasy to characterize the trend which Tolkien is regarded as having initiated. As for what differentiates this sub-genre from previous (and subsequent) fantasies, Brian Attebery describes “five characteristics” which can be consistently found in works adhering to this tradition (*Fantasy Tradition* 12).

Firstly, although (as mentioned earlier) nearly every fantasy “postulates another world, in which the fantastic or magical becomes the expected and normal”, the “magical Other World” of high fantasy tends to be very different, and “does not exist on the same plane or in the same time as our own” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 12). Simultaneously, however, the world displays some elements, commonly inspired by an idealized medievalism, “to evoke [...] a nostalgia for the never-was” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 12), so that Rosemary Jackson was in this sense justified in describing Tolkien’s fantasy as nostalgic. Secondly, the “structural organization” of this genre “is the same as that of its ancestor, the fairy tale” (ibid. 13), a form which is itself pervasively influenced by the long oral tradition of popular folklore and legend. I have mentioned how Tolkien was very much aware of the closeness of these forms to the kind of “fairy-story” he himself was writing, tracing this ancestry in a downward line: “Epic, heroic legend, saga, then localised these stories [myths] in real places and humanised them by attributing them to ancestral heroes, mightier than men and yet already men. And finally these legends, dwindling down, became folktales, *Märchen*, fairy-stories — nursery-tales” (Tolkien 42). However, much criticism has been careful of this kind of statement — Patrick Moran, for instance, holds it to be “primarily a legitimization strategy” for modern fantasy (14), to give stability and credibility to a genre that remains relatively new and sustained by a recent academic and critical tradition. Though the connection with myth and folktale must necessarily be acknowledged, Moran maintains that fantasy written during “the nineteenth, twentieth and twenty-first centuries” does not have “the same meaning [...] that it had in antiquity or in the Middle Ages”, especially because these “[h]eroic and fabulous tales no longer represent the dominant narrative mode” (Moran 15). In spite of this, the high fantasy (sub)genre still displays a structure that can be described by Vladimir Propp’s morphology of the fairy tale, “beginning with an opening problem [...] and proceeding through interdiction, violation of interdiction, lack, testing of the hero, receipt of a Magical Agent, and so on, to liquidation of the lack, punishment of the villain, and the hero’s marriage and ascent to the throne” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 13). This structure is much more fixed in fairy tales, whereas high fantasy has the freedom to play with it as it may, altering or even skipping each of these plot points; however, the ending must remain satisfactory, a requirement which appears to come from Tolkien’s *On Fairy Stories*. Tolkien argues in this essay that fantasy has a threefold function of “recovery of freshness of vision”, Escape, and Consolation (Tolkien 68), meaning “the Consolation of the Happy Ending” or “eucatastrophe”. This goes beyond simple “imaginative satisfaction of ancient desires” (Tolkien 75), because tragedy remains: “the joy of the happy ending [...] does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure”, since these are “necessary to the joy of deliverance” (75). Thus, the ending need not be universally happy — but it does require the tying up of any loose ends and the denial of tragedy, of “universal final defeat [...], giving a fleeting glimpse of Joy, Joy beyond the walls of the world, poignant as grief” (Tolkien 75). In his later work, *Strategies of Fantasy*, Attebery goes as far as to establish this as characteristic of fantasy in general:



[T]he characteristic structure of fantasy is comic. It begins with a problem and ends with resolution. Death, despair, horror, and betrayal may enter into a

fantasy, but they must not be the final word. Much fantasy does not have what we could call a 'happy ending'. [...] But in each case the problem initially posed by the narrative has been solved, the task successfully completed. If it were otherwise, [...] then we would not have the structural completeness of fantasy, but the truncated story-forms of absurdism or horror. (15)

Attebery does not seem to impose this as a harsh requirement, arguing that this choice speaks "about the ways we seek for order", rather "than about our expectations of finding it [order] in the real world" (*Strategies* 15). Still, such a statement has been criticized on grounds of the structural rigidity it imposes, since works without a satisfactory conclusion could not qualify as fantasy under this requirement. Still, eucatastrophe — or the comic structure — stands as common among high fantasy works, and thus a reliable indicator of the sub-genre in this case.

The third characteristic of high fantasy, according to Attebery, pertains to the character of its hero, who is usually a human, or otherwise an individual that is "ordinary" and "limited [...]" in the unlimited realm of fantasy" (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 13). This is necessary because, as Mendlesohn had established in her description of portal-quest fantasies, the reader is "tied to the protagonist" in the position of "companion-audience" (Mendlesohn 1), so that the hero acts as the audience's "entry into the enchanted kingdom" and their "guide toward understanding the marvels therein" (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 13). On the other hand, the fourth feature of high fantasy is that the hero's companions are not held back by such limitations, and may therefore "be as extraordinary as imagination permits" (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 13). The genre will thus usually feature "inhuman peoples" who "may be a little lower than man [...], but not so low that they may not communicate with man. They may be higher, [...] but not so high as to be above error and emotion" (*Fantasy Tradition* 13), and their interaction with the human or otherwise ordinary hero constitutes part of the wonder. The fifth, and final, staple of high fantasy is a system of actions within "a coherent and extractable order" that reflects a "strong polarization of good and evil" (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 13). This is often represented through two major forces at odds which ultimately engage in a battle that is decisive for the future of the world; however, even small or seemingly insignificant actions usually begin a ripple cause-effect chain that gives them much larger significance in the great scheme of things. In Attebery's words, "[a]cts in a fantasy are always meaningful, because everything connects with, or signifies, everything else" (*Fantasy Tradition* 13-14).

Although Tolkien is often heralded as the representative of high fantasy, he was far from the first to inaugurate it and display such features in his work. Jamie Williamson refers to these works as "pregenre" fantasy, encompassing works that were written well before the 1960s, and thus before the concretization of fantasy that followed Tolkien's success. One of the most significant representations of such concretization was the Ballantine Adult Fantasy²⁰ Series, edited by Lin Carter and dedicated to reprinting such pregenre works, from authors such as George MacDonald or William Morris, many of whom Tolkien himself admired and "all of whom [...] were authors of adult fiction" at a time when most fantasy was marketed for children (Clute 7).²¹ Williamson argues that, prior to the series' publication, "there had been no identifiable

20 It is worth mentioning that "adult fantasy" is nowadays more often employed to refer to works featuring erotic or pornographic content (see Clute 7), since children are no longer thought of as the primary audience of the genre. The distinction is now more commonly made the other way around, by referring to "children's fantasy".

21 Tolkien himself was very much against this association of children and fantasy, considering it "an accident of our domestic history. Fairy-stories have in the modern lettered world been relegated to the 'nursery', [...] primarily because the adults do not want it, and do not mind if it is misused. It is not the choice of the children [...]. Children as a class [...] neither like fairy-stories more, nor understand them better than adults do" (Tolkien 50).

genre resembling contemporary fantasy” (1): much of this prior work was classified under other labels, and had gone unrecognized and unidentified *as* fantasy. As such, when the Ballantine Adult Fantasy Series (henceforth BAFS for short) began to be published (in an attempt to draw the same audiences that had been drawn to Tolkien’s work), it constituted “the first time that fantasy was presented on its own terms as a genre in its own right” and the first time that “work now considered seminal in the genre was drawn together under a unified rubric” (Williamson 4). This means the BAFS pioneered the definition of the genre itself, since as the first it had “the power of determining a general historical canvas and implicitly shaping a canon of fantasy” (Williamson 4). Thus, after the series ended in the mid-1970s, a set of recognizable features began to be assignable to the genre. In turn, “new writers began to write more frequently to its specifications” (Williamson 6) in what effectually led to the slow establishment of a best-selling fantasy formula during the eighties, which eventually overshadowed the pregenre works of the BAFS: this formula is what “drove the mushrooming of the fantasy genre during the early 1980s into the full-grown sibling of science fiction and horror that it now is [...]. And the phenomenon is not simply literary: with bestsellerdom, fantasy began to permeate mainstream popular culture through the media of games, films, and graphic novels” (Williamson 198).

It is worth mentioning, however, that though Williamson mentions the inconsistencies in the use of the term “fantasy”, he does not make use of the genre-mode distinction as proposed by Attebery and Mendlesohn — despite its usefulness to reconcile the discrepancies he notes on the academic definitions of fantasy (citing Jackson’s *Fantasy: The Literature of Subversion* and Irwin’s *The Game of the Impossible* in particular) against the non-academic, popular conceptions of the genre, as well as their conflicting takes pertaining to the fantasy characters’ relationships to the impossible within the narrative (see Williamson 8-11). Williamson’s work is still useful, however, in its recognition of the role which the BAFS played in the establishment of a working, “informal canon of fantasy [that] has held through the succeeding decades” (5). Despite its recognition of pregenre writers, the BAFS was created *in response* to Tolkien’s *The Lord of the Rings* and its unprecedented success, attempting to satisfy “the growing demand among readers for similar texts” (Moran 8). It was only *after* Tolkien’s work proved fantasy as profitable that these predecessors were receiving due credit, many years after having published themselves. This makes fantasy peculiar in that marketability and commercial success largely determined its inception as a genre: it “is not simply a timeless, unchanging entity, but was constructed, quite deliberately, to meet a new demand” (Williamson 6). Significantly, this implies that the BAFS editors were specifically looking for stories that had features and plots similar to the ones presented by Tolkien; in so doing, they effectively defined what the core of the genre eventually became, establishing high fantasy as the centre from which the genre departed — and, securely at the centre of that centre, was Tolkien.

There is no one answer to what made Tolkien different from his predecessors despite the stark similarities amongst their writings, and much speculation surrounds the reasons behind his unprecedented success. Brian Attebery holds that *The Lord of the Rings* was

the first extensive exploration of the possibilities of modern fantasy. It seemed on the one hand to sum up the whole Western tradition of the marvelous [...]. On the other hand, the trilogy was an integrated story with a perception and a point of view that many readers found appropriate to the contemporary world: that is, it was not only a culminating work but also a seminal one. (*Fantasy Tradition* 154)

Indeed, the canonical status of *The Lord of the Rings* boasts a wide consensus that no other work has thus far managed, arguably to the extent that “no important work of fantasy written after Tolkien is free of his influence” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 12). Tolkien himself is “the only author of fantasy to be regularly considered as (potentially) belonging to the canon of general literature, as well as often hastily perceived as the father of fantasy” (Moran 24-25). His magnum opus was successful and influential enough to be secured “as the book that established modern fantasy literature as a genre, setting its mode and its formula, both used (and abused) by later writers” (Fimi 335). Later writers who would, thenceforth, be perceived and positioned in relation to Tolkien — inevitably compared and contrasted with his achievement. This indisputable hegemony led to two different responses among later authors of fantasy: “either a desire to imitate (even ape) Tolkien, or the urge to react against his blueprint and create fantasy literature with its own distinct character and voice” (Fimi 335).

Attempts have been made to trace Tolkien’s heritage through later writers, among them Williamson’s own.; I have relied mostly on Dimitra Fimi’s, in *A Companion to J. R. R. Tolkien* (2014), and Tom Shippey’s *J. R. R. Tolkien: Author of the Century* (2000) to outline a few examples of each of the above responses to Tolkien’s influence. Concerning the desire or attempt to imitate, Terry Brooks is likely to be the most famous example: he “slavishly imitated Tolkien” with the first volume of *The Sword of Shannara* series, published 1977 (Fimi 336). There is also Alan Garner’s *The Weirdstone of Brisingamen*, published 1960, for which he, like Tolkien, drew “upon Scandinavian mythological motifs and characters” (Fimi 338). Shippey also finds other similarities, such as the quest related to a talisman, the nature of the characters — as the protagonists “find themselves in contact with dwarves, a troll, and orc-analogues” — and even influences “on the level of scene and even more of phrase”, although this may be unconscious (Shippey, *Tolkien* 478). Unlike his predecessor, however, Garner wrote “low” fantasy, or intrusion fantasy in Mendlesohn’s terms, as he is “very much fascinated by the links between British myth, folklore, landscape and ancient ruins and sees ‘low’ fantasy as a way to express their interconnections”; this interest in the connection between myth and place was also present for Tolkien, though, so it is still possible to consider it an influence (Fimi 340). Other oft-quoted writers thought of as being on the same high fantasy current as Tolkien are Robert Jordan (*The Wheel of Time* series, from 1990 to 2013) George R. R. Martin (*A Song of Ice and Fire* saga, from 1996) or, more recently, Brandon Sanderson (*The Stormlight Archive* series, from 2010), who also co-wrote three books of *The Wheel of Time*. The best-selling popularity of more recent examples like Sanderson himself or Patrick Rothfuss (*The Kingkiller Chronicle* trilogy, from 2007), and the fact that it is possible to trace Attebery’s five core characteristics in these stories, shows that the Tolkienian high fantasy tradition continues to carry enormous weight.

On the other hand, there are writers who react against Tolkien or deviate more consciously from his tradition, such as Diana Wynne Jones: she acknowledges a connection to Tolkien in her “debt to British myth and folklore”, as well as “Norse legends and tales” and a subtler use of “medieval literature, on the level of narrative structure and style”; however, she was also very “outspoken [...] against the clichéd medieval trappings of much modern fantasy” (Fimi 338-339), which she mocks quite mercilessly in *The Tough Guide to Fantasyland* (1996). In this vein is also Michael Moorcock, who wrote fantasy in the 1960s and 1970s and was very openly frustrated with the hegemony of the Tolkienian heritage, criticizing it as a “reassuring, conservative, anti-urban and old-fashioned” form of fantasy that “does not question anything and never makes the reader uncomfortable” (Moran 37), a critique which strangely echoes Rosemary Jackson’s own (see Jackson 154). Moorcock even ended up being known as the

“Anti-Tolkien”, all due to how adamant he was “to defend and illustrate the possibility of a fantasy genre freed from Tolkien’s influence” (Moran 38). A mention is due in this regard to Ursula K. Le Guin as well, though she was not nearly as scathing as Moorcock was. Though her fantasies are often thought of “as ‘the next best thing’ after Tolkien” (Fimi 340), Le Guin deviated from and even actively questioned certain fantasy stereotypes, especially concerning gender and race. Her work does share certain similarities with Tolkien’s default, such as a fully fleshed-out secondary world (characteristically portal-quest and/or immersive fantasy), a single protagonist faced with a seemingly insurmountable quest, and some “central concerns” regarding “the importance of language [...] and the significance of transmitting history and poetry via an oral tradition” (Fimi 341). However, unlike the medieval, vaguely European character of Middle-earth, “Earthsea is an archipelago of islands, and most of the heroes of its tales are copper-brown in complexion”, showing “Eastern” spirituality and “elements and traditions of tribal societies rather than the strict hierarchies and politics of medieval society” (Fimi 340). It is worth mentioning, however, that Le Guin read Tolkien quite late in her life, after she had already been writing for years and thus developed a style of her own: “I could count it lucky that I, personally, did not, and could not have, read Tolkien before I was twenty-five. Because I really wonder if I could have handled it [...]. If I had known that one was there before me, one much greater than myself, I wonder if I would have had the witless courage to go on” (Le Guin 172-173). Such a statement speaks volumes about the expanse of Tolkien’s influence, and partially explains Le Guin’s ability to make the world of Earthsea unique while challenging “previous assumptions or givens of fantasy literature”, which were, in reality, “often established by Tolkien” (Fimi 341). More recently, some writers have also taken up the Tolkienian mantle, conscious of the baggage it carries, with a subversive intent behind their adherence to the characteristics of traditional high fantasy. A particularly poignant example of this is *The Priory of the Orange Tree*, by Samantha Shannon (2019), who builds her secondary world’s mythology around female figures and matriarchal social structures. Laure Eve terms *The Priory* a “feminist successor to *The Lord of the Rings*” in her cover blurb.²²

Whatever their uniqueness, however, these examples are presented as responses to Tolkien, as either adhering or deviating from his default, further cementing his central position. The genre itself was, “for several decades, [...] built largely on the idea that Tolkien was its supreme representative” (Moran 31). In reality, despite many of the above authors establishing themselves as popular and well-known staples of fantasy, Tolkien still very much “occupies a disproportionate place within the genre. His position at the centre of its canon seems as eminent as it is immovable” (Moran 25). *The Lord of the Rings*, in turn, becomes for both authors and audiences a “mental template” for the essence of fantasy (Attebery, *Strategies* 14), a default that “seems to reshape all definitions of fantasy to fit itself” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 12). Essentially, then, what I have been calling *high* fantasy is “the first thing that generally comes to most people’s minds when thinking of fantasy” (Moran 33), an idea reinforced by many of the above authors who wrote within this tradition having themselves become representative instances of the genre as a whole.

Thus, though fantasy does not in fact have a fixed canon, this central position of high fantasy presents a problem in two major respects: for one, it leaves little to no room in the public eye for sub-genres and variations of fantasy that do not follow this portal-quest, medievalist high fantasy model. In turn, works that do stick to this template are perceived as prototypical — and hence more canonical, in an overtaking of public perception that fails to reflect the inherent

diversity of the fantastic. For another, there is the problem inherent to “any discussion of the literary canon in general: the predominance of dead white men” (Moran 56). It is a tempting and often widespread belief that fantasy has not been taken seriously enough as a genre to suffer from the same problems as mainstream literature; since it does not have a set canon and all we have are varying lists of particularly popular or favourite authors, it follows that fantasy *also* sidesteps the favouring of “white/heterosexual/cisgender/male authors [...] at the expense of the representation of female, racialized and LGBTQ+ voices” (Moran 56). To perpetuate the idea that fantasy escapes these constraints by virtue of its escaping the canon, however,

is to forget the fact that mechanisms of domination and hegemony reverberate at all levels of the cultural machine. It is worth questioning why Tolkien, the fantasy writer most likely to be taken seriously by the establishment, happens to be a white, male, heterosexual, cisgender and deceased university professor; why most fantasy heroes are white, male, heterosexual and cisgender characters whose adventures take place in worlds mostly inspired by the European Middle Ages (or at least a fantasized vision of the Western medieval era). (Moran 57)

Furthermore, since the canon tends to reinforce its own bias, Tolkien’s limitless influence has led to a chain of influences among white males (and fewer, yet notable white women) imitating one another. The weaker aspects of Tolkien’s work — that sense of nostalgia for an unreal, Western, medieval-like past, the predominance of whiteness, maleness, and cis-heterosexuality in both the secondary world as a whole and the characters the plot follows — are, in this way, canonized themselves, become immortalized as features of fantasy rather than “obsolete pieces of ideology which have become fossilized and have turned into fantasy tropes” (Moran 60). As a result, these features, plotlines, and character roles are replicated and reused in later works, passing forward unquestioningly that universal, hegemonic voice; in endless repetition, these features become staples, almost requirements for the genre, which lead to an inability — or unwillingness — to imagine more diverse presences occupying these spaces and playing these roles. This is at the root of the gender, sexual, and racial disparities generally found in literature, which Ebony Elizabeth Thomas attributes to “a massive failure of the collective imagination” (6).

Indeed, although from the 1980s onwards it is possible to find authors questioning common tropes and exploring more diverse representations within fantasy (see Moran 64 for some relevant examples), this has not necessarily gone hand-in-hand with more diverse authorial presences. This is in spite of, or precisely due to, the fact that diverse voices tend to either play with the Tolkienian formula in ways that subvert its male- and white-centric core purposes and values or directly write against them, especially through using other sub-genres or blending different characteristics together. Thomas herself writes that “the Black fantastic has historically been liberating, activist artistic production in the face of erasure and marginalization” (8), yet “the fact remains that the vast majority of speculative narratives read and viewed in the United States are still written by White authors” (9). Similarly, despite the importance of female authorship being evident from the very beginnings of the Anglo-American fantasy tradition (Hope Mirrlees wrote *Lud-in-the-Mist* as early as 1926), it is rarer for them to reach the heights of popularity and influence of their male counterparts. Even Ursula Le Guin and her considerable status and popularity remain overshadowed by Tolkien, though his hegemony seems to be shifting as more, younger readers are introduced to the genre. Even though the genre has continued to constantly evolve, another major shift in the paradigm of fantasy — and a displacement in

the centrality of high fantasy — did not occur until the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries. Such a shift can be most easily traced back to the newfound popularity of so-called young adult literature, or YA for short.

This particular kind of literature is, as its name suggests, mostly defined by its intended audience. And yet, the term *young adult* has quite a long and disputed history as both concept and literary classification, which I review here only briefly. During the first decades of the twentieth century, “adolescents, teenagers, or young adults were — at least until the late 1930s — still widely regarded as children” (Cart 8), so that a separate category of literature targeted towards this liminal audience between childhood and adulthood did not exist. It took until the 1940s for this “new field of writing for teen-agers” to become “established” (Cart 11), and then again, during “the 1940 and 1950s, books [...] ‘dealt almost exclusively with white, middle-class values and morality’” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 25). It was not until the 1970s that “the way that teenagers read and the way authors wrote for teenagers” (*Inclusive* 25) began to change, especially through novels like S. E. Hinton’s *The Outsiders* (1967), itself “born out of frustration of how teenage life was depicted in literature” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 25). While literature oriented towards this younger audience continued to evolve throughout the twentieth century,²³ the term *young adult* was often favoured over *adolescent*, which “smacks a bit too much of the clinical” and may even sound “faintly patronizing” (Cart 7). Still, the usefulness of *young adult* over any other term comes from its perceived inclusivity: during the late nineties, the notion began to be “[n]o longer limited to the traditional twelve-eighteen demographic” (Cart 70), progressively expanding to include “nineteen- to twenty-five-year-olds (or even older, as the twelve to thirty-four [...] demographic has become an increasingly desirable market in publishing)” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 139). This comes, of course, from the arbitrary and often conflicting definitions of adolescence across countries and cultures, as well as “the wide appeal of YA” literature itself (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 23). Cart quotes statistics that show fully grown adults buying and reading YA in not inconsiderable numbers: “Fully 55 percent of buyers of works that publishers designate for kids aged 12 to 17 [...] are 18 or older, with the largest segment aged 30 to 44. [...] 78 percent of the time they are purchasing books for their own reading” (R. R: Bowker Company press conference, quoted in Cart 146). Likely in an attempt to do justice to this wider audience, much older than originally intended, the term New Adult was coined in 2009 to encompass “fiction similar to YA that can be published and marketed as adult” (Cart 143). However, the term does not seem to have caught on very widely as of yet: besides the fact that it appears as a marketing ploy to admix YA and more adult literature, YA itself is already characterized by venturing “into modes left unexplored in children’s literature. [...] Despite having thematic and structural tendencies of its own, the YA novel blends with the novel for adults in its employment of, for example, themes and scenes of sexuality and the presence of science fiction”, the latter being much more common in YA than in children’s literature (Cadden 307).

Although this latter statement is definitely debatable, many authors do see contemporary fantasy and science fiction as “bending and blending, in shape-shifting and morphing” into “something called ‘speculative fiction’” (Cart 97), an umbrella term which, despite its apparent usefulness, I will not be using here due to my specific focus on fantasy. In fact, Cart argues that, of the two genres, “it is fantasy that has arguably [...] maintained the stronger sense of separate identity” (97), likely due to the fact that YA fantasy in particular “brings together two

23

Cart revises the history of literature for young adults from the 1940s to the 1990s, including examples of noteworthy works, in chapters one to five of *Young Adult Literature: From Realism to Romance*.

established genres with devoted readerships — young adult fiction and fantasy fiction — and in so doing amplifies and energises some of the most recognisable aspects” of both (Wilkins 3). A particularly useful instance of this is J. K. Rowling’s *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007), which highly popularized the sub-genre of boarding school fantasy and which made Rowling one of the few authors resembling Tolkien’s impact most closely: the series quickly became one of the best-selling of all time, sparking a cult following as well as a wave of imitators in its wake. Though it was initially thought of as children’s literature, due to the youth of its protagonist and apparent whimsy of its magical world, the novels took a rather more serious turn as Harry and his companions grew up, and began to explore darker topics related to adolescence and wider social issues. This, combined with the novelty of Rowling’s take on the boarding school sub-genre, turned “young adult literature into an increasingly global phenomenon” and created “a new interest in fantasy as a genre not only for children but also — and perhaps more importantly — for young adults” (Cart 118). This meant that adult authors became increasingly attracted “to the newly profitable field of books for young readers” (Cart 118), cementing the position of YA in the publishing industry and challenging previous assumptions about what its audience wanted to read. Other similarly impactful examples are Stephenie Meyer’s incredibly popular *Twilight* saga (2005-2008), credited as inaugurating the genre of paranormal romance — a coupling of “romance and speculative fiction” where (mostly female) protagonists fall in love with all manner of (male) supernatural creatures (Cart 121);²⁴ and Suzanne Collins’ *The Hunger Games* (2008-2010), often heralded as the pioneer of YA dystopian novels — which are set in future, often post-apocalyptic societies marked by nightmarish repression, ruin, corruption, squalor, darkness, or devolution”, although “[s]ome are not set on this world at all” (Cart 123).²⁵ Much like it had happened with Tolkien, the indisputable commercial success of these works has consolidated their position and influence within YA in general — but also within fantasy in particular, inviting a new audience to partake of the genre (one that was young, yet not comprised of the children that had been so often thought fantasy’s primary target) and showing the extent and many forms of its possibilities beyond the popularized high fantasy model. Furthermore, and similarly to the fantasy genre as a whole, YA literature has proven itself particularly flexible: though its history can be mapped out and certain works — such as the previous examples — can be pinpointed as having popularity and influence over the rest, “there is still no canon of YA literature” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 34). The aforementioned lack of exact boundaries on what is or constitutes YA literature, the ongoing exploration of its possibilities, and the fact that it has only received critical attention very recently, all contribute to the difficulty in fixing a canon. Additionally, YA literature (again, much like fantasy itself) is often met with general disregard: despite some YA works having been canonized, like *The Catcher in the Rye* (1951) and the aforementioned *The Outsiders*, they are rather perceived as

24 It is worth mentioning that this genre in general, and the *Twilight* saga in particular, are also known for receiving notorious amounts of scathing reviews, from both critics and fan communities, despite their popularity. The wave of hatred, directed as much to the book itself as to its fans, has been connected to misogynistic preconceptions towards the romance genre and its orientation towards a mostly young, female audience. For more on this, see the essay by Isabel Clúa, “Las chicas sólo quieren divertirse: Mujeres y géneros populares” (*Girls Just Wanna Have Fun: Women and Popular Genres*), in *Máxima Audiencia: Criterio popular y género*. Barcelona: Icaria, 2011.

25 There is often a debate surrounding dystopia and whether it fits best in the science fiction or the fantasy categories, since — as happens with many sub-genres — there is often overlap between the two. Interestingly, Janie Slater offers four reasons why dystopian novels are necessary or beneficial for young adults that closely resemble arguments in favour of fantasy in general. For instance, she argues that dystopia “[h]elps us see new, different perspectives than we’re capable of from our own limited experience” (quoted in Cart 125), a phrase strikingly similar to Tolkien’s statement that fantasy serves to “clean our windows”; and the reasoning that dystopia helps “sort out and express feelings and emotions, providing cathartic release and relief” (Slater, quoted in Cart 125) pointedly fits with the idea of deriving Consolation from the fairy-story — dystopias are bleak, “but that doesn’t mean they are hopeless” (Cart 125).

‘classics’ of the general literary scene, so that YA is thought to lack solid, ‘valuable’ literary precedents. This perceived lack, along with its explicit orientation towards a younger and often dismissed audience, has contributed to YA being held under a rather negative light not only in academic and critical instances, but also by the very public both outside of and within its intended audience. Save for a few exceptions, YA (and most particularly when featuring romance) is oft-dismissed as lesser-than, “pedestrian and formulaic” in its writing and “controversial” in its content (see Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 23). Relatively recent scholarship also speaks of the “straightforwardly commercial aims” of this kind of fiction, which is thought to aim at reinforcing existing norms (see Wilkins 8). This negative bias is often the result of adhering to “a *cultural literary heritage*” (italics in original) — a heritage embodied in works heralded as canonical, and thus notorious for excluding “some of the voices that make up contemporary society” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 23). Both YA literature and fantasy, then, in their relatively recent and commercially-influenced inception as genres, find themselves missing the legitimization which the existence of a solid canon would provide.

The question therefore remains of whether the sense of academic and critical legitimacy it would afford is worth the fixing of an unavoidably exclusionary canon, and thence perhaps the loss of such flexibility. The lack of solid, fixed literary precedents is a hindrance in some respects, yet it also implies that new voices, particularly voices from the margins, could seize the relative newness of the field to make their way into the mainstream, reflecting changes that were and are also taking place in society at large (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 35). Authors interviewed by Melanie Ramdarshan Bold often thank the new, emerging audience of YA for this apparent acceptance of diverse voices, since “with YA, irrespective of the critics, you can get to the readership without always needing gatekeepers” (*Inclusive* 34). The heightened diversity in YA authorship is particularly evident in terms of gender: statistics have shown that a very significant majority of YA is written by female authors (see Ramdarshan Bold, “The Eight Percent Problem” 392-393), and features female protagonists. The representation of LGBTQ+ identities has also tended towards noticeable improvement (see Lo, “2014 LGBT YA by the numbers”). Sadly, this is not the case in terms of race, since ultimately both authors and audiences in YA are mostly “white, middle class” in their majority (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 35). Despite diversity being a constant conversation among authors and audiences in the contemporary scene, and an apparent concern of publishing houses, both Ramdarshan Bold’s statistics show the number of publications from authors of colour — and hence the presence of non-white characters and experiences in YA — suffers from an overall decline (“The Eight Percent Problem” 398), a concern which Thomas’ work in *The Dark Fantastic* reinforces. This can be traced to both the publishing houses’ desire to publish what will be sold on the market without facing particular difficulties *and* the glaring lack of “publishing professionals of colour”, who “face the pressure of being a minority in the workplace” (Ramdarshan Bold, *Inclusive* 52). In spite of these hindrances, however, authors of colour continue to publish and fight for their presence in the shelves, contributing to the blooming multicultural diversity of YA and making of it a safe (or at least safer) space, for otherness in characters and plots as well as experimentation with the established staples of so-called “adult” genres.

Thus, the consistent shift towards inclusivity prompted by the advent and popularity of YA has been especially significant as far as fantasy is concerned: for one, because YA expanded the demographic of fantasy beyond the polarity of either children or fully grown adults, which broadened the genre’s horizon of expectations. For another, because fantasy prior to YA was so deeply entrenched in the Tolkienian high fantasy tradition, YA provided a playful and unexplored space that led to the rediscovery of the genre’s heterogeneity. As authorship

grows more varied, so have the fantasies themselves, bringing along a prolific variety of sub-genres. Among these are the aforementioned paranormal romance and dystopian fiction, but also urban fantasies (*The Mortal Instruments* by Cassandra Clare, 2007-2014), period fantasies (Naomi Novik's *Temeraire* series from 2006-2016, or Garth Nix's *The Left-Handed Booksellers of London*, 2020), and even a return to the aesthetics and themes of the Gothic (as in Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Mexican Gothic*, 2020). On the other hand, the secondary world-building and characterization have become increasingly varied: although many genre features remain recognizable, and traces of the norm may still be found, YA fantasy has moved, steadily, beyond the white/male/Anglocentric canon, as well as beyond the high fantasy medievalist settings. Some examples are Silvia Moreno-Garcia's *Gods of Jade and Shadow* (2019), drawing from Mayan culture and mythology; the *Legacy of Orisha* series by Tomi Adeyemi (begun 2018), set in a secondary world inspired by Yoruban culture and drawing from West-African mythology; Malinda Lo's *Huntress* (2011), influenced by Chinese culture and *I Ching* philosophy; Naomi Novik's *Spinning Silver* (2018), inspired by Slavic folklore, and so on.

Though the shift was very marked in YA, this evolution is not limited to this kind of fantasy. On the contrary, marketed as “adult” fantasies are the highly successful *The Poppy War* series by R. F. Kuang (2018-2020), drawing on mid-twentieth-century war conflicts in China, and Samantha Shannon's aforementioned *The Priory of the Orange Tree*. The latter in particular plays very closely to the high fantasy canon, with a plot-line of epic proportions about a heroic quest to defeat a monolithic evil — except her cast features a variety of female, queer, and racially diverse characters, with the two female protagonists unambiguously entering a romantic and sexual relationship. Being the author that occupies this work, mention must necessarily be made here to N. K. Jemisin's extensive body of work; her *The Broken Earth* (2015-2017) trilogy received three Hugo Awards, and was shortlisted for other prestigious awards like the World Fantasy, Nebula, and Locus, among others. Despite its commonalities with the norm, especially regarding the scope and heroic proportions of her tales, Jemisin's fantasy works very consciously to subvert many of the expected tropes outlined by Attebery, and makes it a point to write characters of colour (who often are sexually diverse, as well) at the centre of her plots.

Twenty-first century fantasy protagonists have thus grown more varied and distanced themselves from the white, male, cis-heterosexual hero. Female protagonists in particular have become increasingly common, especially in YA, where a female protagonist has almost become a genre expectation. The plots themselves have become increasingly heterogeneous, leaving behind or writing against the fairy-tale inspired structure of more hegemonic fantasies to play on the readers' expectations. Many times, they fail to observe the eucatastrophe which Tolkien (and, seemingly, Attebery) thought of as essential — featuring unexpected cliff-hangers or twist endings that do not necessarily deliver the required consolation. Most significantly, fantasies have even begun to shed any pretence to detachment from reality in order to offer straightforward social commentary, deconstructing essential ideological tenets with such poignancy as to make the connection between secondary and primary world unavoidable. However, with a genre so heavily dependent on precisely such a detachment from primary reality, how can such commentary be managed? To delve into the answers to this question, the next chapter aims to elucidate the peculiar relationship between fantasy as a literary genre and the primary reality which surrounds and inevitably influences it.

CHAPTER 6: FANTASY AND/ AGAINST REALITY

*Hard times are coming, when we'll be wanting
the voices of writers who can see alternatives
to how we live now, can see through our fear-
stricken society and its obsessive technologies
to other ways of being, and even imagine real
grounds for hope. We'll need writers who
can remember freedom – poets, visionaries –
realists of a larger reality.*
(Ursula K. Le Guin at the
National Book Awards)

The fantasy genre's particular relationship to reality — its voluntary, conscious separation from what is considered the *real* world — has for a long time been surrounded by assumptions that have harmed its critical and academic credibility. Its consideration as an escapist genre is particularly pervasive, despite escapism being a relatively recent concept. As Tom Shippey writes, the word “did not find its way into the *OED* till the 1972 Supplement, the year before Tolkien died; and even when it did the editors could find no citation earlier than 1933” (*The Road* 285). The definition of escapism reads: “‘The *tendency* to seek, or the practice of seeking, distraction from what normally has to be endured’. And the *OED* has yet to find a citation which is not pejorative” (Shippey, *The Road* 285). This disparaging connotation stems from the premise that what affects the individual at the level of primary reality loses significance or disappears altogether when the individual ‘escapes’ to the possible world. Fantasy seems to make this escapist movement easier by its capacity to create worlds that can, at least seemingly, differ so radically from the real. John Clute also picks up on these negative connotations in his entry on escapism in the *Encyclopedia of Fantasy*: “A derogatory term much used in descriptions of genre literatures in general and fantasy in particular. It is a term, however, which more accurately describes the motives of the reader than the nature of what is read” (321). In so arguing, Clute shifts the focus of the concept: rather than fantasy itself being inherently escapist, it is readers that turn to fantasy seeking such escape. Yet why is it that they do so? After all, Jackson had deemed fantasy as socially subversive as early as the 1980s; it is curious that the genre would be associated with a derogatory connotation of escape so often and so far into its history — especially given that escapism is not particular, or even exclusive, to the genre.

Any fiction, however realistic its intent, still forces its consumers out of their own reality into a different situation, into the skin of a character or characters that may radically differ from themselves. As Lucie Armitt puts it,

creation and reality and the reader will find the connection too arduous to make; too little and it will fail to work as fantasy at all. (Armitt 24)

Fantasy, then, as far as *escape* is concerned, is no more *fantastic* (in the sense of an imaginative exercise) than any other fiction can claim to be. And yet, no other genre, except perhaps romance literature (Clute himself mentions how Jane Austen's novels "are notoriously read for escapist motives", despite their meticulously realistic nature [321]), seems to have suffered quite as much of an instantaneous and dismissive association with escape. This association is likely due to the evident secondariness (to use Wolf's term, referring to the distance between primary reality and the fictional premise) of fantasy's fictional worlds, as well as its frequent use of portals and other similar devices to 'transport' its audience into different realities. Theorists have argued vehemently against this association, however, and strived to correct it.

Kathryn Hume in particular identifies escapist or "escape literature" as an entirely separate type, indifferent to considerations of mode. Thus, whether they write within the mimetic or fantastic, an author of escapist literature "assumes our agreement that everyday reality is boring, unromantic — even depressing. Furthermore, the author believes nothing can be done to change that reality, so he offers to disengage us from its grey unpleasantness and to enfold us in comforting illusions" (Hume 56). These narratives "are sometimes called fantasy because of their raw daydream content, but they do not contravene the laws of physics or physiology"; in other words, they are "unrealistic but not a departure from what could physically happen in this world" (Hume 22), which, as previously discussed, fantasy necessarily implies. Besides, the sense of hopelessness which this definition hints at — an incapability to change a stagnant reality, and hence a desire to escape it — does not seem to necessarily hold true to fantasy, which fundamentally suggests change, mutability, and the subversion of preconceived notions of what reality is or stands for. Rather, within "the structure of fantasy", as Clute puts it, "the term Escape has a more particular meaning" (321), one that is based on Tolkien's oft-quoted defence of the notion:

[I]t is plain that I do not accept the tone of scorn or pity with which 'Escape' is now so often used [...]. Why should a man be scorned if, finding himself in prison, he tries to get out and go home? Or if, when he cannot do so, he thinks and talks about other topics than the jailers and prison-walls? The world outside has not become less real because the prisoner cannot see it. In using escape in this way the critics [...] are confusing, not always by sincere error, the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter. (69)

Tolkien's understanding of Escape as one of the three essential functions of fantasy is not only more positive than the general conception of it, but also elevates escapism from a questionable attitude on part of the audience to a legitimate purpose of fiction, and of fantasy fiction most particularly. In fact, Tolkien re-signifies the notion into something possibly even beneficial, since it need not imply ignorance or unconcern with the circumstances of the primary, actual world. Not only that, this also correlates the very act of Escape with a noticeable effect over reality — at the very least as far as the individual's perception of and relationship with it are concerned. Thus, escapism would become interpretable as a way to avoid becoming overwhelmed by circumstance, and obtaining a glimmer of hope in order to face the harshness of reality with renewed energy. Furthermore, the conception of fantasy as comforting wish-fulfilment is behind much of the dismissiveness with which the notion of escape is often treated;

however, secondary worlds can be fraught with as much danger and bleakness as with wonder, so that to “automatically claim” that explorations of secondary worlds are “‘escapist’ (with the term being applied pejoratively) is to do them an injustice” (Wolf 35). The notion that readers of fantasy do so for the sake of wish-fulfilment becomes debatable when considering that “the stories set in many secondary worlds often include oppression, conflict, war, and dark times for their characters”, so that “it soon becomes clear that these are not worlds that someone would want to physically escape to, much less reside in” (Wolf 35).

It is worth noting, however, that despite these attempts to destigmatize the notion of escape, the genre continued to be critically dismissed on grounds of unreality or illusion well into its history. Even very recent takes assume the “implicit invitation to escape this careworn world for a visit to a more appealing one, if only in one’s imagination” (Cart 98-99) as one of fantasy’s greater appeals. For instance, fantasist Tamora Pierce holds fantasy as especially important “to a group that I deeply hope is small: those whose lives are so grim that they cling to everything that takes them completely away for *any* length of time” (quoted in Cart 99). Such capacity to displace an audience away from a harsh reality and bring them comfort for a time is certainly worthwhile, and can be seen positively as such. However, this conception retains a sense of pity underneath it, of sympathy rather than empathy — as though those who read fantasy do so specifically to escape the bleakness of their lives, rather than for other purposes traditionally perceived as ‘higher’, such as self-improvement or educational enlightenment. Aside from assuming that readers turn to fantasy in an uncritical manner, as well as ignoring the fact that non-fantastic literatures can very well accomplish similar escapist functions, ideas like these have tinged the fantasy genre with an induced sense of guilt over the consumption of something for daydreaming²⁶ or mere enjoyment, especially in the case of a genre that had for so long been dismissed as pulp-like: “Fantasy is the ultimate guilty pleasure, something in which we all indulge privately and often deliciously, be our daydreams of a romantic, opportunistic, consolationist or sexual nature, but in relation to which we are never encouraged to over-indulge” (Armist 1). This persistence has caused some theorists to avoid the concept altogether, resorting instead to conceptualizing the appeal of fantasy as “a sense of wonder”, created “by making the impossible seem familiar and the familiar seem new and strange” (Attebery, *Fantasy Tradition* 3). While the exploration of a hitherto unknown secondary world is doubtlessly much of fantasy’s appeal, it is also a prerogative of the genre to explore the real and bring new perspectives to it, what Tolkien had termed “Recovery”. In this author’s words, fantasy takes pains to express “the queerness of things that have become trite, when they are seen suddenly from a new angle” (Tolkien 68). However, according to this same author, to impose this sole function on fantasy is to limit it, “for the reason that recovery of freshness of vision is its only virtue” (68).

As mentioned earlier, some of the general academic and critical disregard which fantasy has experienced can be traced back to this equation with escapist wish-fulfilment, which is considered an expression of (wilful) ignorance: “From an academic point of view, fantasy criticism has traditionally carried an element of stigma, seemingly based on the assumption that the business of fantasy cannot ever be sufficiently ‘serious’ to merit proper scholarship” (Armist 1). It must be remembered that disconnection from reality was one of the arguments Rosemary Jackson exhibited against Tolkien’s and Le Guin’s fantasies, as a direct connection to the real

26 In “Creative Writers and Day-Dreaming”, Sigmund Freud suggests that all human beings daydream, yet only children may communicate such daydreams without shame: “the daydreamer carefully conceals his phantasies from other people because he feels he has reasons for being ashamed of them” (152), yet the writer is able to communicate these daydreams by legitimizing them in literature, producing “a great pleasure” in the audience and “overcoming the feeling of repulsion” which the communication of daydreams usually produces (153).

was, in her terms, required in order for fantasy to accomplish its subversive function. This lesser-than concept of fantasy and the fantastic seems to suggest that criticism conceived of the dynamic reality/fantasy as an exclusively dualistic conception, where the former is placed in a privileged position against the latter. Interestingly, this mirrors the dynamic subject/other, insofar as one of the poles is perceived and defined in negative, opposing terms to its dominant counterpart. Much in the same way as the other is conceived of as that which is *not* a subject, the fantastic is then conceptualized as that which is *not* real. Furthermore, if this is so, just as the other is initially conceived of as an entity completely separate and distinct from the subject, fantasy itself is also thought of as completely cut off from reality — which is impossible in itself, since the human mind would not be able to conceptualize such a thing. The turning point solidifying this perception seems to be located at the advent and quick establishment of the realist tradition from the mid-19th century onwards, which makes for an interesting counterpoint to the view of fantasy as an ancient genre spanning many centuries (departing from Greek and Latin mythos). However, as previously explored, such a view of fantasy is more-so an attempt to legitimize the genre against the hegemony of realism than anything else, since our contemporary idea of fantasy is very recent and has evolved considerably quickly. Indeed, the critical separation between realism and the fantastic as separate modes is itself relatively recent:

Before the beginning of the scientific revolution in Western Europe in the 16th century, most Western literature contained huge amounts of material 20th-century readers would think of as fantastical. [...] There is no easy division between realism and the fantastical in writers before 1600 or so, and no genre of written literature, before about the early 19th century, seems to have been constituted so as deliberately to confront or contradict the 'real'. Though fantasy certainly existed for many centuries before, [...] it is quite something else to suggest that the perceived impossibility of these stories *was their point* — that they stood as a counter-statement to a dominant worldview. (Clute 338)

Once nineteenth-century fantasy (after George McDonald, William Morris, and their contemporaries and successors) began to assert itself as consciously and deliberately deviating from reality and its hegemonic point of view, the realist tradition acquired its position of dominance, traditionally praised as a better or somehow superior literary form. This is especially evident in the fact that the literary canon as a whole has been markedly populated by realist fiction, by contrast to fantasy. Such perceived superiority comes from two major sources: firstly, the aforementioned association of fantasy with escapism and childish fancy (itself a dismissal of childhood that, as already explained, many critics and fantasists take issue with), and secondly the evident link of mimetic realism with actual, extra-textual reality, and hence with a sense of knowledge and truth. As Ian Watt argues, “[m]odern realism, of course, begins from the position that truth can be discovered by the individual through his senses”, relying on the “view that the external world is real, and that our senses give us a true report of it” (Watt 11). Jackson’s argument further supports this idea: “Realism, as an artistic practice, confirms the dominant ideas of what constitutes this outside [empirically verifiable, extra-textual] reality, by [...] organizing and framing it through the unities of the text. It presents its practice as a neutral, innocent, and natural one, erasing its own artifice and *construction* of the real” (Jackson 83, italics in original). By its very nature making constant reference to this assumed extra-textual, observable reality, realist fiction reasserts its position of control through “an apparent belief that the external world is something over which human beings can attempt authority, and one

of its most important corollaries: that language can be made exactly to represent the world” (Hunter 129). Henry James articulates this idea in his essay “The Art of Fiction” (1884), where he argues that the novelist competes with life by condensing in his art a way of perceiving it, in order to most accurately show its truths as the author sees them. R. L. Stevenson quickly and famously contradicted this in his reply, “A Humble Remonstrance” (1884): “Mr. James utters his mind with a becoming fervour on the sanctity of truth to the novelist; on a more careful examination truth will seem a word of very debateable propriety [...]. No art —to use the daring phrase of Mr. James— can successfully ‘compete with life’; and the art that seeks to do so is condemned to perish *montibus aviis*” (151). James’ argument is more stereotypically and mimetically realist in its belief that the novel *can* condense reality, and be made to represent it; on the other hand, Stevenson argues that the resemblance of fiction to life is “forced and material, as a shoe must still consist of leather” (153) — that is, exclusively functional, so that our minds can understand and conceptualize it. Under such fostered beliefs, fantasy — whose discourse departs as much as it can from representations of primary reality — becomes left out of the dominant literary economy. Its difference, “which is designed and significant, and is both the method and the meaning of the work” (Stevenson 153), becomes stigmatized as otherness, and is thence shunned.

This comparison between the position of fantasy and the position of the other has already been posited by several theorists:

Like the right hemisphere of our brains, and like woman in a culture where the standard of definition is man, fantasy has been the silent partner, ever since Plato and Aristotle promoted mimesis in their critical statements. (Hume 196).

The mass-market paperback fantasy with a lurid cover is like the limited-edition excursion into fiction by the well-known poet in one all-important respect. Both are outside the culturally defined norm; both are Other. (Attebery, *Strategies* ix)

The modern fantastic [...] is a subversive literature. It exists alongside the ‘real’, on either side of the dominant cultural axis, as a muted presence, a silenced imaginary other. (Jackson 180)

These descriptions convey much of what was already said in previous chapters about the other itself: a sense of inferiority, of something fundamentally different that distorts reality and truth, and that must therefore be controlled, dismissed, silenced. Though the image of the mirror can be understood as descriptive of the fantasy/reality dynamic, there have been attempts to exorcize fantasy from this position of distorted reflection. William Plank, for example, establishes imagination as the synthesizing force that reconciles both poles:

If we admit that the existence of *fantasy* is as one term of the dialectic fantasy/reality, we must also admit [...] that the two terms find their synthesis in the imagination. *Imagination*, that is, the ability of the human mind to create images by means of which it explains the world to itself, the epistemological basis for perceptions of reality. These images, produced by the image-creating cognitive apparatus, are the manner in which that apparatus constructs the world as world. (Plank 79)

for the creation of fiction, the association of imagination and of its adjective, *imaginary*, with fantasy — combined with the aforementioned hegemony of realism — have derived in their historical dismissal as “nonexistent, false, invalid” (Plank 79). However, the idea of something not being present in reality does not necessarily imply falsehood: as Plank himself argues above, the construction of images via the imagination is what “constructs the world as world” — in other words, it is what subjects build in order to explain the world to themselves and one another. This exercise in synthesis is best exemplified through ancient myths, which turned to fantastic narratives of interactions among gods to explain natural phenomena. In bridging the gap between reality and fantasy, then, imagination can be argued to establish a link between the process of reality construction and that of identity construction, since they both take place through similar mechanisms. Subjects build an image of the other after their own perceptions of what otherness entails, and simultaneously construct images that resemble or reflect the world, after their own perceptions of it, in order to make sense of the reality surrounding them. This ties with what was already suggested in previous chapters regarding the ontological impact of narrative: fiction, as an exercise in imagination, can be said to act as a bridge between the gaps in our perception. Its condition as a thought experiment means that fiction enables us to imagine difference, so that fiction can become a “meaning-giving experience” that “helps us find relationships between the I and the not-I, between man and the cosmos, between consciousness and reality” (Hume 27-28). Its condition as an otherized genre — something which has always existed in the margins of the real — perhaps makes fantasy in particular more suitable for this task: both the fantastic and the other are constructed through a process of imagination, based on individual perception and (perhaps mistaken) assumptions. Following the mirror dynamic, this places fantasy in the reflective position: it mirrors reality, but does not quite reflect it — rather distorting or shifting its image to reveal its hidden depths. Rosemary Jackson already pointed out that “many fantasies introduce mirrors, glasses, reflections, portraits, eyes — which see things myopically, or distortedly, or out of focus — to effect a transformation of the familiar into the unfamiliar” (Jackson 43). In so doing, fantasy “does not introduce novelty, so much as uncover all that needs to remain hidden if the world is to be comfortably known” (Jackson 65). In other words, fantasy becomes a vehicle for the representation of otherness, for all that has been culturally repressed or made invisible. In so doing, it shows the real from new angles, forcing the consumer into a position of estrangement, or into what Tolkien called a “recovery of freshness of vision” (68), forcing a different perspective upon the known world that reveals its hidden depths.

Positioning fantasy and reality as the two sides of the mirror further stresses that they are not separate concepts, and supports the idea that they do not in fact conform a dualistic hierarchy, but rather are mutually dependent. On the one hand, as already established, fantasy is incapable of escaping the real, which imposes a necessary limit on its seemingly boundless capacity for imagination: “Fantasy re-combines and inverts the real, but it does not escape it [...]. The fantastic cannot exist independently of that ‘real’ world which it seems to find so frustratingly finite” (Jackson 20). Furthermore, fantasy “is produced within, and determined by, its social context. Though it might struggle against the limits of this context, often being articulated upon that very struggle, it cannot be understood in isolation from it” (Jackson 3). As is the case for all fiction, this implies the impossibility of conceiving of fantasy as existing within a vacuum, apart from and unaffected by the realities that surround its creation — which in turn belies the dismissal of the genre on grounds of escapism. On the other hand, as Kathryn Hume mentions, the fantastic may be dependent on the mimetic, but the opposite is also true, as Armitt’s earlier quotation already suggested: even the most realistic fiction depends on a sense of the fantastic

for its presentation of events — given how primary reality is, as Stevenson argued, not as cohesive and condensable as fiction presents it. Both realism and fantasy are “dependent on the devices of past story-tellers”, although Attebery does argue that “fantasy is less able to disguise its dependence. It cannot pretend to be unmediated reporting. It cannot be validated by our sense of the realistic, and even though that sense is also determined [...] by literary convention, we do not perceive the conventions that carve out particular genres and formulas from the mode of realism”, precisely because they are designed to imitate the discursive characteristics of the actual world (*Strategies* 9). This evidence of interdependence suggests that the relationship between these two poles is rather one of equality, but to think of it as such has noticeable consequences both for the general perception of fantasy and for its perceived effect(s) on the real. Firstly, it legitimizes the genre beyond prejudiced notions regarding escapism; secondly, it implies that fantasy, despite its apparent removal from reality, can still affect it and even alter it, perhaps beyond a single individual’s perception. Several of the aforementioned theories already suggest that the fantasy/reality relationship is not hierarchical: for instance, Doležel’s theory of possible worlds posits fictional worlds as unconstrained “by requirements of verisimilitude, truthfulness, or plausibility” and “shaped by historically changing aesthetic factors” (Doležel 19), and therefore as simultaneously independent of, yet connected to, actuality. Colin Manlove also writes how “several writers of fantasy [...] see the worlds of fantasy as no less real than their own or any other” (xii) and “seek to show that the natural and supernatural orders are not so divided as might be thought” (Manlove 45-46). Brian Attebery, too, insists that fantasy has an impact “not in disordering, but in reordering reality. It reinforces our awareness of what is by showing us what might be, and uses the imaginary laws of the created world to postulate hidden principles on which our own might be organized” (*Fantasy Tradition* 36), even in the case of portal-quest or immersive fantasies, where the secondary world overrides or substitutes primary world defaults almost entirely. Similarly, Armitt emphasizes that “fantasy, in its utilization of a competing worlds model, always requires a re-thinking, never an evasion of the real” (172), and that the “boundary negotiations” between possibility and impossibility, between real and unreal, “are intrinsic to all fantasy, as are the means by which we move between competing worlds” (Armitt 8). As far as these “competing worlds” go, Mark Wolf also argues that “rather than having a strict delineation between Primary and secondary worlds, we have something of a spectrum connecting them, just as ‘fiction’ and ‘nonfiction’ are not as mutually exclusive as they may first appear” (Wolf 27).

Now, if we accept the premise that the narratives of fantasy and of reality stand as two sides of a coin, mutually influential and building their worlds simultaneously with and against one another, it follows that our relationship to fantasy *does* have the potential to go beyond the simplicity of escaping to a different fictional world: it has the power to potentially alter, distort, or subvert the ‘real’ — which makes its parallel with otherness not at all coincidental. Both fantasy and otherness are perceived as existing outside the status quo, and neither can be rid of the political implications of such a position: despite their apparent removal or disconnection from the hegemonic universal, both fantasy and the other may still have effect(s) over such hegemony. This means that fantasy, as a genre, possesses enough power as to become an uncomfortable presence for the status quo. As Lynette Hunter explains, the generalized concern with the link between fantasy and reality is, at its core, a concern “with power, authority, and control”, hence the reason why some critics and academics have attempted and perhaps still “attempt to move fantasy into the non-authoritative by cutting it off from reality, denying all connections” (Hunter 37). Plank also relates the dynamic fantasy/reality to the idea of power as follows:

The mind's ability to create images is the basic epistemological behavior of the human mind: the assignment of truth or validity to these images is the role of a politics of the intellect, a politics that is certainly related to the [...] power of a culture. Politics is the study of power, and it is the political, technological power of a culture that defines what is real and what is fantastic. Reality therefore becomes an exercise in politics, and the fantastic is the realm of the powerless and the disaffected. (80)

Therefore the status quo, as the dominant force over the narratives that rule human society, is then able to define a common agreement as to what reality *is*, as well as to grant power to such a definition in order to reassert itself as the hegemonic power. The system thus works circularly, as Althusser had already suggested: power “validates itself through its claim to being real, true, and right” (Plank 80), so that anything outside of this order is quickly dismissed as a mere fantasy, a distortion of the known — and the possibility of a different social order is consequently derided as utopian illusion. The fact that literary fantasy upsets this, changes it, “takes the real and breaks it” (Jackson 12), makes it dangerous because it “takes us into ‘another world’, beyond the looking-glass or the grave, removed in time or space, but a world that is a mirror image of, a revelation of, an analogy for, the everyday one” (Yarrow 84). Its very existence as a negative, as a *not*-reality, implies the possibility of subversion of the current order — much as Jackson had already argued; and this same threat is embodied in the figure of the other, the one who must be kept under submission, its difference monitored and controlled — but who, conversely, holds the key to the overturning of the system itself. It is precisely this position of marginality, of otherness, which makes it possible to argue that fantasy is particularly suitable to become a site of political and social resistance to cis-heterosexual, white-supremacist patriarchal systems and narratives.

Of course, irrespective of fantasy's peculiarities, all fiction stands in this comparatively marginal position with respect to primary reality, so it may well be argued that any form of fiction can function in the same way, if employed with such a purpose. However, it is my belief that the characteristics inherent to the fantasy genre as outlined in this and previous chapters make it particularly useful for the exploration and articulation of these resistances. As fantasy attempts to take us beyond the real, it also takes us beyond its discourses — specifically, beyond the mimetic, which has so often used its claim to truth and universal validity to exclude marginal voices altogether, or else to encase them within such marginal positions. When discussing fantasy's connection to eroticism, Lucie Armitt mentions how “the distance fantasy establishes between worlds [...] renders this exploration of the forbidden both ‘safer’ and, paradoxically, more immersive: we dream deeply, but ultimately re-surface unscathed” (141). This also holds true for fantasy's exploration of otherness: in its secondary worlds, subjects may explore difference and conduct ideological experiments freely, under an impression of complete safety granted by the premise of fictionality — much in the vein of Ricoeur's idea of rehearsals. As Iser put it, “a successful relationship between text and reader can only come about through changes in the reader's projections” (*Act* 167). It is thus an ideal outcome, then, upon re-emergence into the primary world, for subjects to be in some way touched by the represented difference: the imaginative exercise would have achieved some change in their perception of the actual world, by rendering visible what was previously hidden and thus causing a shift in the preconceptions with which they previously filled the gaps in their perception. The experience of fantasy would then serve the end which is implied, in reader-response and narrative empathy theories, to be

the purpose of fiction as a whole: to enable not only the recognition of otherness, but also its positive perception and assimilation into the subject's perception of the actual, primary world.²⁷

However, as mentioned in the chapter on empathic response, this implies that fiction is, perhaps exclusively, oriented towards producing a change in the worldview of a hegemonic subject — in other words, the subject who benefits from some measure of the privilege of belonging to one or more categories of the universal (male, white, heterosexual, etc.). On the other hand, this work posits that the more significant function of the change fiction may prompt lies in its orientation towards the marginalized individuals themselves — towards their own perception of their identity and their social role(s). This, I would argue, is where fantasy's exploration beyond the real may prove particularly beneficial; and yet, as shown throughout the previous section, many of the major or most influential works of fantasy have been predominantly marked by the white, male, cis-heterosexual point of view. In these fantasies, the representation of difference takes a secondary position — if it takes place at all. It is indeed very telling that fantasy has always been ready to imagine worlds where magic, dragons or elves exist, but not worlds where women live alongside men in equal terms, or where humans and elves could be anything but white-skinned. Fantasists have always been eager and willing to imagine the transcension of the physical laws of reality, yet not so much transcending the boundaries of sexism, racism, and other institutional oppressions which distinctively colour their fantasy worlds as written by and for a very definite set of defaults. Ebony Elizabeth Thomas gives her own experience as a Black reader of fantasy in her introduction to *The Dark Fantastic*, discussing how she felt — and, in fact, was actively told — that these worlds and stories were not meant for her, and were often barred to her presence altogether: “My mother was doing me a favor by letting me know that magic was inaccessible to *me*. The real world held trouble enough for young Black girls [...]. In order to survive, I had to face reality” (1). This was so even despite the fact that there is a not inconsiderable tradition of writers of colour turning to science fiction and fantasy in order to convey their experiences, and to send messages of resistance and courage in the face of oppression. When fantasy, as a genre, has been overwhelmingly constructed and marketed for the universal, hegemonic subject, an economy is created where marginalized identities are prevented from inscribing or imagining themselves into the fiction. For them, it does not function as the “mirrors, windows and doors” which form the title of Rudine Sims Bishop's essay, where she argues: “When children cannot find themselves reflected in the books they read, or when the images they see are distorted, negative, or laughable, they learn a powerful lesson about how they are devalued in the society of which they are a part” (Bishop 1). In other words, otherized individuals do not get to enjoy the escapist function of fantasy when the fantasy itself expels them, marginalizes them, in the same ways as the primary world does. Thomas phrases it in terms of positioning: “not everyone is positioned the same way *in* or *by* the fantastic”, so that neither characters nor narrators position marginalized readers as “possible interlocutor[s]” (18-19). Instead, they are made to occupy the same otherized positions they do in the primary world, indirectly showing the inevitable connection between fantasy and primary reality. Thomas uses Jeffrey J. Cohen's “Monster Culture: Seven Theses” (1996) to show how the marginalized individual (the character of colour, in particular) is always recognized and represented as an other within fantasy, much like the figure of the monster is. Thus, the consumers can never be made to identify with this other, because its perspective is that of the abject, the antagonist whom the hero (the protagonist) must face and destroy (see Thomas 70). The dark other's movement beyond this position is inevitably thwarted in what Thomas refers to as “the dark fantastic cycle” (26).

²⁷ See Keen 61-63 for examples of authors who take this stance.

This cycle refers to a repeated pattern in the roles followed by “Dark Others” in the fantastic. Though Thomas thinks very specifically of characters of colour, and hence her double-edged use of the adjective “Dark”, this pattern could also be read into other characters whose identities are otherized in both primary and secondary worlds. In Thomas’ pattern, the awesome persona of the dark other first appears as a “spectacle”. This presence disrupts or interrupts the fantastic, is unsettling because it should not be there. Precisely because of the way the fantastic as a tradition has been constructed — as fundamentally white, male, able-bodied, etc. — “issues of race and difference threaten to shake us out of the waking dream that we inhabit while engaged in the fantastic. The spectacle of the Dark Other in a speculative narrative leads to the hesitation that is the Todorovian hallmark of the fantastic” (Thomas 73). This hesitation disrupts the experience of the fantastic, which leads audiences to reject and lash out against this other’s presence. In this way, whether driven by fear, desire, or impulse (all possible responses to the monstrous other, according to Cohen), both characters and readers respond to the presence of the other with violence, which constitutes the third phase of Thomas’ cycle. The dark other must be subjugated, controlled, and at some point destroyed, as the conventions of fantasy demand of antagonists. This destruction results in the final phase of the cycle, “haunting”: even after its defeat, the dark other’s “present-absence nonetheless haunts the story”, since it cannot leave the narrative (Thomas 27). Its existence is required for the existence of the narrative itself, for without the dark other, Thomas contends, “there is neither conflict nor climax, neither rising action nor resolution. The Dark Other gives the story its excitement, its promise, its very meaning” (27) and thus inevitably remains, as this ambivalent state between presence and absence must sustain the story to its conclusion. Inevitably, this haunting prompts the repetition of the first phases, creating a vicious cycle that repeats itself text after text. However, there is one more phase which breaks this cycle: emancipation, “reached only when the Dark Other is liberated from spectacle, embodied hesitation, violence, and haunting” (Thomas 28), finally subverting its position and becoming a subject. To encounter narratives where emancipation actually takes place is rare, though, and they are “rarely as popular as those that feature trapped dark subjectivities [...] because subverting the traditional positioning of the Dark Other in the fantastic requires radical rethinking of everything that we know” (28). That is, it requires emancipating imagination itself.

Such an emancipation not only implies that subjects resist and reject the responses to the other — hesitation, violence — which the system encourages and reproduces, but also the reimagining of the subject/other positions in their entirety, since fantasy worlds continue to replicate their existence. It is not possible for these others to escape into a fantasy world where they are not other because the characters who are meant to represent them have experiences and concepts of their own difference that do not differ from what they already live through in primary reality. Thomas exemplifies this with the case of fictional representations of black womanhood:

Black girl characters are always an instantiation of Blackness in the fantastic, and carry with them all the weight of Blackness in the real world. Many children and teens seek the fantastic as a means of escape; as we have seen, Black girl characters in mainstream science fiction and fantasy do not offer agency but are marked by the narrative for death and haunting. [...] O]veridentification with Black story-girls often leads to heartbreak that is not unlike the pain found beyond the page and the screen. (Thomas 138)

The 'weight' not just of Blackness, but of difference in general, persecutes these characters in and beyond the page. For them to enter that phase of emancipation would thus require a fundamental rethinking of the dominant forms of myth-making and metanarratives that have continued to shape our societies, and in turn our imaginations as well (see Thomas 18). It is, I would argue, in this process of rethinking where the exploration beyond the real offered by fantasy comes in as particularly beneficial.

As others, these identities have not enjoyed the autonomy and agency afforded to subjects in primary reality, nor been able to perceive themselves beyond the difference that marks them as undesirable or outsiders. Because they are not part of the universal default, they are always defined by their *non-being* — non-white, non-male, non-heterosexual, etc. Realist discourse, as already established, departs exactly from this primary reality that is conditioned by these perspectives on others. The narratives constructing this primary reality, and the hegemonic perspectives dominating it, tend to encourage authors to reproduce them in their fictional (realistic) imaginings; hence the tendency of social others, when placed in realist fictions, to occupy the same disadvantageous positions they do in primary reality, their identities defined by the hegemonic systems against which they (often futilely) struggle. As long as these discourses, these dominant shapes of the imagination, continue to be relied on to create, fiction will remain unable to emancipate imagination beyond them. Of course, this presents an interesting conundrum, since traditionally a good or *better* representation is thought of as the one closest to reality — Toril Moi points out, for instance, how feminism's "demand for new, realistic images of women takes it for granted that feminist writers should want to use realist fictional forms" (5-6). In other words, in order to represent woman in a three-dimensional, believable way that makes her feel seen, the representation should be accurate in relation to primary reality and reflect the extra-textual experience of what it means to be a woman. However, this presents us with two problems: the first is that it takes us back to the issue of the multiplicity and complexity of the female experience — the fact that there is no single quintessential experience of woman to be represented. Secondly, to be faithful to the dominant version of reality necessarily implies the reproduction of the patriarchal ideologies that affect women's experiences: by working with a reality where women's agency is necessarily limited, fictional representations can only adjust to the same predetermined roles and defaults assigned to them. The cycle is thus reproduced, and female characters become marked by their difference and are doomed to the violence and haunting to which the other is forced to submit. In Patricia Meyer Spacks' words, in the case of the realist mode, "[f]emale rebellion may be perfectly justified, but there's no good universe next door, no way out, young potential revolutionaries can't find their revolution. So they marry in defeat or go mad in a complicated form of triumph, their meaning the inevitability of failure" (158).

It is precisely that "good universe next door" which fantasy makes possible. While this is not in any way to argue that realist fiction cannot work subversively — there is plenty of evidence to the contrary —, the fact is that realism *is* "limited to the circumstances of the recognizable world" (Attebery, *Strategies* 92) and must therefore work from them. Fantasy, on the other hand, is a way to work beyond such limitations, and thus to open up possibilities that are otherwise unavailable. The possibilities for the other in fantasy are potentially limitless, a limitlessness only stoppered by the very social constructions that superimpose the positions of subject and other onto certain identities in the first place; primary world defaults and constructs that need no longer apply within the fantastic. Additionally, given that fiction works as one of the many myth-making tools that construct socio-cultural narratives around individuals, the difference implicit in the *un-real* discourse of fantasy can bring along the complete subversion

of such narratives, whether by overturning their defaults or constructing new ones entirely. After all, it is impossible to break with a situation of inequality by using the same discourse and language that enforce such inequality in the first place: “[a]s long as we go on ‘reading’ the same language we go on seeing the world in the same way” (Yarrow 84), or, as Audre Lorde more poetically expressed it, “the master’s tools will never dismantle the master’s house” (91). Hence, while realist discourse can work subversively insofar as it evidences and denounces the injustices and oppression surrounding the figure of the ‘other’, as well as by undermining dominant discourses of power by exposing their weaknesses and incoherences, its representations are still bound to the constraints of primary reality, due to its mimetic impulse to reproduce the social structures and positions already in place. To continue Lorde’s metaphor, these tools “may allow us temporarily to beat him [the master] at his own game, but they will never enable us to bring about genuine change” (91). On the other hand, fantasy, by its virtue of creating secondary worlds, is free to sidestep such structures entirely. This capacity, along with fantasy’s discourse of estrangement that “cleans our windows”, allows the construction of alternative ways of understanding the same primary reality, thus creating a way of seeing — and of thinking — that is not informed by the traditional economies of specular hierarchies. As Yarrow put it, fantasy has the capability to take us “beyond the looking-glass” (84), to clear our way through and teach us “how to take our differences and make them strengths” (Lorde 91).

To bring this directly to my chosen primary focus, if man has appropriated a reality where he exists as universal subject, and woman only as his negative or his other, woman will not be able to break this mirror or walk beyond it as long as she continues to work within the limits of discourse set by patriarchal society — the limits of the real. By turning to fantasy, unconstrained by requirements of verisimilitude or accuracy, identities that in the primary world occupy marginal positions are enabled to imagine a different reality, one where they can occupy the position of subject. One where their personhood is not stripped from them due to their difference; where this difference is not marked as other, and thus not perceived and answered as such, but simply accepted as one of many possibilities — or even as a default in itself. In an interview for *The Paris Review*, Nora K. Jemisin references Le Guin’s short story, “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas”, which presents the act of walking away as the only form of resistance to an unfair situation:

With Le Guin’s story, at the end of it, she’s suggesting that the only way to create a society that is a better place is to walk away from this one or to go off the grid. That’s not what she’s saying, specifically, but that’s what a lot of people have concluded. But no, you’ve got to fix it, especially when there’s nowhere to walk away to. (“True Utopia”)

With this, Jemisin seems to be implying that the act of walking away is not really a choice for some individuals; there is nowhere for them to walk away to, because, as mentioned earlier, fantasy does not for (Black, non-heterosexual) women constitute an escape in the same way as it does for the white, male, universal subject. The only way towards a better place, towards that “good universe next door”, is to fix the wrongness that is already in place. It has taken many years of consistent evolution and transformation for fantasy to begin exploring this potential, as a genre capable of not only reviewing and reinventing but also of *protesting* against reality, of carrying out a conscious act of resistance through the subversion of its defaults and the emancipation of the individual imagination. Of course, this understanding goes against the notion of escape as previously outlined, and as it is so often associated with fantasy: instead

of walking away from reality into a better world, contemporary fantasy seems to engage with primary reality much more consciously or directly, as both authors and readers continue to narrate “the self into existence in the face of narrative erasure” (Thomas 152). For instance, Thomas notices how “some dark girls and women today are choosing to enter their reading experiences, to quote Audre Lorde, ‘Blackened and whole’” (153), meaning that they make the choice (conscious or not) to imagine themselves into their beloved stories and to “reimagine the very stories themselves” (Thomas 154), as both authors and readers continue to create more plural fictional worlds and transform those which already existed in an act of what Thomas calls “restorying”. This involves using the tools available to readers today for marginal identities to collectively reimagine a story’s meaning, “not only inscribing themselves into the narrative but also demanding to be the center of all their worlds, textual, visual, fannish, and otherwise” (Thomas 156). The words of many authors of science fiction and fantasy, as quoted in chapter 1, speak to this movement towards inclusion: very often, marginalized individuals begin to write not simply due to their own love of fantasy and fantastic fiction, but also in order to remedy the dire lack of characters who looked like themselves, so that no future children will have to go through the same constant yearning to see themselves positively depicted in the stories they love. This speaks to a conscious movement towards the breaking of the dark fantastic cycle and towards the creation of fantasy worlds where the presence of these others is not automatically deemed impossible. Furthermore, these fantasies exploit yet another possibility which is on principle unavailable to realist fiction: namely, that of the source of oppression and the experience of discrimination disappearing altogether.

Many fantasies among those referenced in the previous chapter do include experiences of otherness that can be linked or mirrored to those taking place in primary reality; however, some fantasists have begun to take identities that are otherized in the primary world and present them as defaults in their secondary one. Their otherness does not translate as such into the social structure of the secondary world; in fact, it clashes only with the readers’ learned expectations, which superimpose the hegemony of the universal subject upon the secondary world. I would go as far as to argue that this is the key point where contemporary fantasies deviate from the Tolkienian tradition: they do not follow Tolkien’s advice of looking at the world as it is and finding the wonder within it, but turn a critical, questioning gaze on this world’s dynamics. Contemporary fantasy stares, long and hard, at all of its ugliness, and openly exposes and denounces the limitations around imagination which prevent us from devising worlds where these oppressions do not exist as we know them. Simultaneously, such fantasies prove themselves capable of finding ways beyond the mirror — of offering these individuals an escape, yes, but to a world where they can be the default subjects, where their experience of oppression is not replicated or does not function as they have always known it. In these secondary worlds, there may be suffering and there may be oppression, but it need not stem from facets of their identity, since these no longer constrain them into a socially secondary position. This shows how, while turning a critical eye on the dynamics which the reader expects from the secondary world, these fantasies retain that sense of hopefulness, of eucatastrophe, which has always been quintessential for the genre — except this hope is created by and for those who need it most. In short, instead of the fantastic being an escape to a better place, it becomes an exercise in *fixing* reality. The question of “what if?”, which Lucie Armitt deems essential to fantasy, becomes not only a defiance of the limits of what is physically possible, but also a defiance of the status quo. What if difference need not imply exclusion? Or, even if it should, what if that exclusion could be fought off, and the battle won? It is in this exercise of imagination that “we recognize that all progress, all difference, all reform relies on the impetus,

embedded *only* in fantasy, to imagine what has never been seen, thought, heard or felt, and utilize what seems impossible, and make it known” (Armitt 172). Indeed, Jemisin herself very aptly comments on the particular suitability of fantasy and science fiction for the depiction of social justice: we are taught to believe that “[i]f you didn’t do anything wrong, the system will set you free. None of this is true. [...] I think that on some level, that is where fantasy writers, and to some degree, science-fiction writers, tend to be trying to *create the fairy tales that we need to survive*” (Jemisin, “True Utopia”, italics mine). These tales are necessary for survival in terms of the instilling of a common sense of identity through different generations of otherized readers in order to ensure the permanence of their cultures, showing the value of difference and presenting it as something which is not *other*. However, *survival* can also refer to how urgent the existence of these representations truly is: fictional representations that emancipate the other from its position as such are needed at this moment, right now, in order to continue resisting the cycle of the dark fantastic and create a counter-discourse that is capable of showing the prejudice and injustice inherent to our current social systems. As argued throughout previous chapters, such broad change *can* begin at the local level of resistances — with the seeds planted through fiction, and specifically, through fantasy. By showing this “good universe next door”, these others are not only given hope, but also the tools that they need to perceive themselves as individual subjects worthy of respect and agency.

This turn towards a subversive engagement with primary reality can thus be argued to have a conscious, if perhaps covert, aim to affect said reality: to alter the perceptions of difference and release it from its position as a social other *beyond* the fiction itself. In choosing Nora Jemisin’s fantasies as a case study, I aim to offer proof of such a turn. The analysis that follows applies the theoretical concepts outlined throughout previous chapters as tools to illuminate the impact of representation within, and to a certain extent, outside of the fiction — though taking into account that this response is not really measurable. While bearing in mind the overwhelming presence and influence of the fantasy tradition in both theoretical and literary terms, and how Jemisin’s writing responds (if at all) to such a tradition, I examine *The Broken Earth* trilogy as an example of the use of fantasy and its particular features to subvert the ideological apparatuses that shape our perception in primary reality.

CHAPTER 7: THE REPRESENTATION OF FEMALE CHARACTERS IN NORA K. JEMISIN'S *THE BROKEN EARTH*

*None of these places or people matter, by
the way. I simply point them out for context.*
(Nora Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*)

The Broken Earth is Jemisin's most awarded trilogy, and she declares it came to her in a dream. As she recalls in her interview with Raffi Khatchadourian, she dreamed of a humongous rock in the shape of a mountain, floating in mid-air and smoking as though it were a volcano. And standing before it "was a black woman in her mid-forties, with dreadlocks, who appeared to be holding the volcano aloft with her mind. She was glaring down at Jemisin and radiating anger" (Khatchadourian). Jemisin woke up in fear, but was instantly taken with the image and felt the need to write it down:

I need to know how that person became who she is—a woman so angry that she was willing to move mountains. [...] She was angry in a slow burn, with the kind of anger that is righteous, enough to change a planet. That's a person who has been through so much shit that she has been pushed into becoming a leader. That's an M.L.K. I needed to build a world that would explain her.
(Khatchadourian)

This image of mighty, righteous anger became the inspiration for the trilogy that would launch an already solid career into best-selling fame. It is an image which already conveys the emphasis which Jemisin's writing places in the centring of womanhood, and especially of Black womanhood, in her work. The main character came to her in a dream, and Jemisin built her world specifically for her, around her, to "explain her" (Khatchadourian). This also betrays some of the major themes explored in the trilogy — a power able to move mountains, rage (and female rage in particular), and a Black woman at the centre of a world that has filled her with wrath "enough to change a planet" (Khatchadourian).

The richness and complexity of the secondary world Jemisin wove out of this single image makes it necessary to provide some contextual information in order to understand the significance of the positions that characters occupy within it, as well as the influence that the circumstances of this setting have on the construction of individual personhood. The first book of the trilogy, *The Fifth Season*, opens with — quite literally — the end of the world: an orogenic event that wipes out the largest city in the continent, leaving a trail of destruction in its wake. The aftermath of the explosion and the wave of natural disasters that follows will last for an estimate of ten thousand years. The first-person narrator, whose identity will remain anonymous until the second book, seems almost blithe about this moment: "Let's start with the end of the

world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 1). It is quickly made clear that the destruction of the city, Yumenes, is only given for context. The reader never gets to know the city, or experience any of it beyond this one chapter, as the cradle of civilization is wiped out and the story that follows begins only afterwards. The world of Nora K. Jemisin is thus wrapped in apocalypse, as the continent the story is set on — known as the Stillness, despite the fact that it "is not still even on a good day" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 7) — began with yet another cataclysm of potentially world-ending proportions known as The Shattering. The exact cause of the Shattering is unknown, but it began a seemingly endless cycle of natural disasters which force all of humanity and its achievements into a hard reset every few hundred years, to the point that there is a word to qualify anything, such as ruins or artefacts, left over from previous populations — *deadciv*, likely a shortening of "dead civilization". These seismic events are the Fifth Seasons, which give the book its title: a name based on a proverb, "Winter, Spring, Summer, Fall; Death is the fifth, and master of all" (*Fifth Season* 149). These Seasons envelop the continent in a continual cycle of loss, not only of human life but also, consequently, of much knowledge and technological development. Most of what survives is preserved only in the largest communities, particularly Yumenes, along with lorists — figures that resemble the bards of mediaeval tradition and thus orally preserve significant myths and stories, as well as the Stonelore, a collection of popular wisdom and tenets meant to ensure survival of the human race under a Season.

The continued threat of natural disaster implies that human society has had to adapt and shape itself specifically in order to withstand it. Though the Sanze empire once occupied the entirety of the Stillness, unifying it under a single socio-political imperial system, nations and the affiliations which the empire created became obsolete. Only communities remain — comms, as the narrative refers to them for short, "as local control (under the advisement of the Yumenescent Leadership) was deemed more efficient in the event of a Season" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 464). The bigger comms might develop into cities, but they rarely survive long enough for that to happen, Yumenes being the one notable exception to the rule. Despite this, the remnants of Sanzed ruling retain widespread influence over the continent: the governmental, financial, educational, and caste systems in use by the time the tale begins can all be traced back to Sanze, so that the political and socioeconomic power remains effectually within Yumenes, the epicentre of the empire — until it is destroyed, of course. Perhaps the most obvious example of how the Sanze Empire adapted the social order to the extraordinary environmental circumstances is the use-caste system. Every comm in the continent makes use of three names: one given name, one comm name — indicating provenance and/or allegiance, given at puberty, when the individual has proven themselves a valuable member of the community —, and a use name, indicating which of the seven use-castes the individual belongs to. Use-caste, as its name suggests, indicates an individual's *usefulness*: it discloses what tasks the individual is particularly suited to and what role they will play in the event of a Season. As such, for instance, Strongbacks are "selected for their physical prowess, [and] responsible for heavy labor and security" (*Fifth Season* 465); Resistants "for their ability to survive famine or pestilence" (463); Breeders "for their health and desirable conformation", aiming towards "the improvement of comm or race by selective measures" (458); and Innovators are "selected for their creativity and applied intelligence" (461). Castes have become an intrinsic part of how society functions: to forget one's role, or to refuse it in some way, is likely to mean death for oneself or for the comm at large, since castes are meant to keep the comm working as a functional, coordinated, orderly unit, even under dire circumstances. Likely, part of the theory behind the maintenance and enforcement

of the system is that there will be less room for argument — and hence, for conflict — when one's role has already been predetermined by birth.

The figure of the other is thus embodied in those who do not fit in any of the predictable, predetermined use-castes: orogenes, human beings gifted with the ability to manipulate and redirect kinetic energy to create or negate seismic events — the ability, at all practical effects, to control the earth itself. Though all human beings in Jemisin's world possess *sessapinae* at the base of the head, organs meant to help them detect seismic activity, orogenes seem to be born with overdeveloped *sessapinae*, which allow them to manipulate that energy. They can stop earthquakes or provoke them, move mountains, shift the layers of the earth by pure energy alone; yet this power comes at a cost. Since energy is not created spontaneously, orogenes must either take it from the earth itself during seismic events, or from living things around them. In the event of a loss of control, an orogene might suck the energy out of plants, animals, and even human beings nearby, causing them to freeze over and die. This inherent danger enables the equation of the orogene with the monster, as regular humans become irrationally afraid of their ability. It is this fear that is at the root of the oppression orogenes suffer. The Fulcrum, a self-managing organization under the control of the central Yumenescene government, trains orogenes in order to master their gift in the service of humankind (as well as the whims of Yumenes and other comms). Fulcrum orogenes measure their abilities by rings, from one to ten (from least to most powerful), and are under the control of Guardians. These are humans who gained special abilities from some sort of secret procedure (which will be discussed in further detail later on), rendering them able to cut off orogeny entirely for a period of time, and even to turn it against orogenes to cause their bodies to implode, killing them instantly. This is why, despite being only regular humans, they are still overseers to the Fulcrum's proper functioning and have absolute authority over its occupants. This authority translates into thorough culling of the weak and absolute domination through manipulative tactics and harsh physical punishment, or even elimination altogether. Nobody asks what happens to the orogenes who fail to control their gift or to submit completely to the Fulcrum's demands, yet the consequences are still clear. There is little alternative, however: feral orogenes (those untrained by and/or born outside the Fulcrum) are completely ostracized from any comm, a hostility born from superstition and mistrust that makes them unlikely to survive past childhood otherwise.

In the first book of the trilogy, *The Fifth Season*, the reader is presented with three different points of view, all belonging to orogenes. Two of them take place in the past, seemingly years before the destruction of Yumenes that the book opens with: Damaya, a child taken to the Fulcrum by her Guardian, and Syenite, a young, four-ringed orogene who is assigned as a pupil to the ten-ringer Alabaster. The third and final point of view given during *The Fifth Season* begins right after the Yumenes Rift and is that of Essun, a middle-aged creche teacher in the small comm of Tirimo. However, throughout the narrative, Jemisin makes a very specific and complex use of narrative perspective to enhance the storytelling. As mentioned earlier, the story is told by a first-person narrator who is recounting the characters' lives in the third person, making use of what Genette refers to as "internal focalization", by which "the narrator says only what a given character knows" (Genette 189). As such, though Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are treated as separate characters, and their points of view are presented through different, separate chapters for each, the end of the trilogy's first novel reveals that they have all along been the same person — the different life stages of the story's protagonist, Essun. More on this complex narratological structure will be discussed later. I now offer an examination of Damaya's and Syenite's storylines in order to then analyze Essun's character, thus giving a sense of how her identity has developed throughout her life events and gaining direct insight into the mechanisms

of oppression and subjugation at work in this secondary world. In terms of the dark fantastic cycle, Damaya and Syenite describe the stages of violence and haunting to which they are led by the oppressive systems at work, whereas their final unification into Essun's grown-up perspective is argued to lead to a breaking of the cycle due to the role she takes throughout the second and third instalments of the trilogy.

7.1 DAMAYA

Damaya is the name Essun had during her childhood; as such, this is a period of learning for both herself and the reader. It is through Damaya's eyes that the reader begins to understand what an orogene exactly is, and what the consequences of being one are in this society. The inherent danger of orogeny, combined with its unpredictability — orogeny does not seem to be genetically transmitted, so that anyone can be born an orogene even if the parents are not —, provokes the irrational fear of the community around them, which Damaya experiences first-hand. When she is pushed by another child at creche, she loses control of her emotions and, subsequently, of her ability: she ices the air around herself and very nearly kills the boy who pushed her. Upon getting home, instead of receiving support or concern, she is instantly berated, her mother saying she had “hidden it from them [...], pretended to be a child when she was really a monster, that was what monsters *did*” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 31). As it takes place with difference in the primary world, orogeny is *otherized* — vilified and immediately uprooted from the community, whether by direct violence or by having the offender be taken to the Fulcrum, which is what Damaya assumes will now happen to her. This association between orogeny and otherness, especially racial otherness, is discussed in further depth throughout chapter 8. Nonetheless, Damaya's character arc can be considered a clear example of how the power dynamic of the gaze works at the individual level.

After the incident at creche, she is locked up in her family's barn without even a blanket or a bucket to relieve herself in, which naturally causes her to fear and resent her parents over such immediate, visceral rejection of a previously beloved daughter. She has been in the barn for two weeks by the time her assigned Fulcrum Guardian, a man named Schaffa, comes to take her to Yumenes. He explains that Damaya, contrary to what appearances suggest, was in fact lucky: “Not all parents do the right thing. Sometimes they don't keep their child isolated, as the Fulcrum and we Guardians recommend. Sometimes they do, but we get the message too late, and by the time a Guardian arrives a mob has carried the child off and beaten her to death” (*Fifth Season* 35). The barn's locked doors were not only keeping Damaya in, but also the rest of the community *out*. Perhaps, then, despite being unable to understand her existence as anything but a monstrosity, this meagre protection was a final, if warped and cruel, act of love from Damaya's parents. The child thus can be said to enter the dark fantastic cycle in Thomas' terms, though not because of her skin colour, but because of her ability: in a single moment of uncontrollable emotion triggered by a violent act, a little girl suddenly becomes something monstrous that must be locked up and contained. This is especially poignant in the case of orogeny: though Guardians have abilities against orogeny, the only means available to ordinary people to contain or resist it — and thus the reaction which they quickly resort to — is pure violence. Damaya is only saved from this by her parents' barn, as well as Schaffa's promptness in retrieving her to spirit her away to the Fulcrum as quickly and quietly as possible.

As the more experienced adult, Schaffa soon cements his position as a mentor figure to Damaya during their trip to Yumenes, which makes him a suitable vehicle to impart further knowledge about the secondary world to the reader. This device is particularly characteristic of portal-quest fantasy, as mentioned earlier: the presence of the mentor positions “both protagonist

and reader as naïve” as they move together from the safe, understood world into something unfamiliar (Mendlesohn 2). Since Schaffa is also the only person to treat Damaya with any decency after the incident — as though she is still a human being, and not the monster she has become in everyone else’s eyes —, she attaches herself to him as a parent figure rather quickly, something Schaffa himself notices. While they travel, he begins to tell her the story of Misalem, the orogene who wrought great massacre on the Sanze Empire, and of Shemshena, the woman who stopped him — the first Guardian. Naturally, Damaya admires the woman and thinks he means to comfort her with the tale, but soon realizes that Schaffa “does not see her as a potential Shemshena”, but rather a potential Misalem (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 93), a monster, a disaster waiting to happen. The story was in fact meant as a warning that Schaffa, as her Guardian, would stop at nothing to eliminate any threat Damaya might present. Angered and afraid at the implicit threat, Damaya concludes that, irrespective of how afraid she is of herself, and others of her, she does not want to be controlled in this way:

‘You don’t like that Misalem is the villain of the tale. That you are like Misalem: a potential threat, without a Shemshena to control you.’ [...]

‘I don’t want to be a threat,’ she says in a small voice. Then, greatly daring, she adds, ‘But I don’t want to be... controlled... either. I want to be — [...] Responsible. For myself.’ (*Fifth Season* 95)

Though admiring her wish to take responsibility, Schaffa’s reply is cutting: “the fact of the matter, Damaya, is that you *cannot* control yourself. It isn’t your nature” (95), a word which speaks to the essentialist view of orogenes. The unfairness of this assessment angers Damaya further, and she declares she does not need him to control her — she is more than capable of controlling herself. This statement is as much an instinctive reaction against the total subjugation Schaffa’s control implies as it is an attempt to reaffirm herself as a subject, someone whose agency allows her to make responsible individual decisions without the intervention of external control. In response to this assertion, though, Schaffa’s demeanour completely shifts. He becomes frighteningly quiet as he takes Damaya’s hand in his own; very calmly, he asks her to prove that she can control herself, and then, suddenly and unexpectedly, breaks her hand.

Despite the swift, unbearable pain, Damaya does not reach for her power at all, reacting only by crying and screaming. “Very good”, Schaffa says soothingly, “You’ve controlled yourself through pain. [...] Now comes the real test” (*Fifth Season* 98). This sudden, cruel act is a way to instantaneously teach Damaya two things that she had not yet quite grasped. Firstly, that her opinions and wants no longer count. Her voice is effectively silenced in this moment, both literally and figuratively: the pain in her hand deprives her of coherent speech, and hence of the ability to articulate any argument, and learning that swift punishment will follow if she dares to speak out against this treatment will ensure that she keeps quiet from this point forward. If agency, as Henze suggested, is an individual’s right to “speak for herself” (230), this moment shows Damaya’s agency being forcibly taken from her. Secondly, this teaches Damaya that she is no longer in her own power, but rather completely at Schaffa’s mercy. Unable to protect herself from a sudden cruelty that she did not expect, Damaya realizes that Schaffa may choose to hurt her at any point, with no consequences to him and without her having any say in the matter. This is the lesson he most thoroughly teaches her. When he threatens to crush the child’s hand altogether, so that it will not heal properly and be rendered unusable, Damaya screams “No!” in a panic, to which Schaffa replies:

‘Never say no to me,’ he says. The words are hot against her skin. [...] ‘Orogenes have no right to say no. I am your Guardian. I will break every bone in your hand, every bone in your *body*, if I deem it necessary to make the world safe from you.’ (*Fifth Season* 99, italics in original)

It is thus that Damaya becomes a subaltern subject. In being deprived of her voice, she is also deprived of choice, showing the fundamental link between voice and agency that bell hooks suggested. The right to choose what happens to her, and to speak out against what she perceives as unfair, are taken from her in an instant as Schaffa shows her that he is the subject and she the other, the object, upon which he is free to act as he pleases. This moment can be seen as exemplifying the (violent) processes of instruction and repression by which the “Repressive State Apparatus” (Althusser 19) forces the individual to assimilate into the dominant ideology. And yet, this subjugation is also instantly justified:

‘Wh-why?’ Her voice is hitchy. [...] She doesn’t understand. Her family has shown her that love is a lie. [...] But she had thought Schaffa *liked* her.

Schaffa keeps stroking her broken hand. ‘I love you,’ he says. (*Fifth Season* 99, italics in original)

The state apparatuses thus mould the subjects’ identities by interpellating them through ideology, while punishing them if they fail to respond to or accept their position as ideological subjects (see Althusser 19). Here, Schaffa follows gentle words and teachings with unfathomably cruel actions (and vice versa), following violent repression with ideological manipulation in the shape of love. This, quickly recognizable as a standard pattern of abuse, teaches Damaya that Schaffa hurting her means he loves her, as it is necessary “so that you will hurt no one else” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 100), weaponizing the child’s need for love and recognition to make her obedient to Schaffa’s wishes. This is only the first of many instances of Damaya being abused and manipulated into reassessing her entire sense of self, coming to perceive herself as orogene and nothing else, much like social others are made unable to see beyond the otherness that marks them as unacceptable for the social system around them. Damaya then proceeds to equate this otherness with monstrosity, as she was taught to do from childhood: she was rejected because she is inherently dangerous, doomed to hurt those around her. In turn, this perceived dangerousness is used to justify the pain, punishment, and control of all aspects of her life that she will be forced to endure from now on.

What little sense of an individual self that Damaya had begun to develop prior to the discovery of her orogeny is therefore erased. While she was raised as part of the dominant social narratives — she was a Strongback, like her mother (see *Fifth Season* 30) —, she is suddenly rendered unable to locate herself in them. Neither these social ideologies nor the individuals around her welcome her presence or are willing to interpellate her as a subject any longer, constructing her as an ‘other’ instead. Her parents cease to recognize her as their daughter, and her use name is stripped from her: “Within a comm or without one, *you are orogene*” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 34, italics in original), thus forcibly identified and framed as other, defined by her deviation from the norm. This forced identification with the abject, which she was raised to instinctively reject and fear, dissolves any other sense of herself that Damaya may have had under the social significance of orogeny: “It has never occurred to her that roggas — she stops herself. She. *She* is a rogg. All at once she does not like this word, which she has heard most of her life. It’s a bad word she’s not supposed to say [...], and suddenly it seems uglier than it

already did” (*Fifth Season* 89). The gravity of the slur, and the complete abjection it conveys, is only fully understood once she realizes it applies to herself now. Internalizing this sense of her own difference leads her to use Schaffa’s own justifications to rationalize the hatred it inspires. It is particularly easy for her to do so, given that she has been on the other side — she was once accepted, interpellated as a functioning subject by the systems that otherize orogenes, so that she knows why people hate them so:

It is terrible to know orogenes can kill so many, so easily. But then, she supposes that is why people hate them.

Her. That is why people hate *her*. (*Fifth Season* 39, italics in original)

Cut off from any other source of support, Damaya is still very young, and helpless despite her power; it is not difficult for Schaffa to manipulate her into believing that he truly is “the last person in the world who loves her” (*Fifth Season* 100). By the time Damaya reaches the Fulcrum, she has been “dominated, made an object” (hooks, *Talking Back* 129).

The reader then proceeds to watch as she is assimilated into the Fulcrum’s doctrines, which is the final touch in the process of her othering. Life at the Fulcrum is designed to instil obedience and crush individuality among the recruits, called *grits*, with severe punishments applied to any infraction. Damaya might once have protested unfairness, but not after Schaffa’s lesson: “When she starts to forget what matters, she looks at her right hand [...]. She remembers the pain, and the lesson that it taught” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 193), demonstrating how effectively her voice was subdued into submission. Still, the Fulcrum appears as the preferable alternative by offering a measure of safety against the complete social ostracization which these children faced or would face in the outside world. This safety, of course, is conditional: if the recruits wish to stay on and enjoy what protection the Fulcrum offers, they must think in terms of value, proving their usefulness and obedience to the instructors. This constant pressure to succeed, and knowledge of the possible consequences, wears the children out physically and psychologically — and, inevitably, pits them against one another. The extent of this undercurrent of hardship is painfully revealed when Damaya becomes the target of bullying after a boy, Maxixe, approaches her at lunch. The next morning, her shoes disappear, the first in a series of escalating events that make her decide to act before this causes her serious trouble. She tries to find out who it is by framing Maxixe for stealing her shoes a second time, hiding them in his trunk before having the instructors conduct a search; in so doing, she kickstarts a series of fearful accusations. Maxixe accuses Jasper, another of the students, of having taken Damaya’s shoes last time. Jasper flinches and blames another girl, nicknamed Crack as a cheeky reference to how close she is to losing control of her power:

He almost spits the next words. ‘*She* sold them [Damaya’s shoes] for me. Traded them to one of the cleaning commless in exchange for *liquor*.’

And then he points at Crack. [...]

‘You rusting cannibalson *whore*!’ Crack clenches her fists. ‘You *let* that old pervert feel you up for liquor and a letter, you know full well he wouldn’t give it to us just for *shoes*—’

‘It was from my mother!’ Jasper’s definitely crying now. ‘I didn’t want him to, to, but I couldn’t... they wouldn’t let me write to her...’ (*Fifth Season* 207-208)

Liquor is the ultimate crime for Fulcrum orogenes, since drunkenness entails a loss of control, which is prized above all else. This, combined with Crack's inability to keep up with her fellows, makes it so that she is never seen or heard from after this incident. Maxixe's punishment is not disclosed, but it is harsh enough that he never speaks to Damaya again, and Jasper is exiled to the Arctic Fulcrum. This moment shows the reader two things. The first is how the children struggle to find ways to endure in this oppressive environment — by numbing themselves with substances, or desperately trying to regain contact with the lives they led before the Fulcrum. The second is that the system of the Fulcrum, enforced by instructors and Guardians alike, is designed to make sure that the children never become truly friendly with one another. Never being allowed to leave, children are cut off from any external sources of support, while also prevented from finding solace in one another: competition and hostilities are not only tolerated, but also subtly encouraged, so that they will enter conflicts that facilitate friction and isolation. In such conditions, the climate for resistance can never breed. Whether through assimilation and compliance, or through sheer ruthlessness in punishment and lifestyle, personhood is worn out and completely taken from these children. The Fulcrum can thus be thought of as both an ideological and a repressive state apparatus in Althusser's terms, participating in and enforcing the ideological discourses (and systemic violence) against orogenes. Furthermore, it represents the third phase of Thomas' dark fantastic cycle, violence, by which orogenes are subjugated, controlled, and eventually destroyed. Though this destruction is not always literal, their sense of their own humanity is taken from them so that they can only conceive of themselves as tools:

She knows better now, than to want such a thing [a friend], or to believe that she will ever deserve one.

(Friends do not exist. The Fulcrum is not a school. Grits are not children. Orogenes are not people. Weapons have no need of friends.) (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 297)

Therefore, throughout the book, Damaya's voice becomes increasingly lifeless and lonely, and increasingly that of the specularized other in Irigaray's terms — a pale reflection of what once was a human being. From the safety and security of her prior experience of social acceptance as an individual subject, to the uncertain innocence of her interactions with Schaffa after her first experience of rejection, to her slow indoctrination into the Fulcrum; this process isolates Damaya, until she becomes a haunting (to borrow Thomas' use of the term) presence that loses her individuality and sense of self in favour of becoming orogene or, in other words, fully other. This shows Žižek's symbolic identification with the gaze at work: Damaya shapes herself after what the dominant gaze perceives in her, performing the submission and obedience expected of her perceived inferiority and coming to understand and define herself entirely on the basis of her otherness. In turn, this legitimizes the rule of the oppressive system over her: if "[o]rogenes are not people" (*Fifth Season* 297), as she now believes, then the Fulcrum is right to imprison and subjugate them. The present-absence Damaya becomes denies her humanity and drives home the belief that she is only allowed to exist as a non-threatening, valuable being if she forgoes all feeling, all want, and becomes the useful weapon the Fulcrum is honing her to be.

7.2 SYENITE

Syenite embodies Essun's late adolescence and young adulthood. She is Damaya having grown into herself and her skill, as well as completely assimilated into the Fulcrum's systems —

subject to ideology, in Althusserian terms — so that the shift in tone from Damaya’s chapters to Syenite’s is always quite radical. Though the younger girl had always been a model student, Syenite is much more self-assured and headstrong than Damaya ever was. Her orogenic ability has granted her four rings — tokens of recognition from the oppressive system —, with potential for a fast ascent to a fifth, which gives her a rather privileged position for the likes of an orogene. We first meet her when she is being assigned to the supervision of a sort of mentor figure, a ten-ringer by the name of Alabaster — a name clearly meant to be ironic, given the very dark hue of his skin. Syenite is clearly displeased, not simply at the prospect of having to defer to the greater power and station of the ten-ringer, but also at the discernment that their assignment together is not a mere mentorship, but a coupling: they are to produce a child for the Fulcrum, a practice which the reader soon learns is extremely common. The more powerful Fulcrum orogenes are forced to breed, so that they will produce children very likely to inherit their power. Not even still — non-orogene — children go to waste, as they will become Guardians, ensuring their usefulness to the Fulcrum one way or the other. This is why the mission Syen and Alabaster have been assigned, the clearing of a harbour at the coastal comm of Allia, does not merit the power they both possess; it is merely a convenient excuse to keep them working alone together for months, long enough to conceive. When discussing this issue, Syenite’s superior, Feldspar, offers her a significant piece of information:

‘As a ten-ringer, he has the right to refuse any mission short of a declared emergency. You should know that.’

Wait. Syen’s fingers stop turning the cup, and her eyes flick up to meet those of the older woman. Is Feld saying what it sounds like she’s saying? Can’t be. [...] And yet. Feldspar has given her a way out. Why?

Feldspar smiles thinly. ‘I have six children.’ (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 64)

This makes for a brief, and very rare, instance of solidarity — not just between women, but also between orogenes. Further, it implies that orogenes lower than ten-rings have no right to refuse the commands to breed, whatever their status; the only reason Syenite has a way out is the fact that her assigned pair belongs to the highest rank. Alabaster himself makes Syen this same offer of refusal, which she rejects, knowing that the protection of his rank will not extend to herself: “Six children, Feldspar had. But Feldspar was never a particularly promising orogene. Syenite is. If Syen isn’t labeled difficult, they will kill her career and assign her permanently to the Fulcrum, leaving her nothing to do but lie on her back and turn men’s grunting and farting into babies. She’ll be lucky to have only six if that’s how things turn out” (*Fifth Season* 71). Her ascent in the Fulcrum’s hierarchy would be truncated, and she forced into uselessness, and she is much too tempted by the rewards of the Fulcrum to allow this. Having rooms to herself, being allowed to choose what missions and what people to dedicate her skill to — the “true reward of excellency” is the promise of “privacy. And choice” (*Fifth Season* 67), things which ought to be basic human rights but are turned into privileges for the Fulcrum’s servants. This is the way Syen’s ambitions strive, and this is why she is willing — if unhappy — to submit to the unwanted sexual relationship.

Alabaster, however, turns out to be not at all what she had expected of a ten-ringer. Though sometimes rude to Syenite and erratic in his behaviour, he is easily flustered and not at all unkind; he never makes use of his superior rank to hurt or humiliate her in any way, and does not make the sexual relationship any more complicated than it needs to be — beyond his embarrassed blathering when Syen directly offers to take charge of the situation and put herself on top. Seeing

how agitated Alabaster is proves a relief to Syenite, as it shifts the perceived balance of power between them: “*He* is the weak one here, despite his ten rings. She’s the one who has to carry a child she doesn’t want, which might kill her and even if it doesn’t will change her body forever, if not her life—but here and now, at least, she is the one with all the power” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 70). Thus, where she’d once been intimidated, she now becomes merely frustrated at his embarrassment. After their coupling is done — methodically, robotically almost, an act devoid of both love and desire —, they have a conversation revealing that Syenite was born a feral, an orogene found outside of the Fulcrum, living a regular life as Damaya before discovering her power. The existence of ferals, Alabaster says, proves that “they’ll never understand orogeny; it’s not science, it’s something else” (*Fifth Season* 72). Orogeny can be bred for as much as the Fulcrum likes, and pairing up powerful orogenes does appear to increase the likelihood of the gift being passed on; yet it can and does still happen outside of these intentional breeding lines, so that the gift seems to be some sort of genetic mutation beyond the total control of the Fulcrum or any authority. Syenite cannot help but feel a sense of pride at the fact that the Fulcrum wants her to participate in those careful, restrictive breeding lines despite her feral status. She understands, however, that this makes her a willing participant in the discourse of her own inferiority, as she wonders “why a part of her is trying to find value in degradation” (73).

Indeed, the reason why Syen and Alabaster’s relationship deteriorates further from this point forward is that Syenite has assimilated completely into the Fulcrum, and is trying to ascend in its hierarchy through excellency and compliance. She has internalized its norms and fully assimilated into the dominant discourse, so that she becomes an active participant in her own oppression as well as that of others. Alabaster, on the other hand, is much more cynical and able to articulate criticism against the systems Syen has assimilated into, without concealing his disdain for her meagre ambitions. Being the more experienced and higher ranked of the two, Alabaster substitutes Schaffa as the mentor figure. The fact that an orogene occupies this position instead of a Guardian makes the progression of Syenite’s narrative diametrically opposite to that of Damaya: where the latter fit the progression of the dark fantastic cycle in her process of indoctrination, Syenite starts from the other end — not quite a haunting figure as Thomas had understood it, but she does start out as fully othered, fully integrated into the system that positions her as inferior. She is an Althusserian subject, meaning one *subjected* to the ideological systems working against her, and as such unable (and in fact unwilling) to escape her containment. Thus, what Syen’s chapters show is a sort of reversal of Thomas’ cycle: instead of becoming increasingly subjugated, her point of view slowly radicalizes as Alabaster shows the extent of the oppression exercised by the Fulcrum, forcing her to question its teachings and promises. One particular event, during their trip to Allia, marks a strong turning point for Syenite and is what makes her question what the Fulcrum had made her consider as fact. There are tall towers, known as nodes, connected to the Fulcrum and scattered throughout strategic spots of the Stillness. Each tower houses a Fulcrum-trained orogene whose job is to quell shakes and other seismic events, to keep the area stable and its comms protected. Syenite believes these node maintainers have a “tedious duty [...], the sort of thing they give to orogenes who’ll never make it to fourth ring—the ones who have lots of raw power and little control” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 119), and so she is surprised and confused to find Alabaster has been quelling the micro-shakes to relieve the burden on the node maintainers. As she puts it, “Earth knows they probably need *something* to keep them from dying of boredom” (119). Of course, she has never been to a node herself, and so Alabaster adamantly insists that they visit one, which strikes Syenite as just another of his strange outbursts. While on the way, an enormous shake begins,

which Alabaster manages to quell at great cost to his energy. He quickly realizes it was the node maintainer who set it off, which only makes their quest for the node tower more urgent. Upon arrival, they find that everyone in the tower and its surroundings has been killed — iced, in what is unmistakably an orogene's act. The node maintainer sits at the top of the tower, and Syenite is horrified to discover that it is nothing but a child, sat in a metal chair and ran through with wires:

‘Even the least of us must serve the greater good,’ he [Alabaster] says, with no irony in his voice.

The body in the node maintainer's chair is small, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things—tubes and pipes and things [...]—going into the stick-arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There's a flexible bag on the corpse's belly, attached to its belly somehow, and it's full of—ugh. The bag needs to be changed.

She focuses on all this, these little details, because it helps. Because there's a part of her that's gibbering. (*Fifth Season* 139)

Both Syenite and the reader thus learn what happens to all those orogenes who cannot master their self-control, or who do not learn it at an appropriate pace. Alabaster shows her the scar where the child's sessapinae were lesioned in order to erase agency while preserving orogeny, a sort of lobotomy that keeps the node children entirely submissive, yet fully useful. That is not all, however: Alabaster explains that the children must be kept sedated constantly, a more humane measure given that the lesions to the sessapinae cause them pain every time they use their orogeny — which they must do exclusively on instinct, lacking an active mind of their own. This particular node maintainer had somehow woken up and caused the shake that alerted them to his presence, and when Syenite asks if it was one of the doctors who woke the child, Alabaster nonchalantly replies:

‘Maybe. Or some local citizen who paid for the privilege.’ Alabaster actually shrugs, gesturing toward a still-livid bruise on the boy's upper thigh. It's in the shape of a hand, finger marks clearly visible even against the dark skin. ‘I'm told there are many who enjoy this sort of thing. A helplessness fetish, basically. They like it more if the victim is aware of what they're doing.’ (*Fifth Season* 142)

This is what the Fulcrum's lies and concealments amount to: the child in the chair, exploited as both tool and sexual object, becomes monstrously abject in the full denial of its humanity. Though Syenite retches, horrified at the extent of this torment, Alabaster is just as ruthless in driving home his lesson as Schaffa was when he broke Damaya's hand. “You think *you* matter?” he asks Syen, “You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not. [...] 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*” (*Fifth Season* 143). The force of the slur becomes evident: there is no other name for the abjectness they are witness to. The pale imitation of personhood suggested by the polite use of *orogene* seems like mockery before this extent of loss: “Not people at all. Not *orogenes*. Politeness is an insult in the face of what she's seen. *Rogga*: This is all they are” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 144).

Much like Schaffa breaking Damaya's hand, this moment drives home the fact that they are nothing but property, to be used and discarded, controlled and subjugated. And yet, while it seems as cruel as Schaffa's lesson, it is meant to have the opposite effect: Alabaster is trying

to show Syen that she is a subject — not in the Althusserian sense, but a true subject. One who possesses the agency necessary to make her own choices, even within a system of oppression, and with the voice to articulate these injustices for what they are. While he is harsh, he is still the one that makes Syenite understand that she was never truly valued, that the skill she took pride in and whose importance she relied on is nothing but coin for her to barter with, to try and earn back small pieces of her own humanity. In other words, she realizes now that no amount of compliance will earn her any respect nor any real agency over her own body and self — not even that of a particularly useful weapon. Syenite's temper after this moment is worse than ever as she projects and amplifies the dislike she'd already initially felt for Alabaster into misplaced anger. She lashes out at him for his so-called “crazy” behaviours — which are in reality expressions of his post-traumatic stress disorder, and as such responses he cannot really control. Though driven to arguing, Alabaster does not lash back at her, and instead extends understanding against her outbursts:

‘I think you hate me because... I’m someone you can hate. I’m here, I’m handy.
But what you really hate is the world.’

[...] ‘What do you mean, then, that I hate the world?’

‘You hate the way we live. The way the world makes us live.’ (*Fifth Season*

123)

Unable to redirect her anger effectively to the source of oppression, knowing there is little that Syenite, as an individual, can do in that regard, she instead turns against Alabaster for being the one pointing this out to her — and for seemingly not caring how much harm his revelations cause to Syen's beliefs and expectations. He is helping her grasp her “liberated voice”, as bell hooks called it, but also “refuses to allow her any of the polite fictions and unspoken truths that have kept her comfortable, and safe, for years” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 348), forcing Syen to recognize that she has been complicit with the system subjugating her and others. She has been keeping herself safe at the expense of both her own and others' autonomy, and Alabaster is the one making her face these convenient, soothing lies, so that she can no longer exist within the system and content herself with self-preservation, as she has been until now. After what she has seen, Syenite cannot resume her unquestioning service to the Fulcrum; cannot want the same things she has wanted up until now, because she has seen their price. Incidentally, this shows how crucial empathy is to social justice: while Syen had been contented to think only of herself to survive, as well as to keep climbing the Fulcrum's ladder, it is actually her realization that others are enduring much worse things from the same institution that makes her uncomfortable enough with the state of things to even have the thought of resistance. Yet survival must take precedence. Since the Fulcrum still owns both her and Alabaster, they must pretend that this moment of realization never happened at all in order to keep themselves safe from any retaliation. They must feign to understand that such atrocities are *reasonable*, given what they are and what they can do: “And if anyone asks how you feel about it, you understand that's why they do these things to us. You know it's for our own good” (*Fifth Season* 147). It is thus that they return to a semblance of normalcy after this life-altering, belief-shattering revelation and continue with the mission they have been assigned.

When they finally reach the comm of Allia, Syenite attempts to clear out the harbour as requested, so that the trade routes may resume; the obstruction turns out to be one of the obelisks, deadciv technological geodes that float, seemingly aimlessly, throughout the skies of the Stillness. After she accidentally awakens the power of the one that was buried at sea, Syen

and Alabaster are targeted by one of the Fulcrum's Guardians. Alabaster's power is rendered useless by the wound of an obsidian knife, which both interferes with his orogeny and causes him enormous pain. In a desperate attempt to save the both of them, Syenite connects her orogeny to the obelisk she awakened and tries to draw on its power to fuel her own. Something goes awfully wrong, however, and a sudden burst of energy explodes — decimating Allia and freeing what was trapped inside the obelisk: a stone-eater, a humanoid creature of unknown origins whose body is made entirely out of stone. After losing consciousness, Syenite wakes up far away from Allia, on the island off the coast called Meov. Looking into the horizon, she is horrified to see that the coastal community has been completely destroyed, turned into what is now an active volcano. The only reason why she and Alabaster did not die along with it is that a different stone-eater rescued them, using its power to transport their bodies to the island at superhuman speeds through the earth itself. Upon waking, Alabaster reveals that he has actually known this stone-eater for some time — she gives no name, but he calls her Antimony — and that she appears harmless, though somehow attached to him, an interest that partly explains why she chose to save them both. When they set out to look for food and shelter, they are quickly found by the inhabitants of Meov. Despite initial, natural misgivings due to their unexpected appearance, Alabaster actually speaks their language (a fictional creole of sorts), and is thus able to smooth things over. Thanks to this, he also learns what is the most significant and shocking fact about the community at Meov: "They don't kill their roggas, here", he excitedly reveals to Syenite, "[t]hey put them *in charge*. And they're really, really glad to see us" (*Fifth Season* 296). It is at this point that we see the first glimpse of what Thomas calls emancipation in Syenite's character.

Meov survives on fishing and piracy, raiding boats and coastal comms for whatever resources they cannot obtain on the island, whose rocky grounds cannot be cultivated. Syenite is shocked that they would be willing to live here at all, since the constant seismic movements make islands unsafe — just as quickly formed as they are destroyed. Yet this is precisely why the Sanze Empire would avoid the islands as settlements, and thanks to this Meov has escaped colonization entirely while keeping themselves and their island protected thanks to the abilities of orogenes. Here, orogenes are prized for what they can do, instead of feared, precisely because the comm recognizes that their ability is crucial for their survival. Alabaster and Syen are quickly welcomed into the comm, as the same power that made them so monstrous back in the continent is here admired and embraced as a strength. This shows how important positioning is for the perception of difference: since this comm was never touched by the dominant ideologies of the colonized continent, they do not have such things as use-castes, partly in rejection of the Sanze custom and partly because being surrounded by water protects them from many of the worst consequences of a Season, so that they need not be as worried as the continent is. In fact, when Syenite asks what happens if there is a Season, Alabaster replies, "I asked them that, too, and they just sort of laughed the question off. [...] At least they'll die free, they say" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 294), showing that they would rather choose death than survival through submission. This is painfully ironic given that the way Syenite has managed to survive up until now is precisely through careful and well-executed submission — by adapting her entire self, as much as she could, to the requirements of the Fulcrum's gaze in a gamble for its approval. Meov, then, clearly recognizes difference as an advantage rather than something monstrous, a philosophy of radical acceptance that has made the island endure and flourish where so many other comms would already have perished. It is their willingness to embrace difference, rather than to categorize and control it, that allows them to be versatile enough to adapt to their environment — and not only survive, but also *live*.

This is Syen and Alabaster's first taste of true freedom, in a place where they are embraced as part of the community, instead of feared and expelled. This society recognizes them as subjects *with* their difference, not *despite* it, which proves fundamental for them — and for Syenite in particular — to begin to unlearn the narratives that depict them as inherently inferior, which they were taught by the Fulcrum. This is the process that hooks referred to as an act of “self-recovery” (*Talking Back* 30), and which can only take place in this environment, unconstrained by the ideologies that had worked to subjugate them. Meov's free practice of love and sexuality plays a particularly significant part in returning to Alabaster and Syen a sense of their own humanity. The continent had instrumentalized sexuality as a means to the end of reproduction, or else weaponized it in order to obtain a benefit from it, as the Fulcrum does with its breeding lines. Meov, on the contrary, considers it a mutually consensual experience that can be freely discussed and shared, greatly normalizing its presence. This throws Syenite off, not just because these people are much more direct than she is accustomed to about their desires and relationships, but also because — as mentioned in the beginning — her own sexuality was always instrumentalized, a tool and an asset, not meant to be enjoyed or *enjoyable* in any capacity. Here, however, far from the Fulcrum's control and the continent's customs, she can begin to explore her body and sexuality in her own terms. If we follow Merleau-Ponty's suggestion that the body is a crucial channel of communication with others and essential to the recognition of oneself and others, then Syenite's newfound ability to explore her connection to other human beings through physical touch is an important breakthrough, as it invites her to take ownership — agency — over her own body, and act on her own desires, which are recognized by others. Her attraction to Innon, the comm's second-in-command, is instantly recognized and responded to, as Innon openly and shamelessly flirts with her, inviting further contact. Yet he does not do this with Syen alone:

This ridiculous, loud, vulgar man has made no secret of the fact that he wants Syenite. And unfortunately—because otherwise this would be easy—there is something about him that Syen actually finds herself attracted to. [...]

Thing is, he seems to want Alabaster, too. And Alabaster doesn't seem disinterested, either.

It's a little confusing. (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 351)

The realization that Innon is interested in *both* of them marks the beginning of a difficult and emotionally charged conversation for Alabaster and Syen, during which they try to come to terms with this feeling of attraction which they have so rarely experienced before — of wanting somebody and wishing to be wanted back. In a moment of raw emotion, Alabaster asks, “Don't you ever just want to... to be human?”, and Syenite's response is “We aren't human” (*Fifth Season* 354), which explicitly reveals the extent to which the oppressive beliefs and practices of her society have erased her sense of her own humanity. However, in this context, in a safe space out of the Fulcrum's radar and with no immediate danger to be feared from their actions, Alabaster can voice his rejection outwardly: “Yes. We. Are. [...] That we're not human is just the lie they tell themselves so they don't have to feel bad about how they treat us —” (*Fifth Season* 354). Syenite's feelings on the matter are a lot more ambivalent, though. She still perceives herself from the Fulcrum's gaze, so that she remains unable to articulate the rejection of its dehumanization just yet. Still, to resolve the issue at hand, she offers to back down so Alabaster can enter a relationship with Innon. This selfless gesture, out of character for her, is born out of respect for all that she now knows Alabaster has gone through, which betrays a certain

protective instinct that belies her outward hostility towards her mentor. Despite Alabaster's status as a senior, Syenite and even Innon perceive him as the weaker of the two, his fragile mental state betraying itself to those around him, which is why she decides to withdraw and let him have a relationship that will make him happy:

'Everyone sees that you are the stronger of the pair. [...] Many things have broken him. He holds himself together with spit and endless smiling, but all can see the cracks. You, though; you are dented, bruised, but intact. It is kind of you. Looking out for him like so.'

'No one ever looks out for *me*.' Then she shuts her mouth [...]. She hadn't meant to say that. (*Fifth Season* 357)

In Meov, however, this is not the issue they perceive it to be. Monogamy is only one of many kinds of relationships, and Innon clearly does not perceive his interest in Syen as conflicting with his interest in Alabaster in any way. In fact, as she says that "No one ever looks out for me", Innon kisses her, "a gentle, kindly thing", and says: "I will" (*Fifth Season* 357). He will take care of her, and of Alabaster as well, freely giving them the unconditional affection which their lives have been sorely missing. Thanks to his reassurance, they end up, by mutual consent, entering a three-way polyamorous relationship. This finally shifts the dynamic between Alabaster and Syen, since their clashing personalities are complemented by Innon's easy-going, gentle nature. His ability to openly express physical affection heals the imprint of violence in both of them, and smooths over their frictions and resentment. Not only that, this relationship, combined with the slow recovery of their senses of self, allows them to strive for more than simple survival — for love, for happiness, and for personal fulfilment. Further, Meov itself, as a community which exists in the fringes of the norm, made it possible for polyamory to be straightforwardly accepted, without attempting to justify or rationalize its acceptability. This, in turn, prepares the reader to take the free expression of consensual, passionate love in stride against the monogamous norm of the primary world.

It is important, however, to remark that there is a fundamental difference when it comes to Innon's experience of orogeny. He, unlike both Alabaster and Syenite, is a feral orogene who has remained such his whole life: his society has never treated him as a monster or attempted to subjugate or control him, nor was he ever threatened by the Fulcrum and its doctrine. In fact, he is likely to be ignorant of what the Fulcrum even *is*. As such, Innon embodies the ideal of a whole self, one that was never touched by oppression (see hooks, *Talking Back* 30), what orogenes may have been if the Fulcrum were never in the picture. Though foreign, and difficult to comprehend, Innon also gives encouragement for Syen and Alabaster to continue their process of "self-recovery" (*Talking Back* 30). It gives them hope to think that perhaps one day they can rewrite their narratives of self to recover some form of the subjecthood which was erased in their non-existence under the oppressive systems of the Fulcrum. The stay at Meov is therefore the first time that Syenite experiences a true home, one where she is recognized and loved as a subject; it is also the first time that the novel presents us with a succession of happy events. Yet, interestingly, the narrator chooses not to dwell on the narration of this part of Syenite's (Essun's) life: "It is unimportant. Perhaps you think it wrong that I dwell so much on the horrors, the pain, but pain is what shapes us, after all. We are creatures born of heat and pressure and grinding, ceaseless movement. To be still is to be... not alive" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 361). This suggests the belief that this woman — these women — were shaped by their trauma, rather than by their moments of happiness, so that the latter can be omitted without a great loss to the narrative.

Thus, there is a time-skip at this point which takes the reader two years after Syen has given birth to Corundum, the son that she and Alabaster did end up conceiving. Syenite is asking Innon to take her along in one of his piracy raids, which he has been putting off with the excuse of nursing the child. Corundum has already outgrown breastfeeding, and the excuse “was pointless anyway, since in Meov that sort of thing is done communally, same as everything else” (*Fifth Season* 362). Furthermore, and atypically for a fantasy novel, Alabaster is more than willing and happy to take on the bulk of the child-rearing responsibilities: he “does most of the diaper changes and sings little Corundum to sleep, and coos at him and plays with him and takes him for walks and so on” (362). Despite the fact that the performance of gender is altered due to the extreme circumstances of the Stillness, the bulk of childcare still seems to generally fall on the women, particularly due to the nursing responsibilities, so that what Alabaster is doing here amounts to a non-normative performance of masculinity even within the bounds of the secondary world. Syenite, on the other hand, feels trapped in the tranquil island life, focused on childcare and homemaking; it is no wonder that she would resent this kind of quiet existence, given that she was used to spending time training, working, always moving to accomplish missions and make use of her skills. At Meov, she can no longer do much — Alabaster and now Coru, who at two years old already shows incredible orogenic skill, manage to quell anything well beyond Syen’s own radius around the island. As a trained orogene, she could be more useful in Innon’s expeditions, since she possesses skills which he, as an untrained feral, lacks. Finally, she gets Innon to agree and take her on a raid. Since Syen is not skilled at hand-to-hand combat, and her orogeny could be dangerous in the close quarters of the boat, she hides belowdecks while the crew invades the boat they’ve trapped. “She sits in the shadow of the steps while the other crew members run up and down them, and her heart is pounding; her palms are damp. Something heavy thuds into the hull not five feet from her head, and she flinches” — and yet she thrives, excited rather than scared, deeming this dangerous situation “so much better than sitting around on the island, fishing and singing lullabies” (*Fifth Season* 375). In the same way that Alabaster embraced the traditionally feminine trait of childcare, Syenite thrives in an environment that is traditionally masculine within the parameters of both the primary and secondary worlds concerned here.

Furthermore, she seems to be particularly detached from the experience of motherhood: though she loves her son, Innon shows concern that she does not feel as attached to him as she theoretically ought, saying “Corundum is *your son*, Syenite. Do you feel nothing for him, that you constantly chafe to be away?” (*Fifth Season* 365). Though Meov avoids or actively counteracts many of the patriarchal structures of the primary world, Innon’s question nonetheless echoes the presupposition that mothers *naturally* desire to be with their children, desires which a patriarchal society “generates [...] in the form of natural drives” (Butler 126). Syenite’s detachment and general lack of maternal instinct can be understood not simply as the result of her general demeanour and preferences, but as a consequence of the fact that she was forced, by the Fulcrum, to be a mother. Additionally, Meov does not pose a very different alternative: though Syenite will not be forced to reproduce as she previously was, she is nonetheless asked by a local woman to “have babies, give us one, yes? Or we have to go steal, from the mainland” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 358). Syenite is not allowed to forget that the acceptance of orogenes in Meov, while unconditional, stems from a need to survive, which means they are willing to resort to extreme measures — like kidnapping orogene children — in order to keep the island protected. While she did not like this idea, Syen was willing to tolerate it under Meov’s promise of acceptance and safety, since “here, any child that she and Alabaster have won’t end up in a node station” (*Fifth Season* 359). All the same, this context of compulsory reproduction, where

she feels (and was) deprived of agency and opinion in the matter, makes her resentment of the role of mother and its expectations seem logical.

Alabaster, however, is able to perceive a different meaning to her restlessness: he sees that something has changed about Syenite, that she is no longer satisfied not just with motherhood, but in general. And he is right — on an almost subconscious level, Syen finds herself looking for a “way to change things. Because this is not right” (*Fifth Season* 371, italics in original). The process of self-recovery has seemingly succeeded, as Syen has come into a perception of herself that allows her to articulate resistance against the dominant ideologies. Ironically, now that he has succeeded in implanting this sense of self-worth in her, Alabaster is the one asking her to conform, to be content with what she has: “You can’t make anything better [...]. The world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over again, there’s no changing it. [...] Love your son. Even live the pirate life if that makes you happy. But stop looking for anything better than this” (*Fifth Season* 371). “Corundum should have better”, is what Syenite replies (371) — better than a life spent hidden away in the only safe haven they have managed to find for him. And though Alabaster agrees that he should, “the unspoken is palpable: *He won’t, though*” (*Fifth Season* 371). It seems curious that her mentor, who was so eager to display the Fulcrum’s injustices to lift the veil from her eyes, would be the one to say this now — to convey such hopelessness. Yet Alabaster had never hoped for change, at least not for a change widespread enough to matter, whereas his guidance has inspired Syenite to aspire for more — if not for herself, then for her son, who is innocent and deserves to inherit a better world than this. This, once again, shows how empathy plays “an important role in catalyzing action” (Chabot Davis 404): even if Syenite is yet to take any concrete action towards that goal, she is once again thinking of resistance thanks to somebody else’s presence in her life, a son for whom she wants a more accepting world more than she does for herself. Yet this noticeable progress in Syenite’s recovery of her liberated voice will find itself swiftly truncated.

During the expedition on the ship, Syenite asks Innon to sail near Allia, to see the true consequences of the disaster she unknowingly unleashed by using the obelisk up close. In a rather impressive orogenic feat, she closes the active volcano, stopping its eruption by using its own energy to supply her with the necessary power. In so doing, however, she attracts the attention of the Fulcrum Guardians — among them Schaffa, who has spent these past years looking, unsuccessfully, for his former pupil. It does not take them long to follow Syenite’s trail to Meov, where the massacre is ruthless and immediate. Alabaster is unwillingly spirited away by Antimony before anything can happen to him, Syenite forced to watch as his body incongruously disappears into the earth and takes with him any chance that the island may have had to be saved. Shortly after, Syen is also forced to watch as one of the Guardians turns Innon’s orogeny against him in a horrific murder scene. Left alone and powerless to stop the Guardians, overwhelmed by terror and grief, Syenite sees no way out but to suffocate Corundum in her own arms, thinking only of one thing: “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” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 441). This very evidently echoes the ethical questions raised by Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where Sethe attempts to kill her three children rather than allowing them to be enslaved again. Presenting such a brutal act as the murder of a child as the right thing to do expresses the fundamental ethical quandary of the oppressed existence: “being able to orient herself rightly” (Quashie 107) is impossible for both Sethe and Syenite in the context of a world that fundamentally denies their humanity. After the time spent in Meov, Syen understands the value of freedom, of a life lived in one’s own terms, and it is while remembering everything that the Fulcrum would make her son endure that Syenite makes the choice. It is less difficult

to make the choice when she thinks that Coru will die having known only love, freedom and acceptance, rather than live only to be put in the node chair. This is a highly emotional moment that calls for the reader's understanding and compassion, but which nonetheless leaves open the question of the rightness of Syenite's actions.

Syen then taps into the power of another obelisk, the amethyst, and wilfully causes the catastrophic seismic event that destroys Meov and kills nearly everyone in range. She herself is one of the few survivors, left unconscious on the debris. Thus, after only a brief taste of emancipation, of liberation from the haunting and violence of her past, the Fulcrum takes everything from Syenite once again, a tragedy that echoes Damaya's utter loneliness despite the diverging paths of their stories, and which returns her to the haunting state. Though she survives the massacre, she is nonetheless deprived of every shred of autonomy and personhood she had achieved, yet she is still forced to remain within the confines of the narrative — alive despite the unsurmountable loss.

7.3 ESSUN

It is thus that the reader reaches the point at which Essun's narrative begins — going from the end of the novel to a deeper understanding of its very beginning. By the end of the first book, there are in fact two major revelations at play: the first is the confirmation of what a keen reader may have already suspected — that the three women we have been reading about are all, in fact, the same person. In the last of Damaya's chapters, right before she takes the examination to gain her first ring, she tells Schaffa "I, I picked a rogga name [...]. Syenite" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 331), making it obvious that Damaya and Syenite are the past stages of the life of the woman currently going by Essun. This constitutes a twist not only in terms of narrative structure (a plot twist, in other words), but also a twist in perception by which the reader is forced to reassess the information that they previously obtained under this new light. It is fascinating, if perhaps dismaying, to understand that all the trauma Damaya and Syenite endured through their respective versions of the dark fantastic cycle was actually experienced by a single person. Henceforth, then, the protagonist of the narrative will be referred to solely as Essun, not simply for the purpose of clarity but also because the deliberate change in her name reflects the way she has started over and attempted to leave those two past selves behind.

The second revelation is the identity of the narrator, which has remained undisclosed for the majority of the book. As mentioned earlier, the narrator refers to himself in the first person, yet speaks about the rest of the characters in the third — except for Essun herself, whom he particularly addresses using the second person pronoun *you* throughout the entire trilogy. The reader still remains privy to the characters' thoughts and feelings throughout the story thanks to the narrator's focalization describing them in detail, but the narrator himself continues to be quite an enigmatic figure. The use of first-person pronouns (*I/me*) is sparse in the first book, which focuses mostly on Essun's point of view (as well as Damaya's and Syenite's). It is only at the very end of the book, after recounting the massacre at Meov and Syenite's (Essun's) survival, that the narrator reveals his identity: "I introduced myself to her eventually, finally, ten years later, as she left Tirimo. [...] I told her that I was called Hoa. It is as good a name as any" (*Fifth Season* 443). This is Hoa, the stone-eater presenting himself to Essun under the appearance of a young child, and the same that she, as Syenite, had freed from the obelisk in the Allia harbour. Hoa therefore becomes an intradiegetic narrator in Genette's terms, a narrator telling another character's story from inside the narrative (see Genette 228), while being a participating character in the narrative himself. The reason why he refers to Essun alone using the second person is, as Hoa himself admits, that "I continue to tell this story through your

eyes rather than my own” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 156). In other words, he prefers to focalize the narration through Essun and embody her point of view as much as possible, at least for the time being. On the level of narratology, this means that the account given throughout the three books is in fact filtered twice over: first through Essun’s perspective, being the one who experiences the events first-hand, and secondly through Hoa, who is retelling those events from Essun’s point of view. There is also an intradiegetic reason for why Hoa is doing this, as well as for why he wishes to align his own perspective with Essun’s as much as possible, but this reason is not revealed until the very end of the trilogy and will, as such, be discussed in further depth later on.

Knowing this makes it appear as a deliberate choice that Essun’s past selves are referred to as if they were separate people: combining the different names with the third-person address shows that Hoa, and likely Essun herself, both conceive of her past selves as fully separate identities. The change in name thus signals a core-deep change in terms of both personality and lifestyle as Essun adjusts her whole self to new circumstances. Interestingly, this is the change that pulls Essun out of the dark fantastic cycle, though her past and current experiences of oppression partly replicate it. In a traditional fantasy narrative, one wishing to exclude the presence of the dark other, this character might have had a different role entirely — a secondary role that might have allowed her, as Syenite, to perish after Meov’s massacre, or otherwise to waste away, devoid of purpose after the traumatic event and yet doomed to a continued, meaningless existence within the confines of the narrative. Yet this is not a secondary character, but the protagonist of the narrative, so that the change in name allows her to resurface, to be brought out of that haunting state by being reborn as a new self. Even so, the traumatic experience of violence at Meov takes away the progress she had made towards self-recovery: since she must conceal herself and her orogeny to avoid the Fulcrum, she is again effectively silenced. Though she is no longer imprisoned nor at the Fulcrum’s behest, this semblance of freedom comes at the expense of fear, anxiety, and loneliness, as she lost everything she had held dear. Wandering through the continent, she takes up a fake use name (a Resistant, not the same she had as Damaya) and makes up a fake past — a fake *self* — to fit back into this society. The very fact that she is able to ‘pass’, to coexist with every other individual and adapt to a normal life without issue, is itself proof of the constructed character of her difference: though her orogeny never disappears, those around her are willing to perceive and recognize her as a functional subject nonetheless. This concealment allows her to be accepted as a creche teacher in the small comm of Tirimo, a tiny settlement where she comes to leave her past completely behind. Though her scars have not quite healed, she manages to start anew and find “comfort if not happiness, for a time” (*Fifth Season* 443), after she initiates a relationship and has two children with a knapper (a tools-crafter working with stone and other materials) named Jija.

Her concealment of her otherness allows her to regain part of her agency, as the premise that she is a subject and not a social other allows her to take control of her decisions. In spite of this, *The Fifth Season* still introduces Essun to the readers in a position of relative powerlessness after having had yet another child violently torn from her. She enters her home after sensing the Yumenes earthquake only to find her two-year-old son, Uche, murdered on the floor. His own father has beaten him to death after discovering that the child was an orogene, just like his mother and his sister, Nassun. Beyond the horrific nature of the act itself, Uche’s death also resurfaces Corundum’s, causing Essun to go into shock. She enters a catatonic state and subsists on auto-pilot for at least two days that will remain blank in her mind, simply to keep herself functioning at all. However, both Jija and Nassun are missing, so that it stands to reason that her first child might still be alive. This alone is what pushes her forward, and presents a crucial difference between this moment and the previous traumatic events she suffered through.

Before now, she had always been able to cut ties and eventually overcome her past by changing herself to mould and adapt. As Damaya, she was left alone and friendless, so that there was no one to miss her when she erased herself in order to become Syenite; and as Syen, she lost everything and everyone she loved with the invasion of Meov, left once again alone and with no attachments. Now, though, the ties to the life she led as Essun are not gone. Jija lives, still, and hopefully so does her daughter, so that Essun needs to preserve this name, this self, even if she wishes to abandon it to suppress the pain:

You think, maybe, you need to be someone else.

You're not sure who. Previous yous have been stronger and colder, or warmer and weaker; either set of qualities is better suited to getting you through the mess you're in. [...]

You could become someone new, maybe. You've done that before; it's surprisingly easy. A new name, a new focus, then try on the sleeves and slacks of a new personality to find the perfect fit. A few days and you'll feel like you've never been anyone else.

But. Only one you is Nassun's mother. [...] If she still lives, Nassun will need the mother she's known all her life. (*Fifth Season* 172)

She will then remain as Essun, not only to confront Jija and avenge Uche's murder, but also for the sake of Nassun's life — so that her daughter will not have to live without a mother, as Essun herself once did. Unable to cut herself off from these events, to desensitize herself to their consequences by pretending it happened to someone else, "Essun will have to make do with the broken bits of herself that Jija has left behind" (*Fifth Season* 172).

It is quickly evident that Essun has chosen to embrace the kind of life which she, as Syenite, had detested, starting from the fact that she had two more children, despite her expressed reluctance when Alabaster proposed having another back at Meov. Motherhood has become a significant part of her life, especially as flashbacks to her life with Jija suggest that she was the one who took on the bulk of the childcare. Besides, her work as a creche teacher had her contributing to raising the comm's children, something Syenite would doubtlessly have resented. This is the quiet, inactive life that she had once begged Innon to bring her out of: busying herself with homemaking and taking care of the children, as well as with a simple job that demands very little from her. Her skill with orogeny is kept hidden, and seemingly not used at all — though it is later revealed that she used it to sess her own children's orogeny and quell the shakes they caused as babies, as well as to train Nassun in order to conceal it. Nonetheless, these are smaller, likely easier tasks for an orogene of her prowess than her previous, Fulcrum-assigned tasks, or the sea expeditions fraught with danger at Meov. This change in lifestyle is partly forced by circumstance, since leading a subtle life allows her to remain undiscovered by both the Fulcrum and the town itself; on the other hand, it also seems to fit the generally expected shift in a woman's development, from a rebellious teenager to a settled-down, mature adult that is responsible and cares for others. At no point does Essun betray the same restlessness that once characterized Syen. She is certainly more sensible and rigid, but the absence of such restlessness goes beyond that of a regular process of growth from youth into adulthood. It also displays a regressive movement, from Syenite's hopefulness and desire to strive for a better world, back to her prior desire for survival, for herself and for those few whom she holds dear. The ease with which the Fulcrum took everything from her, despite having grown more powerful and despite Alabaster's protection, has caused her to lose that

“faith in the power of the individual to effect change” (Chabot Davis 404). Thus, as she was made to do in the Fulcrum as a child, Essun foregoes any desire to speak out against injustice, both silencing herself and withholding any help she might give to others who are suffering in order to keep herself hidden and hence protected. While this appears as a selfish or somehow egoistic move, it must be remembered that she has already had a family torn from her once, and is likely trying to be careful that it will not happen again.

Inevitably, however, it does — and all her efforts at concealing her own and her children’s orogeny prove good for nothing, ending in the death of yet another child. Furthermore, the news that her son was an orogene (and thus that she is either one herself or was hiding one for years) has already spread around Tirimo by the time Essun attempts to leave. Though the comm leader is willing to let her leave peacefully, tensions escalate quickly and one of the comm’s guards attempts to shoot Essun with a crossbow bolt. This violence, coming from people she has known for years and exerted against her exclusively on the basis of a now-perceived otherness, triggers a visceral response from Essun — “something raw and furious and cold. *You cowards. You animals, who look at a child and see prey*” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 57, italics in original). Even though she is very well aware that it was Jija who killed her son, the violence that took Uche’s life is not individual, but systemic: the pathologizing of difference, carried out by the dominant narratives which both objectify it and aim for its eradication, whether through assimilation or expulsion (as explained throughout chapter 2), is responsible for teaching Jija to hate and fear his own son. This is, in turn, extrapolated to the whole comm, as their “hate, their fear, their unprovoked violence” (*Fifth Season* 58) was what taught and validated Jija’s reaction. Upon learning of the murder, the community would have rewarded and praised Jija for doing what needed to be done to ensure their safety, even if it meant murdering a child barely old enough to speak. As such, Essun reacts as can only be expected — by responding with more violence amidst the shock and pain of the comm’s betrayal of her and her children. She uses her orogeny to ice everything and everyone around her, killing several people before a child’s cry stops her short, making her realize the horror of what she is doing; even if this comm’s, this world’s hate was what caused Uche’s death, leaving more blameless children bereft of a family or even a life will do nothing but perpetuate that hatred against those like her.

Empty-hearted and exhausted, Essun leaves the comm only to have yet another child attach herself to her during her travels. Hoa is a strange child, with features bordering on the uncanny: almost “colorless” white skin and white hair “above his icewhite eyes. White white white” (*Fifth Season* 111), and with “nothing *Sanzed* about him, except the texture of his hair” (111, italics in original). Of course, this is because he is not human, but a stone-eater. He has used his abilities to model his facial features after an ethnicity that preceded the Sanze entirely, and taken on the appearance of a child only to make Essun more comfortable with his presence, not because he is one in any way that matters. It works; despite her reluctance and the foreignness of his exceedingly white skin, she cannot bring herself to leave a child on his own. In exchange, Hoa tells her that he, through some undisclosed ability, can sense Nassun heading in the same direction as a large group of orogenes that seems to somehow be gathering in the same spot. Essun is perfectly willing to believe any hint that may take her to her daughter, irrespective of how insane or unlikely it may seem. Headed to this spot, they find — or are found, rather — by the citizens of a comm called Castrima, led by a woman named Ykka. The latter introduces herself as “Ykka Rogga Castrima” (*Fifth Season* 267), using the slur as a use name, which instantly shocks Essun — and likely the reader as well, given the dehumanizing use the word has been given up until this point:

You use this word all the time, but hearing it like this, as a use name, emphasizes its vulgarity. Naming yourself *rogga* is like naming yourself *pile of shit*. It's a slap in the face. It's a statement—of what, you can't tell. (*Fifth Season* 268, italics in original)

As Damaya quickly learned, orogenes have no right to a use-caste; irrespective of where they are, they will always remain orogenes, their ability marking the beginning and end of their role in the world. This identification with their difference is meant to contribute to the erasure of their personhood, as they are denied even the most basic rights of a human being in the Stillness. Essun has taken on the Resistant use name only as a cover, not as any true claim to that identity. To proclaim orogeny as *part* of one's name, as Ykka is doing, is to reclaim it as part of one's identity, to willingly and openly position oneself as orogene and hence to remove the shame attached to that position. This is not the first time the slur was used openly, as Alabaster also did so rather frequently. However, his use of the word was merely a way of reminding both himself and Syenite of how they were perceived by the world, of the only thing they could ever be in people's eyes, and thus expressing a form of self-hatred. Ykka, on the other hand, is using it to *identify* herself, to display her own association with the otherized community and in fact be proud of it. In other words, she is rejecting "the powerful's definition of [her] reality" (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 92) by embracing her orogeny and constructing it as part of what makes her an active agent, not simply through self-acceptance but also by relying on her community, creating a bond with the rest of Castrima that in turn bolsters her sense of self. Essun is immediately struck by the "confidence" in Ykka's stance and demeanour, a "kind of utter, unflinching embrace of self" that is unexpected in an orogene; it is only "common in stills" (*Fifth Season* 267) because they are not socially constructed as the objects of systemic oppression, and thus not taught to reject and hold "contempt for [their] difference" (Irigaray 54). This is the first sign that Ykka has not been subjected to the same experiences of oppression that Essun has. Indeed, the reader quickly finds out that she, like Innon, was born and raised outside of the Fulcrum as a feral orogene. When Essun tells Ykka that "[e]veryone understands perfectly well how to *use* us", Ykka asks pityingly, "Fulcrum trained? The ones who survive it always seem to sound like you" (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 333, italics in original). The processes of indoctrination undergone at the Fulcrum have ingrained, as seen through Damaya's perspective, a deep mistrust of others and their motivations which led to an inability to develop healthy friendships. The belief that orogenes will always be *used*, because they are meant to be tools, is also a consequence of the Fulcrum's training — as Essun is used to seeing orogenes valued only in light of their ability to be useful and nothing else. Since Ykka did not go through any of it, it is nowhere near as difficult for her to believe in the success of this project of coexistence. Even though she does recognize that the comm accepts orogenes because they are fundamental to the functioning of the electrical and water supplies, Ykka is nevertheless confident in their ability to live together and to understand one another: "Now you'll see how much more we're capable of when we're willing" (333) — willing to coexist, that is.

This is how Essun finds herself once again stumbling into a community that accepts orogenes, rather than shun them, though it is certainly not the same as Meov was. Firstly, this comm is in the continent, and as such must take much stronger measures to conceal and protect itself, given that their illicit community remains within the extent of the Fulcrum's reach. They have made their home underground, in a deadciv settlement located on the carved-out inside of a giant geode — a technological marvel, created who knows how long ago, whose systems are powered by orogeny itself. This not only proves that deadciv communities were aware of

what orogeny was, but also that they were willing to use it and work with it, rather than contain it. Though there is no proof that these ancient orogenes lived freely, Ykka is proud of this find nonetheless, as it proves that there is an objective or a usefulness to orogeny that goes well beyond quelling shakes, which is as much as the general perspective endorsed by the Fulcrum was willing to grant it. Yet, wondrous as this technology is, it remains as dangerous as living on the island was, since none of the Castrimans can fully understand the technology which their livelihoods are dependent on. Furthermore, the people of Castrima seem much more reluctant than the Meovians to rely so strongly on orogeny. Even if the liveability of the geode depends on orogenes, the coexistence with stills seems precarious, almost as if all of them were waiting for an inevitable disaster; this shows the difference between the ideal, pre-colonial community of Meov, which existed outside of the artificial distinction between subject and other created by the continent's ideological apparatuses, and the post-colonial comm of Castrima, which was created and exists under these hegemonic narratives. Everyone in Castrima is marked by the violence exerted against orogenes, whether as a victim or as a perpetrator, so that the community struggles to leave behind these dominant narratives and their imposed binarism in order to coexist. Though the comm is certainly a safe haven, Essun is reluctant to join them for this reason; besides, it quickly becomes apparent that her daughter is not here. However, at this point she has lost Nassun and Jija's trail, and being in a comm during a Season is unquestionably better than travelling alone — or travelling at all. There is also the fact that the comm is not willing to let her and her companions go after having already learned Castrima's location, so that they are forced to settle here for the foreseeable future.

Surprisingly, it is in Castrima that Alabaster reappears. His physical state is much diminished after the years he and Essun have spent apart, not necessarily because he has aged (though he is well into his forties at this point), but because he has clearly been doing something with his power and the obelisks — something that has rendered him unable to perform orogeny without causing himself great pain and transforming parts of his body into stone. It is heavily implied that these stone parts are eaten, or otherwise consumed, by Antimony the stone-eater, who is doubtlessly honouring her kind's moniker. To her shock and horror, Essun finds out that what Alabaster was doing was, in fact, using a tremendous power to set off the destruction of Yumenes and kickstart the Season *deliberately*. What is more, he has a quest of equally imposing proportions for her:

'You tore that rift up north,' you breathe. [...] 'You split the continent. You started this Season. With the obelisks! [...]

'Yes, with the obelisks, and with the aid of the node maintainers. They're all at peace now. [...] I need your help.'

'To fix it?' [...]

'I don't want you to fix it,' Alabaster says. 'It was collateral damage, but Yumenes got what it deserved. No, what I want you to do, my Damaya, my Syenite, my Essun, is make it worse.' (*Fifth Season* 448-449)

Despite being initially horrified at both his actions and his condition, and despite their reconnection being made inevitably difficult by their shared history, Alabaster's reappearance is thus key to give Essun a purpose beyond finding her daughter. He starts by revealing to her that there is such a thing as a Moon, which Essun does not at all understand. Yet, upon learning of the Moon's nature, she soon recalls the old myths describing the beginning of the Seasons: "Father Earth did not always hate life, the lorists say. *He hates because he cannot forgive the loss of his*

only child” (*Obelisk Gate* 103, italics in original). This myth is based on a real event by which the Moon, the Earth’s only satellite, was somehow thrown off its orbit, far enough that the people of the Stillness have forgotten its existence. Eventually, and thanks to Alabaster’s guidance, Essun understands that, by manipulating the obelisks and connecting them into a network, she — like Alabaster himself — can harness a tremendous power, which she may use to bring the Moon back to its proper orbit. This will not fix the current Season, hence Alabaster saying that he wants her to make it worse; however, Antimony confirms that, should this “equilibrium be reestablished, it’s likely the Seasons will end, or diminish to such infrequency as to mean the same thing to your kind” (*Obelisk Gate* 172). The scope and consequences of such a quest go well beyond Essun as an individual, yet it still proves essential for her individual development as well as for the world at large.

One of the many patent effects of Essun’s past trauma is her unwillingness to work with others. Since she was very carefully taught by Schaffa that she does not — cannot — belong anywhere, she also *refuses* to belong: she never thinks of herself as part of Tirimo, using it merely as a convenient cover without really integrating into the community beyond the confines of her family, or really making a home out of it. In the same way, she is now refusing to think of herself as part of Castrima, partly because she did not enter the comm by choice and partly because she is expecting to leave as soon as she can in order to continue searching for Nassun. Not only that, she is, as mentioned above, highly mistrustful of others due to her time at the Fulcrum teaching her that they seek only to use her for their own gain. This has deeply damaged her ability to relate to others and to communicate, which results in a lack of meaningful, genuine relationships in her life. It quickly becomes obvious that this is a consequence of the deep loss she endured as Syenite, as well as of the more recent loss produced by Uche’s death. These tragedies have taught her that to build relationships is to expose herself and others to pain; this pain she conceives of as inevitable, since *she* herself is to blame for it. This sense of self-censure comes from perceiving herself as the only common denominator, and therefore at fault for what became of those around her, particularly her children. After all, she still chose to have Nassun and Uche, even after what happened with Corundum and knowing they were likely to inherit her orogeny: “No. I killed Uche. By being his mother [...]. Stupid, stupid woman. Death was always here. Death is you” (*Fifth Season* 60). Essun blames herself for having connected with other human beings, which proves that she still looks at herself from the Fulcrum’s gaze. Orogenes are not allowed to have these connections, to have love and family, because they are cursed. Whatever love and family they attempt to build will thus be taken away as cruelly as possible, and sooner rather than later, as both Damaya and Syenite had the chance to learn through experience.

As Essun, then, she builds only reluctant relationships which resent from her inability to conceive of herself as part of a community. When the rumour about the true length of the current Season — Essun estimates at least ten thousand years of the Yumenes Rift venting an endless rain of ash — spreads around the comm, Lerna berates her for choosing to think only of herself, as an individual, and her own self-preservation. He is the one who forces upon her the idea that she belongs:

‘This is your comm now.’

[...] You’re too busy vehemently rejecting the idea to respond. But he knows you too well. He knows you don’t want to hear it. That’s why he says it again. ‘*Essun Rogga Castrima*. That’s who you are now.’ (*Obelisk Gate* 70, italics in original)

As much as she wants to deny this, to keep going after her daughter, Essun accepts that leaving the comm is not a possibility if she wants to survive. And if she cannot leave, then she must belong — think of this place as her home, think of this people as *her* people, and extend her sense of empathy towards them so that she can work with them and to protect them. Alabaster bestowing his quest on her actually goes a long way towards helping her achieve this sense of community and of belonging, because she is in fact the only one who can do anything against the impending Season:

‘The rumor’s spreading, Essun. And now everyone’s thinking about how slowly their children will die. [...] Thinking about how they can’t do anything about it.’
But you can, he doesn’t need to say. (*Obelisk Gate* 71-72, italics in original)

This is how Essun is convinced to make an earnest attempt at building relationships with the people of Castrima, engaging more actively with the comm’s tasks and getting involved in its management, as Ykka had asked her to do in the beginning. Though this change is forced both by circumstance and by Lerna’s stern reminder that these are people, and not her enemies, this active participation in the community nonetheless contributes to her recovering a sense of agency that she had been lacking up until this point. She can engage in daily tasks that, tedious and petty as they may be, allow her to make choices and to put before them immediate solutions, which is a relief from the higher stakes of the Season and gives Essun a sense that what she does on the daily actually matters in the long run. And yet, despite these improvements, Essun remains suspicious of Castrima’s fragile equilibrium, which is tested when the more powerful comm of Rennanis finds them. Rennanis threatens to place Castrima under siege, making only one final offer: “*Join us and live*, the gray one had told them, *but not with your roggas*” (*Obelisk Gate* 286, italics in original). The comm’s orogenes are outnumbered, of course, and without the support of the comm they will be either killed outright or exiled, and hence condemned to die commless as the Season progresses. The final decision is put up to a vote, before which Essun starts taking steps to protect herself and those closest to her, assuming the worst:

‘Stills *learned* to hate us. They can learn differently.’
‘Now? With an enemy literally at the gate?’ You’re so tired. So tired of all this shit. ‘Now is when we’ll see the worst of them.’ (*Obelisk Gate* 294)

She knows that, if placed under enough duress, the comm will turn against their weakest link — the orogenes who are already shunned by society at large, the ones it took most effort to tolerate and whom they have likely never fully trusted. Though Essun tries to convince Ykka to look out for herself and the comm’s orogenes, Ykka refuses, choosing instead to trust the vote. She places her faith in the community she has built and chooses to believe that “these people—my parents, my creche teachers, my friends, my lovers” are more than “just beasts whose nature it is to kill” those who are unlike themselves (*Obelisk Gate* 295). In other words, Ykka relies on mutual recognition — on the fact that the community hails and recognizes her as a full subject, as a human being and not a social other marked by an unacceptable difference. She trusts that the communicative, interpersonal relationships she has built with those around her will be enough to shift the workings of the gaze in their favour, keeping the comm’s orogenes safe. Essun’s experiences of past violence, on the other hand, prevent her from sharing Ykka’s belief in this humanity and empathy, precisely because Essun has been denied these gifts consistently. As

much as she might like to share in Ykka's same "hope of a real future, a real community, a real life..." (*Obelisk Gate* 295), Essun knows that, in this society, orogenes are disposable, and that the world *relies* on that disposability to function. Knowledge of their disposability ensures that orogenes will never rebel against their fate; that they will accept any mistreatment in exchange for being allowed to exist. This sense of non-being, and of hopelessness for anything better, is ingrained in Essun as much as in society at large, however much she may resent it: the "belief that orogenes will never be anything but the world's meat dances amid the cells of you [...]. It isn't fair. You just want your life to matter" (*Obelisk Gate* 296).

Unfortunately, Essun's misgivings are almost proven right. The incident at Tirimo very nearly repeats itself when a woman pins an orogene child down over some petty misdeed, and begins to beat her up. Bearing witness to this resurfaces Essun's trauma instantly, the seemingly endless cycle of violence against orogenes for daring to exist as such resonating in a very precise way with her past experiences: "*Everyone* is Jija, the whole damned world is Schaffa, Castrima is Tirimo is the Fulcrum NOT ONE MORE [CHILD] and you turn with the obelisk torrenting its power through you to begin killing everyone within and beyond your sight" (*Obelisk Gate* 329). Only Alabaster's timely intervention stops Essun from decimating Castrima and everyone in it, yet this overexertion causes his death. Instead of giving in to the overwhelming grief of losing one more person, however, Alabaster's death is the last straw that sets Essun on her path and leads her to take action. Her mentor died stopping her from destroying this comm and its people, and she "will not allow Alabaster to have died saving these people from [her] for nothing" (*Obelisk Gate* 335) — only for the comm to turn on its own members and shatter Ykka's hopes. It is thus that Essun interrupts the comm's tally, obliterating any votes already cast, and proclaims:

‘No vote. [...] Leave. Go join Rennanis if they’ll have you. But if you stay, no part of this comm gets to decide that any other part of this comm is expendable. No *voting* on who gets to be people. [...] This is a community. You will be unified. You will fight for each other. *Or I will rusting kill every last one of you.*’
(*Obelisk Gate* 335, italics in original)

While perhaps unorthodox in its method, Essun's intervention is crucial, as it forces the members of the comm to face the vote for what it is — a dehumanizing endeavour, targeted against the very people that have been working to keep them alive and safe through a Season. This is crucial to force the comm to present a united front against the threat of Rennanis, but it is more than that: it forces the comm's members to perceive orogenes as part of their lot, instead of as disposable others, so that their personhood is not up for debate, "there is no argument to be made, [...] no speaking to or against an audience" (Quashie 10) to defend it. This moment also shows how, instead of further traumatizing Essun and causing her to sink into depression, Alabaster's willing sacrifice to save this community and its potential finally pushes Essun's personal development forward. She regains the restless stubbornness that she had as Syenite, and which had been left behind after Meov's tragedy: that desire to fight for a change, however small, rather than for simple survival, because "Corundum should have better" (*Fifth Season* 371), and so should every other orogene child.

There is still a journey ahead of her, however — and if she is to succeed, she must learn to overcome her trauma through connection, by reaching out to others instead of isolating herself. Essun successfully harnesses the power of the Obelisk Gate and decimates Rennanis in a gamble to save Castrima; in so doing, she ends up in a near-coma, and her body, like Alabaster's, begins to turn to stone. Though the Castrimans survive, Essun's use of the Gate caused the destruction

of the underground geode and forced the whole comm to migrate in search of a new settlement to take refuge in, a dangerous undertaking during a Season. Though Essun resorted to the Gate to save the comm, and did successfully keep its people alive, she still used its power thinking as an individual, without focusing on the common good. Ykka expresses it thus: “You didn’t think about any of us while you were using those obelisks, did you? You thought about destroying your enemies. You thought about surviving—but you couldn’t get beyond that. That’s why I’ve been so pissed at you, Essie. Months in my comm, and still *all you are* is ‘just a rogga’” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 71). Despite having done her best to accept her new role in Castrima and become part of its communal life, Essun could not help thinking in simplistic, individualistic terms (of herself against the world) because this is what her experiences both within the Fulcrum and outside of it have taught her: that orogenes cannot rely on anyone else. Besides, when she opened the Gate, she was still driven by her fundamentally selfish desire to find her daughter, and hence was unable to let go of her independence — and the deep sense of loneliness it conceals — in order to put the comm’s best interests first. The emigration is terribly difficult for the comm in general, and for Essun in particular: no longer able to use her orogeny to protect herself or others without her body turning to stone, she must stay in the background and allow herself to be cared for in ways she is unused to. During the comm’s trek through a deadly desert, which must be crossed to get to the settlement Rennanis left vacant, Essun notices herself increasingly dissociating, “as though you’re floating above yourself, [...] listening to someone else yawn. Like it’s happening to someone else” (*Stone Sky* 227). This is not only due to the sheer exhaustion of the trip’s pace, but also due to the changes effected by her use of orogeny after the Gate: she has lost a hand, up to the elbow, as well as one of her breasts, and continues to progressively lose feeling derived from bodily functions, such as forgetting to eat or touching Lerna, her current love interest. As had happened to Alabaster, Essun feels progressively more detached from her body, “from the flesh, as it became no longer flesh” (*Stone Sky* 227). Yet, despite the hardship the comm endures — their stores slowly running out as many of the comm’s older and weaker members do not make it or must be left behind —, Essun chooses to endure with them, rather than allow Hoa to transport her to Rennanis directly, though this would have been easier and better for both her own and her daughter’s sake: “I could have taken you from the desert. You did not have to suffer as they did. And yet... they have become part of you, the people of this comm. Your friends. Your fellows. You needed to see them through” (*Stone Sky* 230).

This act of companionship, even through a gruelling trip fraught with suffering and peril, suggests that she has finally embraced the sense of community which Ykka had been trying so hard to instil in her. Furthermore, when it is finally time to make the journey to catch the Moon, she realizes that she wants her friends to come with her, even if it is selfish to put them through even further danger. And, with Hoa’s encouragement, she decides to ask them directly if they want to make the journey by her side: “All things change in a Season—and some part of you is tired, finally, of the lonely, vengeful woman narrative. Maybe Nassun isn’t the only one you needed a home for. And maybe not even you should try to change the world alone” (*Stone Sky* 285). Though Essun cannot forget the abuse of her past, which worked to isolate her from any form of support or true friendship, her stay in Castrima and the relationships she has built in it have helped her in making a conscious attempt to understand the ways in which that abuse has affected her, and how it was preventing her from growing as an individual. “You can reject those dregs of your old self and pretend that nothing and no one else matters...” Hoa narrates, “or you can embrace them. Reclaim them for what they’re worth, and grow stronger as a whole” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 128), so that it is only by accepting her past and learning from it that she can grow, and move forward.

7.4 ESSUN AS THE HEROINE

As a rule, Joseph Campbell's traditional hero's journey as outlined in *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (1949) seems to place women in secondary positions — those of healers, wives, or mothers, which they occupy in relation to men: "In the whole mythological tradition the woman is *there*. All she has to do is to realize that she's the place that people are trying to get to" (Campbell, quoted in Murdock 18). She is the goal of the quest and the one the hero fights to protect. Against this, theorists Maureen Murdock and her spiritual successor Valerie Estelle Frankel have proposed the idea of a heroine's journey, using a similar methodology to Campbell's by relying on the similarities found among traditional myths and fairy tales worldwide. The journey is similar to the hero's in character, yet its goal and scope seem to shift entirely in order to accommodate the female gender.²⁸ The focus is now on love or family matters: recovering what was lost, enduring trials with patience and fortitude, mending what was broken, or seeking justice for or the saving of a loved one. Heroines "set out on rescue missions in order to restore their shattered families", or "redeem beloved family members or potential husbands" (Estelle Frankel 4). The fact that these grand myths stem from oral traditions of folk tales, and as such tell of "woman's struggle for autonomy in the world of myth" (Estelle Frankel 8), seems to explain the general lack of heroines who deviate from the traditional female sphere of domesticity and familial bonds. The final goal of the heroine's journey, according to both Murdock and Estelle Frankel, is then "to become this archetypal, all-powerful mother" (Estelle Frankel 4), to come together with the Goddess, the Mother archetype and thus to accept her true, feminine essence, achieving peaceful communion with these parts of herself.

Leaving aside the gender binary underlying both Murdock's and Estelle Frankel's takes, as well as Campbell's own, the journey that we find in *The Broken Earth* does not fully adjust to either version. Despite Essun's gender, her heroine's journey does not quite meet Frankel's and Murdock's requirements: the object of her quest works at a grander scale than the familial bonds and individual reconciliation with femininity which they suggest as fundamental for the heroine. Her journey also involves a great deal of both physical and emotional violence, which Frankel's heroines generally reject or merely endure — whereas Essun does not hesitate to exert it. Furthermore, the narrative of her quest shares many of the essential steps of Campbell's hero's journey. Alabaster's request calls Essun to adventure, out of the ordinary life she has begun to build in Castrima, which she attempts to refuse when he bestows it upon her. Her eventual acceptance of the quest also entails the acceptance of the role of heroine, the chosen one, the prototypical portal-quest fantasy protagonist that decides to embark on a perilous journey at great personal cost to set the world to rights. In this journey, she receives the supernatural aid of magic, which allows her to open the Obelisk Gate; she crosses the first threshold upon first opening the Gate, and endures a road of trials during her trip through the desert with Castrima. In fact, the story itself acknowledges Essun's transformation into the figure of the hero when Danel, a former lorist before the Season forced her to become a soldier, asks to accompany her in the journey to Corepoint so that she can chronicle Essun's deeds:

'I know when I see new stories being written, though.'

'I... I don't know anything about that.'

She shrugs. 'The hero of the story never does.' (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 222)



²⁸ See Murdock 20 for an outline of the heroine's journey, and Estelle Frankel 5 for a full outline of its steps as compared to Campbell's hero's journey.

Essun cannot think of herself as any such thing, of course: “Can’t help thinking of Allia, and Tirimo, and Meov, and Rennanis, and Castrima. Heroes don’t summon swarms of nightmare bugs to eat their enemies. Heroes aren’t monsters to their daughters” (222). This metanarrative comment certainly emphasizes that she is not a traditional fantasy hero in any sense. She is not male, for starters, a gender variable which would theoretically preclude her configuration as the heroine of the tale. Nor is she young, whereas a prototypical hero’s journey as outlined by Campbell would have begun early in the hero’s life. The call to adventure comes when the hero is not yet such, when he is still innocent and untested, unprepared — if perhaps willing — to undertake the adventure. By contrast, Jemisin creates a heroine who is already in her middle age, a full-grown adult and hence deeply experienced. By the time she is called to undertake the quest, she is already looking at the world from a much more cynical standpoint than the prototypical young, bright-eyed hero, lacking his innocence and optimism due to all that she has endured. It is true that her youth and her growth into adulthood are shown through the chapters dedicated to Damaya and Syenite, an evolution which the readers follow; however, the actual call to action does not come until she is already grown up. The prototypical quest therefore appears when Alabaster asks her to retrieve the Moon, so that, by the time she embarks on it, she has already gone through a deeply traumatizing series of events that altered her in fundamental ways. She has killed, abused, and countless other wrongdoings for her own self-preservation that, according to herself, make her unworthy of being called a hero at all. And yet, it is precisely by having gone through these events that she has become strong and experienced enough to take on what is asked of her, and potentially succeed. As such, Essun’s evolution through the quest motif is not, as it was for Campbell, “a rite, or moment, of spiritual passage, which, when complete, amounts to a dying and a birth” (45): she has already been twice reborn with a new name and a new self, yet still remained unable to escape the systemic oppression which conditions her life and beliefs. The rites of passage already undergone — first when Damaya became Syenite, second when Syenite was metaphorically killed at Allia — lead her to refuse Alabaster’s call to adventure, because these past experiences prevent her from believing in the success of Ykka’s community, and consequently on Essun’s own success in making any changes that may lead to improvement on a scale larger than Castrima itself.

Rather than a rite of passage, then, Essun’s quest for the Moon — and for her daughter — serves as a catalyst and sets the background for her personal growth. The reader watches as Essun goes from a distrusting lone survivor to a person regaining hope and learning to accept affection, gradually becoming more willing to work with and rely on those around her. Through the trials of the quest, the people of Castrima and her few close friends slowly teach her that a community that favours coexistence and equality is not only possible, but is being built before her eyes. This is what prompts Essun to accept the quest and take the steps to bring forth a new social dynamic, one that will alter the functioning of the world at large. There is no doubt, then, that the journey shares similarities with Campbell’s. The object of the quest is traditionally heroic, its end ultimately selfless and of epic proportions, as to restore the Moon to the Earth will require enormous power and come at great peril to Essun, the Gate likely to kill her in the process. There is also the fact that Essun, finally able to accept the support of her close friends, gains invaluable allies, the heroine’s loyal companions that insist on following her to Corepoint to open the Gate one final time, even with the considerable risk it entails: “As it is, Hoa’s going to be hauling a rusting caravan through the earth” (*Stone Sky* 348). Additionally, the presence of the lorist Danel, ready to chronicle her tale, “changes things, somehow”, as it makes Essun fully internalize that she is about “to face a fate that an Equatorial lorist wants to record for posterity” (*Stone Sky* 348). This leads to direct acknowledgement of the heroic

quality of the enterprise within the fiction itself: “Now it’s not just a caravan. It’s a rusting quest” (348).

However, this is not exactly a traditional hero’s journey either. After all, Essun is not only questing for the Moon, the Earth’s only child, but also for her own lost daughter. She does, as Estelle Frankel puts it, battle “through pain and intolerance, through the thorns of adversity, through death and beyond to rescue loved ones” (17). Nassun, the daughter that reflects her failures as a mother, is the one she must save — or so she thinks, at first. Further, Essun’s journey is one she can only undertake with the support and love of others, which is at the root of her personal growth as she finally understands that she does not need to isolate herself in fear of hurting or causing others to be hurt: “you don’t have nothing. You have Hoa, and Ykka and Tonkee and maybe Hjarka, *friends*, who know you in all your rogga monstrosity and accept you despite it. And you have Lerna” (*Stone Sky* 283). The fact that these people are unafraid of her otherness and of the destruction she can potentially cause results in Essun losing her own fear of herself; the fact that they can accept her monstrosity, in turn, means that she no longer need to perceive herself as monstrous at all. She is thus no longer a solitary protagonist on a quest for revenge, but rather a heroine on a quest for restoration. Whatever reluctance she might have felt, she no longer refuses the call to “do what needs doing”: “The world is broken and you can fix it; that’s what Alabaster and Lerna both charged you to do” (*Stone Sky* 283). And this resolution comes thanks to the relentless company, love, and support that she has received — and which she finally becomes able to reciprocate. The sense of community is what gives her the crucial hope that drives her forward: the sense that the world is worth saving, beyond the fulfilment of Alabaster’s truncated dreams. This hope shines through in the unfolding of the final phase of her quest, when Essun and her daughter finally meet and wrestle for the fate of the world. This meeting will be discussed at further length in the chapter about Nassun herself, whose presence is essential for the fulfilment of the heroine’s journey.

7.5 A WOMAN, A BLACK WOMAN, A BLACK OROGENE WOMAN

As can be gathered from the above analysis, the representation of Essun as the protagonist of the trilogy constitutes a reimagining of femininity at the central position of both the traditional fantasy journey and of the fantastic secondary world as a whole. The question remains, then, how Jemisin uses the affordances of fantasy to make it possible for Essun, as a racialized woman, to be represented and be hailed by the narrative as a full-fledged subject and a fantasy heroine, instead of Thomas’ proverbial dark other. Though, as discussed in previous chapters, a female protagonist is no longer an unusual encounter in fantasy, it remains quite a rarity to find in adult-marketed fantasies. Essun’s particular case is even rarer, given that she is an explicitly racialized female protagonist and thus constitutes an immediate departure from the expectations surrounding the canonical fantasy hero. This is her physical description as given in the very first chapter of *The Fifth Season*:

She is forty-two years old. She’s [...] tall when she stands, straight-backed and long-necked, with hips that easily bore two children and breasts that easily fed them, and broad, limber hands. Strong-looking, well-fleshed; such things are valued in the Stillness. Her hair hangs round her face in ropy fused locks, each perhaps as big around as her pinky finger, black fading to brown at the tips. Her skin is unpleasantly ocher-brown by some standards and unpleasantly olive-pale by others. (Jemisin 10)

This gives the reader, very early on, a list of all the ways in which Essun could be perceived as ‘other’ in the primary world. As a middle-aged, visibly racialized woman, she clearly deviates from the male, white norm of the universal subject that overwhelmingly dominates the primary world (see chapter 2) as well as the long-standing fantastic canon, as discussed in chapter 5. The fact that the story is focused mostly on her point of view means readers quickly find themselves on the other side of the mirror — looking at the secondary world from the eyes of a character who resembles the social outsider. Yet these identities, this intersection of gender and racial oppressions, interact with other identity variables (such as age or caste) and come into play very differently within the secondary world, where orogeny takes the place of otherness. It is the major source of oppression and the only significant deviation from what in the Stillness is universal, which will be further delved into in the next chapter. This makes it so that gender and racial oppressions do not occupy as prominent a place in the secondary world, though there are still certain social practices and behaviours which speak directly to racism and sexism as experienced by primary-world readers. Essun’s gender, for instance, seems to acquire further importance as the plot continues to bring into focus and relevance struggles that would, traditionally, be considered female-coded — such as interpersonal relationships, both romantic and platonic, and the experience of motherhood. As Estelle-Frankel’s heroine’s journey suggested, the traditional portal-quest structure can be argued to shift in order to accommodate and delve deeper into these interpersonal relationships, which prove crucial to the shaping of Essun’s character. Interestingly, such relationships predominantly involve male characters, which can be argued to be problematic. Their key roles in Essun’s self-construction could be considered an instance of the male gaze at work, of a female character being perceived and fashioned after the whims and desires of a male perspective. I would argue, however, that this is not the case.

Though these male characters do sometimes respond to well-known archetypes, such as the mentor figure, the father, or the male love interest, they are always more complex than these archetypes suggest — generally morally grey, and often showing toxic or even abusive traits. Schaffa is a prime example of this: despite taking on the role of mentor and even father figure in Essun’s life, he remains an abusive manipulator who would not have hesitated to murder her if he saw fit to do so. Her experience with Schaffa is determining for Essun’s later treatment of her daughter, Nassun, which displays how Schaffa’s abuse echoes irreversibly through generations. On the other hand, Alabaster, as Schaffa’s parallel, is Syenite’s superior, yet does not behave according to the expectations surrounding the figure either, considering his erratic behaviour and scarce, (seemingly) unhelpful advice. Since he is perceived as more of an equal in both age and demeanour, and given that Essun is meant to produce a child with him, expectation may easily generate for them to warm up to one another and become lovers. However, their relationship, as described throughout Syenite’s section, becomes much more complex than this. Conditioned by unresolved trauma and the incompatibilities in their ways of being and seeing, Alabaster and Essun both love and hate one another, becoming fast friends while still preserving some of their early hostility, constantly arguing and contradicting one another. The role of romantic interest is instead fulfilled, at different points, by both Innon and Jija, with Lerna becoming a third quite late in the trilogy, during Castrima’s emigration. The fact that all of Essun’s lovers are male invites the presumption of her heterosexuality, though sexual diversity presents in other ways in her character, such as her polyamorous relationship with Innon and Alabaster.

Romance, under the dynamics of the male gaze, tends to work to further objectify female characters: when the heroine “falls in love with the main male protagonist”, she “becomes his property, losing her outward glamorous characteristics, her generalised sexuality [...]; her

eroticism is subject to the male” (Mulvey 21), so that the female character is rendered inactive and tethered to the man by being idealized as his object of desire, and/or else encased in the roles of wife and mother, which keep her in the periphery. Though this is not the case in *The Broken Earth*, given that Essun remains at the centre of the narrative throughout, there is no denying that the significantly different relationship dynamic she shares with Jija displays certain patriarchal characteristics — fitting to both the man she is with and the stage of development she finds herself at. With Jija, Essun creates a subdued and perhaps even submissive self, in order to take a seemingly insignificant, unassuming personality that would help her conceal her orogeny and her children’s. She and Jija are also shown in a more traditional monogamous relationship, where Essun plays the part of the dutiful mother and homemaker and Jija acts as the main breadwinner of the household. Though both of them work outside the home, Jija does so as a professional selling his skill, whereas Essun takes the more traditionally feminine role of teacher and caretaker at creche. By contrast, Innon was attracted to Essun precisely because, as Syenite, she was headstrong, impulsive and intense — traits which do not correspond with the norm of femininity. The polyamorous relationship that they shared is very positively depicted, as enriching for Essun’s emotional life and compensating for the affective and emotional deficiencies suffered throughout her life. The crucial difference between this and what she shares with Jija is that she could openly be herself with Alabaster and Innon and heal by their acceptance of all aspects of herself — including, and especially, her orogeny —, whereas Jija’s affection, though helpful, was noticeably conditional. It depended on Essun concealing a crucial part of herself; as soon as she failed to do so, the relationship violently crumbled. Essun’s last romantic relationship is with Lerna, which makes for a curious romance, if one may call it that at all. At first, a relationship with him seems completely out of the question, since Essun knew him while she was still married to Jija and the age difference between them makes her think of Lerna as boyish, though he is very much an adult. Despite his evident interest, Lerna’s advances are gentle and careful, mindful of Essun’s psychological state and never overtly sexual. Eroticism is noticeably absent from this relationship, even when it finally consummates during Castrima’s emigration through the desert. Such absence likely stems from the fact that Essun accepts Lerna not as much from physical or emotional attraction, but from a desperate need for affection that continually grows as her body begins to turn to stone. This not only causes insecurities in Essun’s perception of herself, it also entails a loss of an ability to share human contact, and hence a loss of connection with others — the body being, as previously discussed, the channel through which human beings relate to the world. She thus needs physical touch as a comfort, not simply to achieve human connection, but also to reassure herself that she is, herself, still human — that she is still Essun, despite her slow and painful physical transformation into inanimate matter. Lerna can very willingly provide such reassurances, which makes him not as much a love interest as a needed source of support. Unfortunately, the relationship is prematurely cut off before it can become anything more: Lerna does not survive the final journey to Corepoint, and dies a rather anti-climactic death when Essun and her companions are attacked by stone-eaters.

By contrast to these significant ties with men, Essun does not establish any female friendships until her arrival at Castrima — and then again, she makes very few. As depicted in Damaya’s chapters, growing up a Fulcrum orogene conditioned Essun to isolate herself and encouraged her to regard others as potential danger, or else as competition for a better position when she was Syenite, so that she becomes highly independent and refuses to rely on others. She meets Tonkee during her travels and accepts her as a companion, but until they get to Castrima (and thus achieve a measure of safety), she remains distrustful of her, and neither woman opens

up about their true self or intentions. Once they become part of the comm, however, Ykka's conciliating influence proves crucial in managing to slowly build a bond with Essun — as well as in getting her to do the same with the community around her. Tonkee and Ykka thus become Essun's closest female friends, allies that she comes to trust fully and open up to, showcasing the importance of sorority — of female friendships which do not make of "shared victimization the basis for woman bonding" (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 45). The last prominent female figure in her life is her daughter, Nassun; yet despite how crucial the relationship proves to be for the plot in general and Essun's character in particular (as will be further discussed in chapter 9), we never see them interact except through flashbacks. These short memories, sprinkled through the second and third books in particular, are enough to give readers an idea of how strained their relationship was, but Essun loses all connection to her daughter until the trilogy comes to its climax.

One might argue that, though these female figures trigger crucial character development for Essun, the majority of significant influences in her life are male, and male characters take much of the spotlight throughout. Despite the evident prominence of male figures, however, Essun is never perceived through a male lens, or otherwise adapted to what the male gaze may find desirable. There has been some debate around the possibility for female authors to write from the male gaze, as it seems impossible by definition: women have not been socialized within the same gendered parameters, and as such cannot, in theory, share the male way of looking at the world and at women in particular. However, it is important to remember Žižek's notion of symbolic identification, by which women look at other women from the male perspective, thus reinforcing their own otherness. As Mulvey also dissected, the dynamic of power implicit in the gaze makes it so that women constantly try to identify with the superior, more desirable male position, "with the gaze for which [they are] playing [their] role" (Žižek 118). Thus, female authors may still represent female characters through archetypal traits assigned to them by the male gaze: for instance, by heavily sexualizing them (and thus making them into sexual objects for one or several male characters), or else by victimizing them (hence making them helpless, needing the intervention of a male character to save them or resolve their problems). These possibilities combine the ambivalence of the role of the other with the male gaze, often resulting in one-dimensional female characters that misrepresent the female experience or else identify its totality with what is really a single part of what it means to be socialized as a woman — the part which best supports and reinforces the (mis)conceptions of the norm. I would argue that it is not impossible for a female author to write from or otherwise fall into features resulting from the male gaze, yet Jemisin manages to avoid this in the case of her female protagonists thanks to the combination of several elements. Firstly, the performance of gender, and of femininity in particular, is made to function in a completely different way within the secondary world. Despite the readers' interpretive frameworks, as Iser calls them, being conditioned by the constructs of primary reality, so that its patriarchal ideologies mediate between them and the text, readers are still forced to acknowledge that femininity as a construct does not exist in the Stillness. Or, at the very least, it does not exist as they know it, which is in no small part due to the extreme survival conditions that communities are forced to be constantly prepared for. The mirror dynamic, then — the discursive and ideological systems of power that displace individuals on the basis of their otherness (that displace women) —, is not at work in this scenario. And yet, some remnants of primary-world patriarchal specular dynamics filter through the cracks of the fantastic. In the Stillness, motherhood and its related roles seem to be primarily assigned to cissexual women, with the trauma and significant changes which pregnancy entails. The reproductive measures in place — particularly within the Fulcrum — fall especially harshly on cis-women, given

that they are the ones carrying the children to term. Syenite's chapters showcase that women's ascent in the Fulcrum's hierarchy may find itself truncated because of the complications of a pregnancy, or else may be withheld as blackmail to ensure their compliance with the breeding practices. Another example is the fact that the major cycles of abuse depicted in the trilogy take place from men (such as Schaffa and Jija) towards women (Essun and her daughter, Nassun), which replicates the dynamics of gendered violences as present in primary reality, and invites the reading of these female characters as occupying the stereotypically female position of a helpless victim. Furthermore, even though Essun resented and resisted the positions of a mother and wife, as well as the childcare and homemaking responsibilities they represented, she eventually accepts these roles and builds a life around them.

In spite of this, Jemisin's secondary world still manages to construct a reality where the dominant social narratives at work do not make gender into a source of oppression or ostracization. It is orogeny alone that prevents mutual recognition, so that women are hailed as subjects by the ideological apparatuses at work. In the primary world patriarchal economy, as Butler explains, "the institution of motherhood" is constructed and reified "as compulsory for women" so that "the desires that maintain the institution of motherhood are transvaluated as pre-paternal and pre-cultural drives" by which "the institution gains a permanent legitimation in the invariant structures of the female body" (126). Motherhood is thus framed as the natural consequence of a woman's growth and life cycle, "inscribed on [woman's] body as the law of its natural necessity" (Butler 126). On the other hand, Jemisin's narrative does not seem to portray Essun's acceptance of the roles of mother and wife as such, but rather as a product of her specific emotional and physical circumstances. Her marriage can be argued to be a result of seeking companionship, alleviating her profound loneliness post-Meov, and her having children despite her previous misgivings can be seen as an attempt to heal the wounds left by Corundum's violent death — although it is not clear whether having children with Jija was a deliberate choice at all, given the apparent non-existence of (or lack of accessibility to) contraceptive methods. On a related note, while child-rearing seems to fall mainly on women, the parenting responsibilities seem to be shared between both partners, and it is still a much more communal endeavour than it usually is in primary reality: creches act as both schools and care facilities for children during the workday, and comms like Meov practice communal breastfeeding. More generally, women's contribution to the social system is not predetermined by their condition as such, given that the caste system functions regardless of gender. It is common for even castes based around traditionally masculine traits, such as Strongbacks, to have female members, so that the castes recognize women as functional subjects irrespective of their gender. Similarly, regarding appearance and physical descriptions, women's bodies are never sexualized. While they may be described in physical and/or physiological terms, these descriptions never portray the characters as objects "displayed for the gaze and enjoyment of men" (Mulvey 21), or otherwise presented as mystified models of sexual attractiveness. Essun, for instance, is never by any means implied to be physically unappealing, yet she certainly does not "embody dominant ideals of (slender, youthful) beauty" that are found in the primary world's notions of conventional attractiveness (Bordo 298). She has long ago left behind the ideal stage which the patriarchy tends to find most desirable, in sexual terms — youth, or perhaps more accurately, the absence of signs of ageing. She also has large hips that have birthed two children, and bear the signs and scars from it. Her body is in general stout, denoting physical resistance and strength, something that would likely be considered oversized and/or overly masculine for primary world standards. Yet all the same, she is seen as desirable in the Stillness, as shown for instance when a Breeder approaches her in Castrima, flattering her "by talking about how tall and strong you are, how well you weathered

months on the road with only travel rations to eat, and hinting that you're 'only' forty-three" (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 239), and therefore still able to produce a healthy child. Her desirability is not only due to her body's suitability for survival, though, since Essun clearly has no trouble attracting romantic partners. Further, a patriarchal society encourages women towards "a life centered *on* the body (both the beautification of one's own body and the reproduction, care, and maintenance of the bodies of others)" (Bordo 17), whereas women in the Stillness are generally never shown attempting to beautify their appearance or make themselves more attractive. They are never shown wearing make-up or other adornments such as jewellery, which seem to function more as indicators of status and hence are only commonplace in comms large enough to be demonstrably safe, such as Yumenes, where the social significance of castes can be shown through such markers of wealth. Ykka is the only character shown wearing make-up even after the Season has started, very clearly an exception to the norm, and seems to use it as more of an intimidation tactic, rather than for vanity's sake: "And she wields those black-clad eyes like piercing weapons, holding each of your gazes at eyepoint for an instant" (*Fifth Season* 267).

Beyond this, nonnormative expressions of gender and sexuality seem to be radically accepted in the Stillness, to the point of sheer normalcy, which invites the presumption that these lived expressions (potentially otherizing in the primary world) are in the secondary world recognized as part of the norm. There are several instances that suggest this, the most evident being Tonkee. She is a trans woman, and eventually tells Essun that her family had disowned her — not necessarily due to her transness being considered a deviancy, but because it jeopardized a marriage that they had already arranged when she presented as a man, adding to an already long list of offences against family tradition:

Turns out it's Not Done for a child of the Yumenescene Leadership to go into any profession except politics, adjudication, or large-scale merchantry. It's also Not Done for a child who is born a boy to be a girl—apparently the Leadership families [...] breed among themselves, and Tonkee's girlness scuttled an arranged marriage or two. They could've simply arranged different marriages, but between that and the young Tonkee's tendency to say things she shouldn't and do things that made no sense, it was the last straw. (*Fifth Season* 391)

If it had not been for these already rebellious tendencies, it does not seem as though her being transgender would have posed a problem at all, as they "could've simply arranged different marriages". Further, during their travels, Tonkee runs out of "some biomest potion she keeps in her pack" and that, presumably, seems to help her transition like a fantastic equivalent of oestrogen hormones, seeing as "she's been sprouting beard stubble every few days because of the lack" (*Fifth Season* 242). She tries to conceal her washing and shaving from Essun, "even though [she doesn't] care" (242) and is in fact completely unfazed, which speaks volumes in itself. The same approach seems to apply to sexuality: in Meov, Alabaster and Innon openly flirt and show their attraction to one another, which no one in the community bats an eye at. Essun is a little more surprised, but this seems to stem more from the change in Alabaster's personality than the fact that they are both men. Later, when Tonkee enters a lesbian relationship with Ykka's second-in-command, Hjarka, nobody in Castrima questions it whatsoever; Essun, in fact, encourages Tonkee to go for it and enjoy herself. Sexual differences are not perceived as deviances because cisheterosexuality is not part of — or not necessarily significant to — the norm. The universal subject in this secondary world is non-orogene, first and foremost, and likely also able-bodied, fit to be part of one of the existing use-castes and to play that role

properly both out of and during a Season. Heterosexuality is not part of the equation due to the existence of the Breeding use-caste, which treats it as a sort of job — something that may be disagreeable, but required, and merely transactional, as shown by the Breeder's attitude when approaching Essun. This goal-oriented, reproductive view of sex combines with a general acceptance of its existence outside of breeding practices, so that as long as survival is ensured, no one seems to care about who is sharing whose bed. This also affects the readers' perspective: by having the characters offer no reaction (negative or otherwise) to these different kinds of relationships and identities, and never justifying their presence — simply representing them as they are —, the reader is encouraged to react in the same ways and accept their presence without question. Therefore, this normalizes what the narrative may otherwise have coded as otherness, so that, despite the ideas and frameworks influencing the reading, it is not perceived by the reader as such.

Fantasy *is* what makes this radical acceptance and new positions possible: while it must, inevitably, reflect the workings of primary reality in certain ways, it does not need to do so in a system of direct equivalence. Even if the fantasy world features the concept of otherness, as well as oppressed outliers of the dominant social order, this otherness need not come from the same places as it does in the primary world; this is why, in a society structured around usefulness, such things as gender, sexuality or racial makeup do not necessarily impact one's role and social position.²⁹ As such, fictional minds that would have been perceived as other in the primary world due to the discourses at work, are in the secondary world free of any such conception. Hence, the fantasy is free to offer a positive reflection of the traits that make up their identity, untouched by or away from the systems that would encourage (enforce, really) a negative perception of it. As such, where patriarchal primary reality forces women into a state of non-being, of identification with the male and his gaze, Jemisin's women simply *are*. They become subjects, and never objects, because — paraphrasing Žižek — the construction of their fictional selves unmasks the spectacles enacted for the male gaze. These women acquire dimension and complexity, creating narratives of self that are continually changing and evolving; they find their “liberated voice”, as hooks put it, and seize their agency irrespective of their role in the narrative and their status with respect to men. The technologies of gender (borrowing De Lauretis' term) at work in the Stillness have assimilated what in the primary world is perceived as other, so that the dark other — the racialized woman — is made into the very centre of the fantastic. Her perspective is paramount, so that the reader is positioned alongside her and the fantastic is *shaped around her presence*. Her identity, defined by these otherized categories, is incorporated seamlessly into the secondary world, and consequently into the readers' psyche, forcing them to acknowledge and assimilate this otherness into their worldview. The fantasy thus becomes an imaginative variation, in Ricoeur's words, wherein the construction of self does not take place under patriarchal, white-supremacist institutions and discourses. This makes it possible for women within the fiction to develop their subjectivity as part of the social centre, instead of the margins, as they are not ever conditioned by their own womanhood.

The second device which Jemisin makes use of, and which I argue contributes to the deconstruction of the male gaze throughout the trilogy, is Hoa's narrative voice. As the narrator, he filters and conveys the perspectives of Essun and every other character in the trilogy. His is by no means a neutral perspective, especially throughout *The Stone Sky*, when he begins — in

²⁹ Though, noticeably, able-bodiedness and neurotypicality very well may, which speaks to how disabled bodies and minds tend to suffer — or else be disregarded entirely — in dystopian settings such as this one. Despite the presence of the fantastic, the elderly or disabled are left behind when they cannot keep up or when their presence becomes an obstacle for the survival of the able. These representations take a peripheral space in the trilogy, but argument may easily be made for how the socially acceptable/justifiable violences against these vulnerable collectives make them into social others as well.

separate, dedicated chapters of his own — to tell the story of his own past and of how he became a stone-eater, in the first person. However, he *does* continually make an effort to narrate, as seamlessly as possible, from Essun’s point of view, using the second person *you* as previously explained. As the narrator, her psyche is thus accessible to him not only in terms of interpersonal communication, as Merleau-Ponty had argued takes place through the perception of another’s embodied existence, but fully: the fantastic premise of his condition as a stone-eater allows him to be nearly omniscient, accessing — or at the very least presuming to access — her innermost thoughts and feelings, hence positioning himself alongside her bias. Such a perspective works because Hoa does not establish the authoritative relationship with Essun that might be expected of a third-person omniscient narrator. He rather establishes a relationship of mutual recognition, talking to her as an equal from a position of deep affection and harmony, both in terms of their synergy as characters and in terms of the narrative interplay of perspectives. It helps that, while he chooses to identify as a man for ease (as he did back when he was human), he cannot be said to truly *be* a man, given that stone-eaters are immortal beings who have long ago transcended the idea of gender altogether. This gender-neutrality is aided by the fact that Hoa’s identity as the narrator is revealed quite late, so that readers are made to perceive this point of view as more neutral, and hence presumably unbiased as an omniscient narrator’s may be, before learning that this is also a character within the tale. The reason why Hoa is the narrator of the story, instead of Essun herself, is only revealed at the very end of the trilogy’s final instalment, when the reader finally learns of Essun’s transformation into a stone-eater, and of Hoa’s wish to narrate her own self back to her, which will be further delved into in chapter 9.

Therefore, Hoa’s narration is both a reorientation of “the practice of looking beyond its destructive intent” (Quashie 3), leaving behind the objectification and alienation pertinent to the male gaze, and a fantastic re-enactment of intersubjectivity that shows how, as Palmer had suggested, interaction with others is indeed at the core of the human mind. Essun’s relationships with men are not objectifying or fetishizing in Mulvey’s terms because they are part of this “intersubjective first” (Palmer 5) position — the continual dialogue and interrelation between self and other which, as shown throughout the previous chapters, is fundamental to the configuration of an individual’s self-narrative. As Hoa puts it:

After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one’s being. [...] 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 poor lost Allia and Meov. Now you are Tirimo and the ash-strewn road’s walkers and your dead children... and also the living one who remains. (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 1)

Not only that — it is by engaging with another mind, one alike to her own, that Essun is able to recover her sense of self after she fully transforms into a stone eater. This communication with another is crucial to her understanding of her past and of her current standing, which also serves to provide metacommentary on the events that have been told throughout the trilogy. Hoa chose to recount certain experiences because of the impact they had on Essun’s identity configuration, “assembling [her] purported mental functioning” (Palmer 31) by picking which experiences have shaped her. This “continual patterning and repatterning” (Palmer 40) not only of Essun’s mind, but also of the history and the world surrounding it as Hoa goes back and forth among different events, duplicates the process of identity formation: it takes place both outside the fiction (as the reader pieces together Essun’s characterization and development, as

well as the rest of the characters’) and *within* it (as Hoa reconstructs, for Essun herself, who she was and what she cared for). This fictional narrative perspective is therefore designed to immediately bridge the gap between the reader’s consciousness and Essun’s. As the readers enter the narrative, they are almost immediately interpellated by Hoa’s casual, conversational style and by the use of the pronoun *you*, which feels like a direct address, as if the narrator were entering a conversation with them, even though he is actually addressing Essun. This fuses the readers’ and Essun’s perspective together, hence promoting identification *with* the female, racialized character — which in turn favours her likeability as a character. Jemisin herself explains that she came up with this point of view, and with the structure of Hoa’s narration as if Damaya, Syenite and Essun were separate characters, because she explicitly sought to trigger the readers’ narrative empathy in favour of her protagonist:

I wanted readers to accept a protagonist who was an ‘unlikeable’ fortysomething woman of color. [...] Writers have to work against a weight of deeply-embedded societal bigotry which literally, actually causes readers to have trouble empathizing with anyone who’s not a straight cis white guy. [...]

The truth is that there is no one right way to deal with this problem. But I knew it was going to impact Essun, no matter what.

So I decided to trick readers into caring about her. [...] She’s traumatized for much of *The Fifth Season*, and she displays this in ways that don’t tug the heartstrings, because trauma doesn’t usually look sympathetic. It’s angry. It’s distant. It’s violent, and sometimes harmful. I wanted readers to feel this intensely, but I also wanted them to feel the disassociation of her, the not-all-here of her, which is why I chose to use second person. [...] And I hoped that by the time people twigged to the fact that they were all one woman, I could effectively “cash in” on the empathic capital built by the younger versions of Essun, and transfer it to the [sic.] her. (“Tricking Readers”)

This identification, and hence the build-up of empathy, is further encouraged by the fact that Hoa himself identifies with Essun as he tells her story and recognizes what she goes through as similar to his own past experience of exploitative oppression. He, along with a group of companions that are also stone-eaters now, are revealed to have been the first orogenes. They were likely artificially created through genetic engineering, and meant to open the Obelisk Gate — back then known as the Plutonic Engine — in order to create an endless, self-perpetuating source of energy for the Earth. They are skilled at both orogeny and magic, yet are created and raised as tools, meant only to be used — a state which has clearly endured the test of time despite the passing of many generations. The fact that their existence was artificially created, or else altered, makes their objectification that much easier: Hoa and his companions are raised to think of themselves as objects, so that they will have no sense of self beyond their given purpose. When a mentor figure, Kelenli, begins to point the unfairness of this out to them, they are at first confused and indifferent:

By our existence we glorify the world that made us, like any statue or scepter or other precious object.

We do not resent this, for our opinions and experiences have been carefully constructed, too. We do not understand that what Kelenli has come to give us is a sense of *peoplehood*. We do not understand why we have been forbidden this self-concept before now... but we will. (*Stone Sky* 50)

And indeed, they do. Kelenli is here to give them a narrative of self, one that allows them to conceive of themselves as subjects. To do so, she first allows them to locate themselves (as Somers and Gibson put it) within a larger narrative: she teaches them that they were designed in the image of the Niess, a people skilled at magic that were conquered and subsequently subjected to systemic genocide by the people of Syl Anagist. Learning that their appearance was expressly coded to make them fetishist objects (an instance of “the production of the stranger as a commodity fetish through representations of difference” [Ahmed, *Encounters* 116]), and permanent reminders of that genocide, disgusts and alarms Hoa and the rest. Spurred on by Kelenli’s encouragement, they come to understand that this existence as tools and possessions is not right; it is only when they come to think of themselves as more than or *beyond* that that they can begin to articulate resistance, which they do when they come across a new concept: “*Revolution*” (*Stone Sky* 50, italics in original). Through Hoa’s story, then, the reader is privy to the process by which the identification of social others with those “like” themselves (see Henze 241), and empathy for suffering “like” their own, helps in the recovery of their voice — a voice through which they become able to understand their oppression (all the better as they enter dialogue with one another) and hence to speak out against it — and to revolt.

The first orogenes thus decide to thwart the scientists’ plans and short-circuit the Plutonic Engine, turning it against Syl Anagist and taking the power from the technology that it depends on to function, effectively destroying it. However, while they engage the Obelisk Gate, Father Earth himself attempts to wrest control of the obelisks and force a mass extinction event; though tempted, since “the difference between what the Earth wanted and what we wanted was merely a matter of scale” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 340) — showing that these first orogenes perceived violence as a sort of retribution —, Hoa takes control of the Gate at the last moment, thinking of Kelenli. Wishing to keep her alive, he redirects the energy against the Moon itself, which reveals that he was in fact the one responsible for flinging it out of orbit. In turn, he admits that turning into a stone-eater was the punishment Earth reserved for him and his kin. It is easy to see how this establishes several parallels between himself and Essun: they both share a lived experience of oppression that deprived them of personhood for the greater part of their lives, and both were at the root of immensely destructive events — albeit Essun’s destruction of Allia hardly compares to the Moon’s disappearance. In turn, Hoa caused the disaster which Essun is now trying to amend through her quest, using the very tool which provoked it in the first place. The similar shape of their trauma, and the fact that Hoa is reminded of Kelenli when he looks at Essun, help understand the deep affective relationship that he establishes with her — though it crosses the boundaries between human and non-human, and as such difficult to pin down as either romantic or platonic.³⁰

These parallels, as well as the affective relationship which results from it, can be argued to be meant to induce an empathic response from readers towards both Hoa and Essun, given that they were both victims of a system designed to exclude, objectify, and exploit them in order to maintain the illusion of a utopian society — one which achieves safety and technological and social advancement at the expense of others. Regardless, however, I would argue that empathy is a secondary benefit and not the primary object of Jemisin’s storytelling. Despite the (presumed) significance of empathy in helping the assimilation of otherness within the normative readers’ consciousness, as discussed throughout section 4.2, the commentary Jemisin makes through her depictions of secondary-world oppression is not so much concerned with

³⁰ Though it is not the concern of the current study, there is potential for a very compelling reading of this relationship — and of stone-eaters in general — from a post-humanist point of view.

altering the perspective of the universal subject, though such an alteration may certainly take place, especially thanks to the mechanisms of identification at work through Hoa's perspective. Rather, I would argue that Jemisin is more so concerned with the reader that reads from the position of the other; with speaking directly to and for the dark other that finds itself displaced in much fantasy fiction and that is, in this trilogy, centralized. The narrative empowers racialized female characters and follows them on a journey to regain their agency and their hope for the future despite their experiences of cruelty and violence, a journey which allows them to emerge as fully agential subjects — and it does so for the sake of the dark other, to show a model of empowerment and healing that may give the dark other the necessary tools to create a counter-discourse to the oppression they experience in the primary world. The next chapter discusses the source of otherness in the fantasy world — orogeny — more in-depth so as to dissect how Jemisin's use of the fantastic articulates such a discourse within the boundaries of the secondary world, and how she alters the oppressive dynamics to avoid otherizing characters due to such factors as gender or race while still providing an insightful, fleshed-out examination of how these inequitable relationships articulate society.

CHAPTER 8: SYSTEMIC OPPRESSION IN ANOTHER WORLD: JEMISIN'S USES OF FANTASY

*This is what you must remember: the ending of
one story is just the beginning of another. This
has happened before, after all. People die. Old
orders pass. New societies are born. When we
say 'the world has ended', it's usually a lie,
because the planet is just fine.
(Nora Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*)*

As can be gathered from the previous analysis, *The Broken Earth* does not necessarily have a unique storyline: it partakes of tropes, archetypes and structures that have existed for many centuries in the body of work we call fantasy. Its true particularity resides in its execution — in the specific use which Jemisin makes of said tropes and structures. One such notable use is Jemisin's willing tendency towards genre-bending: the twist throughout the trilogy, concealed thanks to her crafty use of point of view, reveals information that transforms the readers' image of the secondary world by adding elements from different speculative genres. These elements are blended into a coherent whole, transforming the trilogy into a multidimensional tale and working together as a coherent whole to drive the major themes of the tale forward. Furthermore, such genre-bending serves to give new dimensions to the idea of fantasy, as the mixture upends the pre-existing conceptions created by the existing canon (as theorized in the above chapters) while retaining essential features of the genre, which adds to the trilogy's originality in its subversiveness.

The major premise and the paratextual elements of the trilogy suggest a high or portal-quest fantasy, per Mendlesohn's terminology. For instance, the map of the Stillness at the beginning of each book is generally considered a fantasy staple, as a visual way of introducing the readers to the secondary world (see Wilkins 5), which in this case does appear to be completely separate from the primary, known world — save for the noticeable similarity of its northern- and southernmost parts being named "the Arctics" and "the Antarcotics". The introduction of Damaya and Syenite's points of view also fits with the general structure of portal-quest fantasies, their perspective aligning with the readers' as both of their mentor figures explain the unfamiliar features of the fantastic (see Mendlesohn 2). The existence of the supernatural abilities of orogeny and magic — which is introduced during *The Obelisk Gate* as a phenomenon separate from yet complementary to orogeny, available only to a few skilled orogenes —, as well as Essun's quest-like narrative to recover the Moon, suggest a traditionally fantastic storyline, albeit with alterations in the expected form and structure of the hero's journey. And yet, as readers continue to further their understanding of the Stillness, it becomes apparent that this is not as untethered a secondary world as it might initially have seemed, as it shares many of the primary world defaults, as Wolf termed them. Aside from the naming convention around the

Arctics and Antarcotics, the Moon is also introduced in such a way as to make it evident that this is a representation of our primary-world satellite; Alabaster's revelation that its disappearance was precisely what threw off the environmental balance is the first straightforward suggestion that the Stillness is, in fact, our very own Earth — though clearly not in our present time. Readers may initially be led to assume that this is a distant past, which is the staple setting for most of high fantasy, as discussed earlier. The genre seems most at home in distant, mediaeval settings, yet the presence of advanced technology left behind by previous civilizations, so-called *deadcivs*, implies that this is in fact a distant future, one many centuries ahead of our primary-world time. This rather suggests that the work leans towards science-fiction, which, as Darko Suvin suggests, “differs from other ‘fantastic’ genres” (viii) because its novum — the supernatural or alien element, “deviating from the author's and implied reader's norm of reality” (Suvin 64) — “both requires and allows” scientific explanation (Suvin 65) and would be “cognitively validated” (68). Despite the many years separating the protagonists from the creation of the *deadciv* technologies, these machines can still be understood and operated — if with considerable difficulty and risk —, the Obelisk Gate itself being a prime example. Along with the futuristic setting, which becomes progressively more high-tech as the story advances, this makes it possible to argue that *The Broken Earth* is generally closer to science-fiction than to fantasy in any of its more traditional definitions. Furthermore, the story takes on a dystopian air as readers realize just in how many ways this distant future has gone terribly awry, with humanity having had to survive through not one but *several* apocalyptic events. The incredible displays of technological power that the characters come across throughout the novels were not enough to preserve the civilizations that built them, and in fact — as Hoa's story reveals — even became the instruments of their own destruction. Further, the repression and corruption inherent to the post-apocalyptic societies of dystopian fiction is markedly present throughout Essun's tale. Both the caste system and the discrimination against orogenes prove to be a repeated pattern throughout history despite the many apocalypses that took place during the centuries, as shown by Hoa's own experience of oppression mirroring Essun's own.

One could even add another genre to the mix by mentioning climate fiction, a term attributed to Dan Bloom to describe a particular brand or sub-genre of science-fiction which became particularly prominent in the last few decades. Though rather broadly defined, the genre seems to encompass science-fiction addressing climate change and consequent disasters, particularly focusing on the consequences of human intervention. There is some argument that it is simply a “rebranding”, since “sci-fi writers have been engaging with the climate-change debate for longer than literary novelists”, but “cli-fi writing comes primarily from a place of warning rather than discovery” as “many of the horrors described seem oddly familiar” (Glass). To further differentiate it from science-fiction, Evancie suggests that rather than “in a dystopian future, cli-fi happens in a dystopian present” — in other words, in secondary worlds closer to the primary-world present time. Despite the fact that this is not the case with *The Broken Earth*, the consequences of climate crisis are obvious throughout. The revelation of the root causes of the Earth's current state in the third instalment further emphasizes the violent human intervention in both natural ecosystems and fellow human societies that eventually led to the dystopian (due to the state of social repression) and dangerous (due to climate disasters) landscape described in the tale. Humankind was first responsible for the exploitation and slow destruction of the Earth: they “poisoned waters”, “killed much of the other life” on Earth, “drilled through the crust of his [Earth's] skin [...] to get at the sweet marrow of his bones” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 379-380). Then, once the technological civilization was sufficiently developed, the unchecked arrogance of Syl Anagist's scientists led to the project for so-called “geoarcanity” (*Stone Sky* 97), the

creation of an infinite, self-sustaining energy source, which, while seemingly a desirable end, would have had irreversible environmental and ethical consequences for the world — all in the service of their budding empire. In addition, exploitation extends to human beings as well, as shown by the genocide committed upon the Niess, and by the creation of magic-sensitive orogenes for the sake of furthering their project. Furthermore, those deemed unsuitable were sent to the “briar patch”, which conducts magic and uses their bodies to produce energy, making these orogenes indispensable to both the creation and sustenance of the infinite energy source:

They are still alive, I know at once. Though they spread 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), it is impossible not to see the delicate threads of silver darting between the cells of this one's hand, or dancing along the hairs of that one's back. [...] Many wear tattered rags for clothes, dry-rotted with years; a few are naked. Their hair and nails have not grown, and their bodies have not produced waste that we can see. Nor can they feel pain, I sense instinctively; this, at least, is a kindness. That 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 them generating more. (*Stone Sky* 262)

This twisted version of a briar is eerily reminiscent of the cables which sustained and imprisoned the child in the node chair, and further suggests the ruthless use humankind makes of natural elements. This mentality of superiority with respect to the natural world creates yet another binary between nature and culture, or nature and humanity, which — like most binary relationships — leads to exploitation, oppression, and eventually to disaster. The loss of the Moon, and thus the permanent changes on the natural environment that force humanity into a perpetual state of survivalism, become a consequence of humankind's utilitarianism and exploitation of the Earth. In this sense, the trilogy becomes a sort of cautionary tale against its potential, deadly consequences, a sense of warning specific to climate fiction.

And yet, in spite of this considerable variety of generic influences, I consider *The Broken Earth* as a fantasy trilogy, and discuss it as such. Despite the heavy presence of technology, futuristic dystopian societies, and even space travel, the fact remains that magical, supernatural abilities coexist with these technologies throughout the tale — without a scientific or otherwise empirically validated explanation ever given as to the reason for their existence, as Tolkien held to be essential (33). Orogeny is not a fully understood phenomenon, and the reasons behind its appearance in non-orogenic families remain beyond explanation and control. Even if Hoa and his companions were created and designed to be sensitive to magic, this was because the Niess people were already using magic proficiently before Syl Anagist was ever a power in play. Also, the technology developed by Syl Anagist, and that continues to be employed by subsequent civilizations, is itself powered by magic, orogeny, or a blend of both — so that it is not a ‘natural’ energy source, meaning not one extracted from the Earth. Even beyond the presence of these magical skills, fantasy is deeply embedded in the fabric of the story, since some of its core elements can be described as inherently fantastic as per the definitions previously given. For instance, there are ancient myths which inform the stories passed down, orally, by lorists, reminiscent of the bardic tradition which is itself a core influence of fantasy as a whole:

According to legend, Father Earth did not originally hate life.

In fact, as the lorists tell it, once upon a time Earth did everything he

could to facilitate the strange emergence of life on his surface. He crafted even, predictable seasons; kept changes of wind and wave and temperature slow enough that every living being could adapt [...]. He did not create life—that was happenstance—but he was pleased and fascinated by it, and proud to nurture such strange wild beauty upon his surface.

Then people began to do horrible things to Father Earth. They poisoned waters beyond even his ability to cleanse, and killed much of the other life that lived on his surface. [...] And at the height of human hubris and might, it was the orogenes who did something that even Earth could not forgive: They destroyed his only child. (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 379-380)

These myths start out by being understood as imperfect, fictionalized attempts to understand the world: to explain the beginning of the Seasons, as well as the evil inherent to orogenes, through stories. However, as with all myths, crucial information is missing: “No lorist [...] knows what this cryptic phrase means” (*Fifth Season* 380), who the Earth’s “only child” was, and the versions change throughout the years. The stories supply a variety of possibilities, such as “the Earth’s favorite glassknife that the orogenes destroyed; sometimes it’s his shadow; sometimes it’s his most valued Breeder” (380), fitting with the changeability and inevitable loss inherent to myths passed down orally. This also shows the working of social narratives within the fictional level: the blame lies on orogenes irrespective of the version chosen, contradicting the version of the story which Hoa recounts, which both explains and justifies their perpetuated exploitation. These narratives are then taken up and reinforced by the ideological apparatuses at work, which in turn imposes repression through the state apparatuses of the Fulcrum, the Guardians, and the endorsement of the Yumenescene government.

There is a kernel of truth in such myths, however, as Essun learns when Alabaster reveals to her that the Moon existed, once, around the Earth — and that it was what was lost. The Moon’s disappearance is given a logical explanation when Hoa admits that his actions were the cause; yet there is an even greater truth hidden in the myths, since, right before the Moon was flung from orbit, Hoa was forced to fight a sentient force for control of the obelisks:

A presence alongside us, *inside* us, intense and intrusive and immense. It slaps the onyx from my grasp before I know what’s happening, and silences our startled signals of *What?* and *Something is wrong* [...] with a shockwave of earthtalk [...]. *Hello, little enemies.* [...]

Get out of here! I rage. Leave us alone!

You started this, it hisses into the strata. (*Stone Sky* 336-337)

This is not an unfeeling, natural source of energy and power. Its voice has inflections, it “snarls in frustration” (337), becomes “amused, malicious” (338), is “angry and phenomenally powerful” (338); and it is revealed to belong to the planet itself. Earth becomes “a living, breathing thing”, not metaphorically insofar as it houses life, but literally — insofar as it is given sentience. “All the stories about Father Earth being alive are real” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 242), and his speech and actions betray, along with the capacity for rational thought, the ability to feel, to experience pain, loss, and especially anger. The planet itself thus becomes a character in the story, the personification working as a strongly fantastic element, one both unexplained and accepted at face value by the characters (and, as a consequence, by the readers) despite its implausibility or outright impossibility according to the laws of the primary world. Furthermore, the Earth is not only personified, but personified as male, characterized using the word ‘Father’

and ‘he/him’ pronouns throughout the story. This contrasts starkly against our primary world’s ‘Mother Earth’, which is anthropomorphically represented as female. The “coding of nature as feminine” is not only “deeply entrenched in Western thought, but also has been said by anthropologists to be crosscultural and well-nigh universal” (Soper 139), most likely due to the “association of women with reproductive activities” (139) which nature, as the source of life, is also linked to. Additionally, nature is generally associated with “the emotions, the body, the passions” (Plumwood 19), all markedly coded as part of the female domain, “a romantic conception [...] that women have special powers and capacities of nurturance, empathy and ‘closeness to nature’, which are unsharable by men” (8). In a patriarchal society, ruled by the male gaze, the idea that the Earth could be personified as a man is unthinkable; the domineering male cannot — indeed, must not — be associated with the feminine, inferior qualities of nurturance and reproduction. Yet the opposite happens in Jemisin’s secondary world: the Earth is here not a nurturer, nor a giver and caretaker of life, or else not willing to be one any longer. Instead, the Earth is seen by the characters as a cruel entity, as shown by the many expletives and curses which include its name, such as the very common “Evil Earth” (*Fifth Season* 126), “Rusting Earth” (*Fifth Season* 108), and other more creative iterations, like “rusted burning Earth” (*Fifth Season* 166) — all focused on the Earth’s ruthlessness. Though, as readers, we learn that this is a consequence of trauma (of constant exploitation at the hands of humanity, as well as the loss of the Moon), the Earth is nevertheless shown locked into a cycle of repeated violences against humankind, and as such associated with the very much male-coded acts of war, punishment, and revenge. Father Earth is, for instance, the one who turns Hoa and his companions into the first of the stone-eaters, and creates the first of the Guardians:

And so it chose for us what seemed, to it, a punishment leavened with meaning: It made us part of it. [...] I screamed as wave upon wave of alchemy worked over me, changing my flesh into raw, living, solidified magic that looks like stone.

We didn’t get the worst of it. That was reserved for those who had offended the Earth the most. It used the corestone fragments to take direct control of these most dangerous vermin—but this did not work as intended. Human will is harder to anticipate than human flesh. They were never meant to continue. (*Stone Sky* 341)

Through the corestone, Father Earth meant to control them, yet the reader is invited to deduce that the Guardians somehow overcame or twisted the Earth’s will: they continued to implant the corestones into the necks of yet more Guardians, slowly giving shape to the institution that would enable the systemic oppression of orogenes. The Earth was still present within the Guardians, but could not override their will as long as they were strong enough to withstand it. In other words, the systemic oppression of orogenes and the creation of the apparatuses which sustain it can be traced back to this moment, and to Father Earth’s actions. As such, having the Earth be coded as male both deconstructs one of the most prominent (and perhaps most questionable) associations across human cultures, indirectly forcing a reassessment of its patriarchal origins, and further emphasizes the world’s secondariness. This Earth is a violent, hostile place to inhabit, with none of the stereotypical kindness of a mother and instead with all the severity of a seriously displeased father.

I thus choose to consider these fantasy elements in *The Broken Earth* to be central enough to the story as to be its defining features; however, in spite of this blend of fantastic or fantastic adjacent-genres, the trilogy actively rejects any insinuation of escapism. While the use of a

secondary world with magical abilities and strange lands may be argued to transport readers *away* from their primary-world circumstances, the gradual appearance of dystopian and cli-fi elements contributes to bringing the events of the tale, however fantastic in nature, *closer* to the circumstances of current primary reality. The fact that the Stillness is shown to be a warped, destructive version of our current Earth makes the events of the trilogy appear more relevant, as it subtly encourages the readers to compare or equate certain situations to those of their primary world. Even further, the actions of the characters — how they react and behave in each scenario — become even more relatable, as it becomes apparent that the situations they experience can be paralleled with primary world ones. A particularly poignant instance of this parallelism or equivalence with primary reality is the reason behind the constant cycles of apocalypse: though Father Earth being a living, sentient entity is at the core of the story's major events and indeed is the catalyst behind many of them, the reasons behind the rebellion that eventually derive into the disappearance of the Moon are all too realistic. The chain of events that ended up triggering climate disaster was due to the fact that the oppression of a certain, vulnerable collective was made indispensable for society to function. Thus, the dynamic of oppression and revolution is at the core of the events driving the plot, as the situation of injustice brewed an organized rebellion which, eventually, resulted in the disturbance to the Moon's orbit. This, then, begs the question of how the dynamic subject/other remains at work in the secondary world, if there are no white supremacy or sexism as we, in the primary world, know them. The answer is that, in the Stillness, the oppressive dynamic relies on a fantastic or supernatural trait, which is examined at length in the following section.

8.1 SECONDARY-WORLD NARRATIVES OF OPPRESSION

Even if the degree of secondariness — to borrow Wolf's use of the term — of the Stillness is not as extreme as the trilogy initially suggests, it has by now become evident that the fantastic premise from which *The Broken Earth* departs shifts the metanarratives playing at the wider, sociocultural level quite beyond recognition. The abundance of natural disasters has made human civilization heavily mutable, with societal institutions, categories and systems specifically shaped to withstand the constant post-apocalyptic climate — and very few actually capable of remaining from one generation to another. This is why only the Sanze Empire was powerful enough to occupy the entirety of the continent: aside from its sheer numbers, it followed and enforced certain predetermined tenets to ensure survival, which then spread as the Stillness slowly became unified under a single socio-political system. Yet not even the Sanze could endure this far: by the time the narrative begins, the Empire has lost much of its power and no longer exists as such, having become centralized in the single city of Yumenes. Nations and other larger political units have become obsolete: only communities, known as *comms* for short, remain, “as local control (under the advisement of the Yumenescene Leadership) was deemed more efficient in the event of a Season” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 464). Though some of the bigger *comms* may develop into cities, it is rare for them to survive long enough for that to happen — Yumenes being the only notable exception. As the largest city, previous imperial capital, and current pinnacle of human achievement, Yumenes remains the central government and thus retains political and socioeconomic power over other *comms*. Additionally, the governmental, financial, educational, and caste systems in use throughout the narrative can all be traced back to the Empire, which betrays the widespread influence of Sanzed rule even in the apparent postcolonial state of the continent.

There is, however, but one major narrative that has been preserved throughout the centuries, and upon which the Sanze Empire set all of its major prerogatives: *stonelore*, a collection of

tenets that contain directions to ensure survival, both during the Seasons and between them. This is not to be confused with the general lore transmitted by lorists, which includes myths such as the one about Father Earth discussed above; while stories are preserved, it is no secret that they shift and vary as ages pass. Stonelore, on the other hand, remains the same — at least, in appearance —, and it is much more than a cautionary or entertaining tale. It is a totalizing discourse, a *grand récit* in Lyotard's terms, that asserts its own authority by making itself indispensable and thus, by default, unquestionable: "it's all that's allowed humankind to survive through Fifth Season after Fifth Season" (*Fifth Season* 125), so that to follow stonelore is widely regarded as the only path to survival. It is compulsory learning throughout the Stillness, taught to children from infancy and often quoted by leaders, scholars, and laypeople alike. Stonelore is thus what has shaped the current social systems in use, particularly the caste system. Tablet One reads: "Judge all by their usefulness: the leaders and the hearty, the fecund and the crafty, the wise and the deadly, and a few strong backs to guard them all" (*Fifth Season* 243). The use-castes were evidently born from these epithets. As discussed earlier, they are meant to disclose an individual's usefulness, revealing which tasks they are particularly suited to and thus which roles they will play in the event of a Season. However, use-caste is not granted on account of the individual's biological or personal inclinations, but rather inherited at birth from the same-sex parent, based on the assumption that genetics will pass down the caste's useful traits in this way. This also partly explains why use-caste is mentioned as a second name in personal introductions, as if it were a surname. On the other hand, the comm name used to identify individuals by which comm they belong to, is given at puberty, unlike caste. It is a sort of coming-of-age ritual that takes place once the individuals prove themselves valuable and useful to the community — and to do so is vital, since strength in the Stillness lies in numbers. Comms offer housing, resources and protection, as well as employment, sustenance, and a measure of comfort. To belong is the ideal, and to be commless is to be shunned. Expulsion from a comm is the highest possible punishment, doled only to criminals and other undesirables — like orogenes — for unforgivable actions. Expelled individuals become commless, shunned by their previous comm and unlikely to ever be accepted in another, given the association of commlessness with criminality; they are thus likely to be the first to die when disaster strikes.

This social organization through comms and castes is therefore determined by stonelore, whose discourse, as already suggested, is consistently legitimized through political and social structures by virtue of both its ancient origins and its demonstrable benefits. The grand narrative further supports itself through the work of lorists, who recount tales of all those who chose not to heed stonelore's warnings, and suffered for it. This makes stonelore into a seemingly immutable truth, so that the majority of people in the Stillness believe "you can't change stonelore", as Essun tells Alabaster once (*Fifth Season* 124). Thus is constructed a cohesive, coherent narrative that sustains itself throughout the centuries, its apparent immutability and permanence symbolized in the fact that the first tablets of stonelore were actually written into stone, much like the biblical commandments, so that "it couldn't be changed to suit fashion or politics. So it wouldn't wear away" (*Fifth Season* 4). And yet, as Alabaster explains, it does wear away — stonelore changes constantly, both naturally and artificially. It has been both worn away by time and surreptitiously altered throughout the centuries by the systems in power, which betrays its status as a fabrication, not any 'true' road to survival:



Every civilization adds to it; parts that don't matter to the people of the time are forgotten. There's a reason Tablet Two is so damaged: someone, somewhere back in time, decided that it wasn't important or was wrong, and didn't bother

to take care of it. Or maybe they even deliberately tried to obliterate it [...]. For all we know, the admonition against changing the lore is itself a recent addition. (*Fifth Season* 124-125)

Thus, though the grand narratives in place in the secondary world have changed, the mechanic of dominance remains intact. Individual identities are still shaped by the grand narrative of stonelore, because following it almost religiously has helped prepare humanity to adapt and survive. It has therefore been internalized, after Althusser's idea, and incorporated into every individual's concept of the world — as well as of themselves as part of that world. If we agree with Somers and Gibson that identity is developed “by locating ourselves [...] in social narratives” (59), then the identities of individuals in the Stillness are shaped by the social categories determined by stonelore. Castes and comms are the means by which society creates kinship and identifies individuals, as well as guarantees of safety, since an inability to belong may well result in death. Nevertheless, stonelore, though classifiable as a metanarrative in Lyotard's terms, seems to produce selves that do not experience the identity markers of gender, race, and sexuality in the same ways as primary world selves do. Even though, as already suggested in the previous chapter, the secondary world does not replicate the mechanic of dominance and the experience of oppression through direct equivalence to primary reality, it does nonetheless replicate the mechanic of dominance itself, as stonelore generates a norm against which individuals are measured and therefore creates other equally insidious social inequalities.

Castes, for instance, are rigid and immutable, passed down genealogically and as such forcing children to pursue the same paths as their parents, regardless of their personal want or even ability to do so. Ableism and eugenics are rampant, as has already been suggested: stonelore reinforces the presence of breeding practices to allow only the birth of the fittest, with the social Darwinism which this implies. While the idea of eugenics is often associated with scientific racism, meant to prevent the reproduction of minority groups, it applies most strongly to orogenes in the Stillness, as only the reproduction of the best among them — the ones with best control over their ability — is permitted. On a related note, the Breeder use-caste is also meant to encourage the reproduction of the fittest members of the comms. Disabled people, elders, and other members of the community that are unable to care for themselves or keep up with the rest are tolerated and cared for during peaceful times, but destined to suffer in the event of a Season — liable to be quickly abandoned as weak links and drains on already-scarce resources, so that health and physical strength and endurance are essential. Most significantly, the practice of eugenics also focuses on achieving the particular Sanzed look, which has very specific defining characteristics and thus gives way to colourism (discrimination on the basis of having a darker skin colour) and varied discriminations based on the desirability of these traits. Even this, however, is due to the primacy of the principle of survival. While people in the Stillness are varied in physique and colouring, and thus recognizable as analogous to primary world ethnicities, Jemisin writes that the Sanzeds “are nothing we would recognize” (“Creating Races”). Their racial traits evolved due to the extreme environmental conditions they faced, and are therefore desirable and bred for not simply due to ideas of racial purity — though these certainly play a part —, but because of their suitability to survive in a hostile environment:



[S]ince the environmental conditions in the Stillness are so different, it made sense that what we think of as racial markers would've developed along completely different lines. Which is why Sanzeds tend to be tall and physically

imposing [...]. They have a propensity to be what we'd call fat; they'd call it 'famine resistant.' Their skin is a shade of bronze-brown that can both handle intense equatorial sunlight during normal years and still produce sufficient vitamin D during Seasons. [...] They have a natural hair texture ('ashblow' hair) that's acid-proof, waterproof, thick enough to help retain heat over any body part it covers, and coarse enough to be used as a filtration mask [...] during ashfalls. (Jemisin, "Creating Races")

Thus, the Sanzed can, at all practical effects, be considered a fantasy race on the level of elves or dwarves, possessing traits derived from fantastic circumstances — while remaining reminiscent of people of colour, specifically Black people, by primary world standards due to the colour of their skin and the texture of their hair. These traits, which a primary world reader immediately identifies as other, are in the secondary world the most desirable and continually bred for through the Breeder use-caste.

From the above, it can be concluded that the universal subject, "the prototypical figure of normalcy" (Garland Thomson 45) in the Stillness as proclaimed and encouraged by stonelore, is likely able-bodied and partaking as much as possible of Sanzed traits — a human being built for survival, which is not so much dependent on sexual or racial categories. This norm, however, is, as Garland Thomson suggested, not in fact "what we actually see everywhere but [...] what we expect to see" (Garland Thomson 45). Individuals cannot be neatly located within this normative category, as Anthias and Yuval-Davis also suggest: "Everyday experience does not fit into such divisions and even if it did, it is unlikely that people would conceive of themselves within such strictly defined parameters as a matter of course" (134). For instance, the reproductive practices of the Breeder caste are not absolute, particularly further away from the strict family lines of Yumenes. In regular comms, any established couple may have children together if they so wish, irrespective of their use-caste, though it seems permission needs to be requested from the comm's leadership, likely in order to allocate resources properly. This makes it so that a mixed appearance like Essun's own, sharing some but not all Sanzed traits, is most common throughout the continent, so that the Sanzed appearance is no longer so much part of the norm. Even so, though the insistence on the suitability of certain physical traits has definitely dwindled along with the Empire's power, it is easy to notice some remnants of colourism. Characters still notice one another's skin colour and other racial features, and make judgements and assumptions about one another's origins based on them; people sharing Essun's mixed appearance are also often referred to by pejorative slurs, such as "Midlatter mongrels", to dismissively distinguish them from the superior, pure Sanzeds.

8.2 OROGENY AND THE DYNAMIC OF THE MIRROR

Under such circumstances, with people putting effort and care into fitting into the expected categories — as much to achieve a sense of community as to protect themselves in the event of natural disaster —, difference is embraced only insofar as said categories permit it, as with the ethnic mixing described above. The existence of the commless, as a shunned group effectively cut off from the necessary means to survival, demonstrates that, under the narrative of stonelore, any who attempt to reject or fail to locate themselves under its norms are explained away as deviants who must be uprooted. This is most evident in the case of orogenes: the most crucial feature of the universal subject in this secondary world is the fact that the subject must *not* be orogene, must be a regular human being — which is why orogenes embody the major figure of the other in this society. This ostracization seems contradictory in a society built around survival

and usefulness, since the ability of orogenes is undeniably useful in the natural environment which humanity faces here. The answer to this apparent contradiction lies in control: orogenes are powerful enough that, were they allowed free will, they would become the uncontested rulers of the Stillness — which the Sanze Empire avoided by ensuring the oppression of orogenes, keeping them obedient to the governmental powers in place. Furthermore, the otherness of orogenes is recognized and feared by the general population, both because of their destructive ability, which only Guardians can possibly threaten, and because they escape the predictability of castes — they cannot be located within the normative parameters ruling society. As such, stonelore continually reinforces the otherness of orogeny, blaming orogenes for causing the Seasons, cautioning against their fearsome power, and encouraging as well as justifying the enforcement of control measures over them. As Alabaster puts it: “They kill us because they’ve got stonelore telling them at every turn that we’re born evil—some kind of agents of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human” (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 124).

It is interesting to notice that, at all practical effects, the only difference between orogenes and regular humans is invisible. It lies within the sessapinae, organs which all humans in the secondary world have developed as a consequence of their environment, in order to help detect — *sess*, as the novel calls it — seismic activity with enough time to take shelter or escape. Orogenes have overdeveloped these organs to an irregular size, which is believed to be at least part of what allows them to manipulate the energy produced by the Earth’s movements, instead of simply sensing it. Unlike other forms of difference which are generally perceivable in plain sight, such as ethnicity or gender expression, orogeny is an ability sourced from an internal organ, and therefore imperceptible visually. Essun would not have been able to conceal herself in the comm of Tirimo if her orogeny had some physical form that could have been recognized in plain sight. The fact that it does not is why, though her difference never disappears, she can be perceived and recognized as a functional subject according to the dominant narratives at work — an individual with agency able to exist outside of the mechanisms of control and oppression exercised by the Fulcrum. This notably returns us to ocularcentrism: the significance of visual perception is such that not even a secondary world foregoing structures around white male supremacy can avoid the centrality of the eye, of the look, in recognizing another. We rely so very much on visual perception in the primary world that it noticeably translates into the fantasy, despite its deliberate separation from that primary reality.

These abilities prove not simply useful, but lifesaving, given the environmental conditions humanity faces. In fact, orogenes have been essential to humanity’s survival, as demonstrated by the quote at the end of Chapter 8 of *The Stone Sky*, extracted from a letter from an Innovator-caste researcher to another: “our popular conception of the frequency of Season-level events is completely wrong [...]. These things aren’t happening every two hundred or three hundred years. It’s more like every thirty or forty! If not for roggas, we’d be a thousand times dead” (216).³¹ This evidences that the ideological apparatuses at work very deliberately continue to orchestrate the fear and hatred orogenes are subjected to. The purposeful concealment of the pivotal role of orogenes in humanity’s survival serves to turn people against them, so that they may be kept as useful tools exclusively at the service and convenience of the Fulcrum, which in turn works for the interests of Yumenes. In turn, both comms as social organisms and the Fulcrum as an institution work consistently to deprive orogenes of personhood, a systemic oppression that brings the trilogy closer to dystopian fiction. Both the first and the third books open with

³¹ Quotes such as this one serve as bookends for each chapter. They are peripheral to the narrative, often citations from stonelore or other secondary-world historical or academic sources, and yet the information they offer is often essential to contextualize the trilogy’s events, as seen in the above-quoted instance.

the descriptions of the largest cities of the continent during their respective time periods. When Yumenes is introduced, in the tale's present, it is seen as a technological and architectural marvel, especially when compared to the smaller, less durable cities that surround it:

Yumenes is unique because here alone have human beings dared to build not for safety, not for comfort, not even for beauty, but for bravery. The city's walls are a masterwork of delicate mosaics and embossing detailing its people's long and brutal history. The clumping masses of its buildings are punctuated by great high towers [...], hand-wrought lanterns powered by the modern marvel of hydroelectricity, delicately arching bridges woven of glass and audacity, and architectural structures called *balconies* that are so simple, yet so breathtakingly foolish, that no one has ever built them before in written history. [...] The streets are paved not with easy-to-replace cobbles, but with a smooth, unbroken, and miraculous substance the locals have dubbed *asphalt*. (*Fifth Season* 2-3)

These concepts can easily be matched with primary-world elements that fit these descriptions, so that it strikes the reader as odd that things they encounter daily would be introduced as such incredible novelties — though, of course, knowing the general state the Stillness is in, Yumenes is certainly at the vanguard. It is the only city that, as happens in our current society, has foregone the practicality of survivability and built for beauty and comfort. That is why the tone seems to introduce it in almost science-fiction-like terms, which in fact echoes the description Hoa gives of the great nation-state of Syl Anagist, the sprawling city where he lived in his distant past:

Here, *now*, dreams have no limit. The people of Syl Anagist 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 to the ground beneath their feet. And Syl Anagist lives, oh how it lives, in bustling streets and ceaseless commerce and buildings that your mind would struggle to define as such. [...] The streets teem with things you might not recognize as vehicles, except in that they travel and convey. Some crawl on legs. (*Stone Sky* 3)

This is immediately recognizable as a much more futuristic city in a science fiction vein, full of technological advancements that Yumenes could only dream of due, of course, to the many centuries of apocalyptic disasters that destroyed Syl Anagist's achievements. However, the fact remains that both cities are introduced with a similar tone, as practically utopias — marvels of human achievement that protect and expand humanity beyond its initial perceived limits. Yet these utopian landscapes have something else in common, as both of them rely on the exploitation of orogenes and their usage as tools for their technologies to work and their social orders to be maintained. The magic-sensitive orogenes raised by Syl Anagist's scientists are constantly used and discarded in the pursuit for that perfect, self-sustaining energy source. Similarly, the Fulcrum's orogenes are used, discarded, and bred for the purpose of protecting Yumenes, of achieving its utopian sense of safety even in a constantly mutable, dangerous environment. The worst of it is that the system, in fact, works: Syl Anagist would have achieved geoarcanity if Hoa and his companions had cooperated as intended, and Yumenes would have remained, protected and persistent, had Alabaster continue to live out his days as a Fulcrum orogene. But, as Ursula Le Guin suggested through her short story "The Ones Who Walk Away

From Omelas”, there is no true utopia so long as the comforts and achievements of human society depend on someone’s suffering. And the key to the destruction of both societies was precisely the suffering they inflicted on those whom they designated as other — the ones used, and discarded, who refused to continue existing as tools. These others chose to reject the system not by walking away, as in Le Guin’s story, but by fighting to dismantle it altogether.

There is clear subtext throughout the trilogy to draw a comparison between the enslavement of orogenes and that of primary-world Africans in the American slave trade, as well as with other genocidal disasters such as the Holocaust as Jemisin herself admitted: “I write things that are informed both by my own experience and by actual history. And I’m not drawing solely upon my own racial experiences. There’s some stuff that’s going to happen in the third book that’s sort of hinting at the Holocaust. You can see hints of stuff that happened with the Khmer Rouge at varying points in the story” (Newkirk). Despite being a fictional ability, orogeny takes on the significance of primary-world features such as ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender, or other factors which cause individuals to become stigmatized as social others. This makes it possible to make a case for its treatment as an instance of “fantastic racism”, a term applied to fantasy or fantastic fictions that employ “the old trick of dealing with thorny issues through metaphor” (TV Tropes). In these cases, the plot displays instances of discrimination against (usually) non-human species, whose non-human traits (fantastic, or generally fictional features) are made to equate the perceived inhumanity of primary-world others. Such traits do not directly correspond with what is actually deemed as other — and hence discriminated against — within the confines of the primary world. For example, the world of the *Dragon Age* videogame series (BioWare, 2009-present) has humans referring degradingly to elves as “knife-ear”; in the world of Rowling’s *Harry Potter*, “mudblood” is a slur employed against those wizards born of regular humans. Both of these words suggest that the targeted collective is somehow made lesser-than by features perceived as undesirable within the secondary world, such as non-magical ascendancy or pointy ears. Instances of fantastic discrimination such as these can be argued to address the evils of discrimination, yet they do so in a way that circumvents the true issues surrounding the power imbalance. Justina Ireland argues that fantastic features are used “to not have to tackle real world racism and expectations of cultural out groups” (“Dispatches”), by substituting the issue of skin colour (or whichever other primary-world trait is concerned, such as sexuality or ability) with a seemingly detached, fantastic characteristic. One could argue that this is in fact what makes fantasy escapist — this escaping primary world issues by applying the to completely fictional situations and beings, so that white-skinned, cis-heterosexual elves and wizards get thrown slurs at, making the metaphor seemingly innocuous. Fantastic racism is perhaps meant to make the issue more palatable to a hegemonic reader, one who aligns with the universal subject, since it tends towards the erasure of identifiable primary-world otherness — of people of colour, LGBTQ+ people, and so on — as the fantastic trait often completely overwrites the presence of any that may be identified as other according to primary-world standards. It seems like yet another example of the “Western imagination” superimposing itself over even secondary world cultures and peoples, presuming to “feel with” them (Keen 148). This fantasy oppression is quite easy to find among popular fantasies and comes across as indicative of the generalized discomfort which the presence of the dark other produces. Furthermore, it makes for watered-down depictions of oppressive dynamics — a “compensatory fantasy”, as Chabot Davis put it, “that inhibits political action” (404) by delivering a simple, insufficiently insightful message along the lines of ‘oppression is bad’. This is because such discomfort before the dark other often translates into a lack of understanding of the depth and multiple dimensions of the workings of oppression; as Justina Ireland bluntly puts it, “if you aren’t comfortable talking

about how racism exists in the real world, your fake world racism discussion is going to be shit” (“Dispatches”), with the same statement applicable to other forms of oppression such as sexism or ableism.

The fictional power of orogeny can indeed be argued to become a stand-in for any kind of primary-world oppression, and very pointedly for racist oppression in particular. If this is the case, how then does Jemisin’s work avoid the issues inherent to the metaphorical usages found in instances of fantastic racism? Firstly, through a first-hand understanding of how racial oppression functions in the primary world. Jemisin understands how identity and social power structures work in the aftermath of collective trauma, which Christina Sharpe very accurately explains through the concept of the wake. Sharpe uses the wake “in all of its meanings as a means of understanding how slavery’s violences emerge within the contemporary conditions of spatial, legal, psychic, material and other dimensions of Black non/being as well as in Black modes of resistance” (14). Through this concept, she argues that Black existence fundamentally embodies and lives in constant re-emergence and re-enactment of the oppressions and violences of slavery. In the wake of an existence as property, society persistently denies and rejects Black being, a constant state of “exclusion” and “ontological negation” (Sharpe 14) that is then inherited by Black children, perpetuating the cycle. On the other hand, the “weather”, according to Sharpe, is “not the specifics of any one event or set of events that are endlessly repeatable and repeated, but the totality of the environments in which we struggle; the machines in which we live” (111). This concept is thus useful to explain what happens in Jemisin’s secondary world — it produces a significant change in the known weather. Jemisin’s fantasy replaces the entirety of our primary-world environment and social structures, so that there is no afterlife, no *wake* of slavery as such. If “race and ability” and other such traits “are historically and materially constructed”, the “recourse to a genre that deliberately unmoors itself from time and space may seem strange” (Pickens 11) as a choice for commentary on racial oppression — because the enslavement of Black people, and the white supremacist systems which historically and socially produced it, are no longer at work. However, Jemisin still acknowledges and incorporates the workings of the wake into the secondary world, as the trilogy does present an ongoing state of oppression — of enslavement, specifically — and a cast of characters that live in its wake.

The social status and circumstances of orogenes as depicted in *The Broken Earth* resonate very closely with those of slavery, the oppressive dynamic being both experienced and dissected through the point of view of the oppressed. Orogenes are defined by their condition as such, deprived of any other identity by being forced to give up any use-name and denied belonging by forcing them to live in the Fulcrum or else homeless entirely, isolated from the comms and cities where humanity makes a living. Their exclusion is taken for granted. Society at large and the Fulcrum in particular are “willing to accept a calculus that require[s] Black” and, in this case, orogene “death” (Sharpe 97), as seen through the utter dehumanization and immoral exploitation of orogene bodies through their general mistreatment, the enforced breeding practices, and the node chairs. Deprived of agency over their bodies and of the possibility to build a narrative of self, the general treatment of orogenes can be summarized through a recorded comment from a Sanzed emperor, cited at the end of Chapter 4 of *The Fifth Season*:

Tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong among us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at these contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their

weakness and doubt. Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve. (Jemisin 76)

This passage applies to the existence of any marginal collective, whose only “‘acceptable’ form” is the dominant subject’s “specularized other” (Moi 134). They become trapped, forever striving to reach a centre that has been built specifically in order to maintain and benefit from their marginality; forever attempting to assimilate to a status quo whose impossible standards ensure that they will be securely kept out of its privileges. The ensuing competition amongst the oppressed individuals, encouraged by this tempting possibility of acceptance, also eliminates any action towards resistance by preventing the formation of community and solidarity — which, as established in chapter 4, is the most effective strategy towards social change.

I would argue that it is precisely the fact that it is possible to draw a direct connection between orogeny and slavery that avoids the shortcomings of fantastic racism. Orogeny is not a metaphorical equivalence but a traceable, substantial similarity that turns its depiction into commentary, not escape. At different points throughout the entire trilogy, the different characters directly use the terms *slave* or *enslavement* to refer to the situation of orogenes, so that the similarities with primary-world slavery become quite easy to discern. Through Syenite’s point of view, for example, readers get several direct comparisons:

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. It’s one thing to know this, to admit it to herself, but it’s the sort of truth that none of them use against each other—not even to make a point—because doing so is cruel and unnecessary. (Jemisin, *Fifth Season* 348)

As a Fulcrum orogene, Essun submitted “freely to the commandments of the Subject” (Althusser 56), willingly shaping herself after what the oppressive system expected and required of her and negotiating its circumstances in order to allow herself a life, an existence, within its dictates. This is why she cannot enjoy their newfound freedom at Meov, because she does not know or understand how to exist outside of this system, which had been the basis of her sense of identity. Further, the system has effectively silenced its objects, and silence becomes a fundamental tool for their submission. As bell hooks argues, the voice of the other is “the talk that is simply not listened to” (6), and these secondary-world others are denied dialogue both with their oppressors (who silence them) and with one another, as they are precluded from recognizing one another as equals. Instead, they are encouraged to mistrust and resent one another, as Damaya was, so that they become progressively more isolated, unable to communicate — and thus, to resist. In fact, to remind one another of their condition as other is seen as useless, “unnecessary” (348), which betrays that the weather of oppression is seen as so immutable that resistance is inconceivable, not even in the realm of possibility for these orogenes. Essun resents Alabaster precisely because he is the one voicing out the system’s contradictions, its injustices: while “all roggas know” that the foundations of the system are fundamentally unjust, “[o]nly Alabaster is vulgar enough to say it aloud” (*Fifth Season* 354). The use of the word ‘vulgar’ is telling — it is rude, or unseemly, to speak as Alabaster does, because it does nothing but make Syenite feel bad without offering any real solutions.

In the same vein, during the second book, Schaffa tells Nassun that he is trying to make amends for “a great mistake”:

“What was the mistake?”

“To enslave your kind. [...] Or perhaps it is more accurate to say that we perpetuated their enslavement of themselves, under Old Sanze. The Fulcrum was nominally run by orogenes, you see—orogenes whom we had culled and cultivated, shaped and chosen carefully, so that they would obey. (*Obelisk Gate* 189)

This illustrates how, much as it happens in primary world processes of enslavement, the oppressed are recruited and made complicit in their own oppression thanks to the systems of “specula(riza)tion” (Irigaray 54) at work. In being perpetually defined against regular humans, orogenes absorb the negative perceptions of their difference, the mechanisms of power shape them to believe in their own inferiority. This makes orogenes wish to resort to any given means to avoid these connotations, to become acceptable for the systems in place, which in turn makes them participants into their own subjugation: “Given a choice between death and the barest possibility of acceptance, they were desperate, and we used that. We *made* them desperate” (*Obelisk Gate* 189). To exist under the rule of the Fulcrum, and the management of other orogenes, is considered as the lesser evil — better than to not exist at all; besides, to be a Fulcrum orogene is to be a civilized one, well-taught and well-bred, and hence a ‘safe’ orogene, one that may yet be accepted within the social centre thanks to their usefulness and docility. Yet there is always a point when the slaves realize that nothing they can do will be enough to earn acceptance, to be recognized as human beings. They cannot be made ‘safe’, because their very identity is always considered a threat — much like the “il/logic” of primary world reality, which regards Black people as “being armed with blackness” (Sharpe 81). Even in a secondary world where usefulness is the major ideological concept around which society is organized, where being of use to one’s community is paramount, orogenes are forever doomed to be armed with their ability. As Kelenli tells Hoa: “*There’s nothing we did to provoke their fear, other than exist. There’s nothing we can do to earn their approval, except stop existing*” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 109, italics in original). Already forced into social and cultural non-existence due to the norm’s refusal to accommodate their being, the one thing orogenes can do to earn the norm’s approval is to disappear — to remove their difference altogether, so that the narratives at work will no longer be threatened by it. Indeed, if not for the significance of their usefulness, orogenes may well have shared the fate of the Niess and been exterminated long ago; however, “the people of the world would not survive without it [orogeny]”, as Schaffa himself admits (*Stone Sky* 178). Orogenes are so essential to survival, in fact, that they “cannot be permitted to have a *choice* in the matter. You must be tools—and tools cannot be people” (178, italics in original). They must be denied subjectivity in order to allow themselves to become usable — and *useful* — objects, unable to deviate from their orders and their purpose. At this point of realization, as the lies and injustices built into the system that has made them into accomplices become more obvious, the enslaved must decide on a course forward, and they often do so in one of two ways:

Some accept their fate. Swallow their pride, forget the real truth, embrace the falsehood for all they’re worth—because, they decide, they cannot be worth much. If a whole society has dedicated itself to their subjugation, after all, then surely they deserve it? Even if they don’t, fighting back is too painful, too impossible. At least this way there is peace, of a sort. [...]

The alternative is to demand the impossible. It isn’t right [...]. They are

not inferior. They do not deserve it. And so it is the society that must change. There can be peace this way, too, but not before conflict. (*Stone Sky* 312)

Very clearly mirroring Black non-being in the primary world as Sharpe, Quashie, and other theorists describe it, these are the only ways in which orogenes are permitted to relate with the world around them, the only alternatives which the denial of their humanity leaves open. “In the face of an imperative for self-despise” as that faced by these social others, “the only orientation possible is either acquiescence to being wrong or antagonism to the hypothesis of wrongness” (Quashie 108). It therefore becomes clear that Jemisin’s use of vocabulary and descriptions in instances such as the above is very much deliberate and encourages the equivalence between the secondary-world and primary-world oppressive systems, especially since these ideas are reinforced throughout the trilogy and from very different points of view. Stonelore, the Fulcrum, the social and political structures in place — all of them work to create the weather (in Sharpe’s terminology) of the Stillness, the environments and machines which work to subjugate this particular group. Essun *does* live in the wake, to return again to Sharpe’s term: she, and most other orogenes, have lived through a mind-altering, traumatic experience of oppression that continually re-enacts itself on their bodies and minds. The world never allows them to forget what she is, just as Black people can never forget or forgo their Blackness. It is a fundamental condition of both of these existences that their societies view them as fundamentally expendable, and build themselves up at the cost of their suffering. Hence the constant cycle of violence which Essun experiences throughout her life, resulting in her isolating herself from human connection, and hence the trauma that is passed on to her daughter: the previous abuse and violence of an existence as property ensures Essun’s self-hate is inherited by Nassun, and these violences reappear from the mother’s past to rupture her daughter’s present.

Orogeny thus becomes direct equivalence, rather than metaphor, for two major reasons. Firstly, the bodies being subjected to oppression within Jemisin’s trilogy are all non-white bodies. Unlike it happens in instances of fantasy racism, which edulcorate the experience by having the discrimination be directed against white-skinned or otherwise normative characters, Jemisin’s orogenes become the dark other in more ways than one: they are otherized in the secondary world due to their power, and in the primary world — through the readers’ actualization of the text, influenced by the narratives at work in primary reality — due to their visible non-whiteness. This makes the equivalence unavoidable, and the commentary direct and targeted. Secondly, Jemisin is herself an African American woman whose own existence is markedly influenced by the wake. She has experienced exactly in what ways the social weather works against the particular intersection of her identities, and this experience finds itself reflected in the oppressive dynamic against orogenes. She has direct knowledge of the violence of erasure, as Jemisin’s own life and family heritage are truncated by the wake, preventing her genealogy from being traced back beyond a certain point due to the lack of records identifying former slaves: “Like most black Americans descended from slaves, it basically stops” (Khatchadourian). This, much like the ostracization of orogenes, serves to deny the individual a tradition and a community in which to inscribe oneself, which results in an inability to preserve one’s identity or trace it back into generational histories. As Jemisin herself puts it, there is a “strange emptiness to life without myths” (Khatchadourian), which is what encouraged her to create her own: like many of the authors quoted in chapter one, she admits that her fiction is very much informed by the need to feel herself represented within the secondary worlds she “read voraciously”, but where “she almost never encountered characters who credibly represented someone like her” (Khatchadourian). The fact that she herself shares some of these experiences in the wake

undoubtedly makes a difference in enabling her to create such ‘credible’ representations, as does the fact that she supports these experiences with historical research: “So as I read about the different sets of people who have been oppressed and the different systemic oppressions that have existed throughout history, you start to see the patterns in them. Obviously I’m drawing on my own African American experience, but I’m drawing on a lot of other stuff too” (Newkirk). This author then clearly perceives the pattern of oppression as functioning similarly through the centuries, as well as throughout different cultures and societies, which is also the point the trilogy makes by way of the parallel between Hoa and Essun.

Thanks to these factors, the images of oppression and suffering in *The Broken Earth* go beyond fantastic racism, as they do not make their case against discrimination by directing the oppressive violences against innocuous fantastic races. Jemisin’s protagonists are coded racialized and coded female, so that escape from the implications of their enslavement is impossible even if said enslavement is due to fantastic reasons. Furthermore, such depictions of violence in Jemisin’s work never constitute “a hail to the non-Black person in the Althusserian sense”, as Sharpe argues is the case with most depictions of Black suffering in media (116). As this author puts it, “the repetition of the visual, discursive, state, and other quotidian and extraordinarily cruel and unusual violences enacted on Black people” works only “to confirm the status, location, and already held opinions within dominant ideology about those exhibitions of spectacular Black bodies whose meanings then remain unchanged” (Sharpe 116-117). This is yet another argument against the graphic depictions of suffering meant to produce empathy, as to expose these instances does not result in the “cessation of violence” or even “lead primarily to sympathy or something like empathy. Such repetitions often work to solidify and make continuous the colonial project of violence”, since they often fetishize these depictions and look at them from a hegemonic, outside point of view (Sharpe 116-117). While Jemisin’s trilogy depicts dark and sometimes quite graphic instances of institutional and individual violence against the oppressed, visibly racialized group, the mechanics of oppression can still be seen to function differently than they would in the primary world. This is because, through the secondary world, Jemisin creates a fundamental change in the weather: these social structures and “environments in which we struggle” (Sharpe 111) are fundamentally shifted and reshaped, so that the social and political circumstances that create and perpetuate violence and enslavement are also changed. This is how the role of race is altered, so that Blackness can be depicted as something other than otherness: as it happened with gender, the sets of white supremacist values and structures of the primary world are no longer in place, so that race is no longer a source of oppression, nor of the characters’ self-hatred and internalized sense of inferiority. Orogeny is made into the sole reason behind these characters’ condition as others: while Essun is abused, deprived of agency, and heavily traumatized, it is never due to her identity as a racially mixed woman. It is thus that the secondary world manages to combine the depiction of oppressive dynamics with a fantasy of Black and female being, instead of the non/being which Sharpe, Hartman, and many others argued the primary world sustains. The reader’s *gestalt*, formed during the internalization of the fiction, is never permitted to construct these characters as other: the narration constantly and consciously centres their position, so that what is other becomes that centre — becomes *subject* and not *subjected*. Hoa always narrates from a position of subalternity, both from Essun’s point of view and his own, so that the impact of the wake in both of their senses of self — of “*peoplehood*”, as Hoa calls it (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 50, *italics in original*) — is directly shown.

This centring of voices and perspectives that would be deemed ‘other’ in primary reality, but who are not seen as such within the secondary world, is what ensures that readers will

identify with and construct the characters as full-fledged subjects. Recall that, due to the workings of the male gaze, “[i]n-built patterns of pleasure and identification impose masculinity as ‘point of view’” (Mulvey 29), so that, in the absence of images that resemble them, women consuming fiction will identify with characters who are *unlike* themselves, or else receive their representations from a masculinized perspective. On the other hand, Jemisin’s female characters are constructed in such terms as to avoid this male or masculinized perspective, and therefore allow a female reader to identify with them in terms of sameness while recognizing this sameness as significant, as worthy of not only narrative attention but also social consideration. This belief that they share “qualities, emotional experiences, or attitudes” (Andringa 209) with these fictional minds is incredibly significant. It helps women — and Black women in particular, given their prominent presence in Jemisin’s work — to, firstly, avoid the internalization of the negative associations which burden otherness in the primary world (of inferiority, of a mere reflection of a more powerful, ideal universal), and secondly to construct their own identity in terms of becoming subjects. To see Essun exercising her agency, to watch her evolving in response to traumatic events without ever quite succumbing to the dark fantastic cycle that Thomas examined, allows Black female readers — and other otherized readers who choose to identify with any part of Essun’s lived experience — to recover their voice as Essun does. When she comes to understand herself as an agential subject in relation with others and connected to them as equals, this becomes a hope and a possibility for the reader who is ‘like’ her, so that readers can come to “reject the powerful’s definition of their reality” (hooks, *Feminist Theory* 92) as other, and hence be encouraged to perceive of themselves as subjects. The depictions of violence are thus no longer “a hail to the non-Black person” (Sharpe 116), an attempt to achieve empathy and understanding for that state of oppression; they are rather a hail *to* the oppressed, and very specifically, to the Black woman. Though thinking of science fiction in particular, Pickens expresses it thus: “Slippages within the genre take for granted multiple forms of cognition, mental engagement, and racial difference such that Black speculative fiction becomes a welcoming place for those who are seeking a way out of their minds” (12). These depictions of violence against the other are therefore turned into a site of resistance, made to work *against* the dominant ideology instead of reinforcing it, therefore creating that “view from elsewhere” which De Lauretis spoke of (25) by utilizing the position “*in the margins of hegemonic discourse*” (De Lauretis 18, italics in original) as an advantage.

In fact, the trilogy as a whole is a fantastic retelling of the response to oppressive structures, a process of rebellion which further distances it from the negative connotations of escapism, as well as from fantastic racism. Jemisin first teaches the reader “about the power structures in [her] fantasy world. And then [deconstructs] them” (Ireland), first at an individual level, through individual radicalizations that eventually derive in system-wide revolutions. This process focuses on the experience of said power structures through the point of view of the oppressed, and in so doing calls attention to and “force[s] further apart the disjuncture between what is natural and what is cultural inheritance” (Pickens 13) by shifting the source of oppression. Furthermore, the narrative dissects the difficulties which orogenes find in relating to one another — particularly as some begin to acquire consciousness of their shared struggle, and thus to reject the unfairness of the status quo, while others remain entrenched in self-hatred and internalized inferiority. This process is seen through Kelenli and Hoa’s relationship, as well as Alabaster’s with Essun: only once these mentor-like figures have planted the seeds of questioning on the new generations can the climate of revolution begin to brew. Yet rebellion in *The Broken Earth* is multifaceted: it not only involves a refusal to participate in the system, as Hoa and his companions did when they refused to carry out the scientists’ plan as intended; nor does it only involve violence, either, as

when Alabaster destroys Yumenes in order to set off a Season. Revolution, and change at a grand scale, requires exercising alternative forms of resistance — particularly the practice of care and mutual support in the face of violence. The comms of Meov and Castrima are representatives of these alternative resistances as communities that create a safe, free environment, one that promotes equality and a symbiotic existence with the presumed other. As mentioned before, for instance, Meov represents the ideal pre-colonization state, a community whose utopian existence remained completely untouched by the secondary-world processes of othering and oppression. Its communal life promoted mutual care and coexistence, and benefited freely from the particular abilities of each member without resorting to the rigidity and immutability of a pre-set caste system. Castrima, on the other hand, comes across as much more flawed despite its attempts at inclusion and coexistence, since it departs from the post-colonial state of the wake — and must therefore rely on some of the oppressor’s constructs in order to function. For instance, Ykka needs to emphasize her Leadership role in order to maintain her sway over her people despite her orogeny. As a consequence, the rest of the use-castes still need to be sustained in Castrima in order to keep a semblance of order and peace. However, this creates issues with the comm’s orogenes, since they lack a use-caste. They are asked to help wherever a pair of hands is needed, irrespective of the kind of work required, yet this further highlights the difference present in them against the rest of the comm and thus makes it harder for them to integrate. Even so, these social structures cannot be altered completely: Castrima’s citizens have all experienced the power dynamics at work, whether as oppressors or as oppressed, and as such have come to identify with such constructs; if orogenes are to be accepted, the transition must be smoothed over by maintaining some of these structures.

And yet, despite its many flaws, Castrima becomes an ideal community in the event of disaster. It takes hard work and extreme vulnerability, on Ykka’s part as well as on the rest of the comm, to consent to an open discussion of problems instead of simply lashing out and perpetuating the cycles of violence, to consent to place the community’s needs ahead of the individuals’ in ways that encourage equality, rather than emphasizing difference. They do so, for instance, by establishing a democratic form of government, where Ykka retains the final say but decisions are debated in council with a few representatives of the comm’s different factions. It is this hard work that manages to make the comm’s members come together, however reluctantly, to care for one another during the Season. It is interesting that this state of coexistence and mutual care is only shown to become possible in the event of comms accepting the difference inherent to orogenes as enriching, rather than merely dangerous. Like in Meov, Castrima’s comm members are valued because of their inherent worth as human beings, not because of their usefulness to the comm’s functioning. As Ykka puts it, “there’s more to Castrima than being rusting *useful*” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 228, italics in original). Where comms in the Stillness generally come together out of practicality, because it is the safest option, Castrima (as well as Meov) are not ruled by skill or by the comm’s survival, but based on an ethics of care “(as in repair, maintenance, attention), an ethics of seeing, and of *being* in the wake as consciousness; as a way of remembering” (Sharpe 131, italics in original).

Even in the wake of violence, and the metaphorical weather produced by it, “there is disaster and possibility” (Sharpe 134). This correlation is especially poignant for Jemisin’s work, given how significantly its characters and social order are conditioned by large-scale natural disasters. The fact that Alabaster’s act of destroying Yumenes is what sets off a widespread movement of social resistance and change makes it possible to argue that disaster *is*, itself, the possibility. Twice over is life-changing disaster provoked *deliberately*: once when Hoa first flung away the Moon, and twice when Alabaster creates the Rift that swallows Yumenes and sets off the

Season. Both actions provoke the death of millions, yet they also destroy the power dynamic in place: Hoa's actions result in the destruction of Syl Anagist and its scientists, all of its progress lost to the ages; and Alabaster's violent act destroys the seat of the Sanze Empire, as well as the Fulcrum itself. The deconstruction of power networks can thus only take place through the apocalyptic event, which each time brings human society to the brink of a full reset, and thus provokes systemic change by sheer force. Alabaster sees this act of utter destruction as the ultimate equalizer, the only thing that will make everyone experience the kind of suffering and self-erasure that orogenes go through on a daily basis under the Fulcrum and its influence. This is not really fairness, but more so retribution:

What follows won't be good, but it'll be bad for everyone—rich and poor, Equatorials and commless, Sanzeds and Arctics, now they'll all know. Every season is the Season for us. The apocalypse that never ends. They could've chosen a different kind of equality. We could've all been safe and comfortable together, but they didn't want that. Now nobody gets to be safe. Maybe that's what it will take for them to finally realize things have to change. (*Stone Sky* 300)

Life during the apocalypse of a Season is here used as a metaphor to represent what it is like to live under the endless cycle of oppression: when there is a Season, everyone can finally understand what it is like to live as an 'other'. Furthermore, Alabaster's words, particularly the last sentence, show how large-scale disaster is seen as simply the final straw, the last resort for change. The system is much too ingrained in social structures and discourse to hope for it to be changed. It must be rebuilt from the ground up, yet to create a society that is able to free itself from that core of oppression requires a radical act, one involving extreme violence and death. It is thus that the destruction of Yumenes shares the moral ambiguity of the revolutionary process: while Alabaster forces humanity to rethink the social structures of power that had until this destructive act upheld society, he also causes the death of millions of innocents. Yet, one might ask, to what extent can anyone be considered innocent so long as they knowingly benefit from oppressive structures? The ripping apart of Yumenes asks these moral questions of the reader, but does not provide an easy answer. Alabaster is certainly a transformative agent, thanks to whom change — through the restoration of the Moon — is eventually made possible, but his take on revolution comes at a particularly high cost, both in the general death toll and the subsequent impact on the lives of those around him. The rippling effect of this act thus shows not only in the world at large, but also in the women most closely connected to the Obelisk Gate — Essun and her daughter Nassun.

If Jemisin wanted to write specifically about racial oppression and the wake of slavery in the United States, she could have just as well written a narrative about African slaves, set in the historical American South, and about their resistance to the ideological apparatuses of their enslavement — and it would have, very likely, driven the same or similar points home for her readers. But she must have chosen fantasy for a reason, and the above analysis allows me to conclude that she did so for two major motives:

1) The use of orogeny as the source of oppression and the otherizing factor, instead of a trait present in the primary world, serves to universalize the experience. In a way, orogeny is a very specific metaphor for the enslavement of Africans at the hands of white colonizers; yet, in another, the experiences it negotiates are applicable to multiple forms of discrimination. It is a story about the exploitation of the Earth, as well as of human beings; it is a story about the

otherizing produced by not just systemic abuse, but also the individual actions of the people trapped in such systems.

2) The fantastic, secondary world is what allows her to represent and position the Black women of her tale as subjects, and hence to counteract their perception as dark others in the primary world. Not only that, it also allows Jemisin to augment the scale and consequences of the resistance to systemic oppression: The Moon is flung from the Earth, a city of millions is decimated, entire towns razed by the anger and hurt of the oppressed — because they realize that their existence has been unjust, and the world must be remade. Thus, as Attebery puts it, the transformations taking place in the fantasy are reflected “in the self as much as in the world”, depicting both “inner changes like growth and desire and selfhood as well as more visible ones” (*Fantasy* 13), like the fall of societies and the crumbling of mountains.

Therefore, the fantastic becomes the space Jemisin seizes to reimagine and transform the condition of Blackness, as well as that of womanhood: “the unmooring of time, space, and culture” prompting “the necessary tumult required to reimagine the world” (Pickens 13). However, Jemisin’s narrative presents us with two reimaginings of the world: Essun represents Alabaster’s hope and the continuation of his efforts to restore the Moon, imagining a world where Seasons no longer exist and where society can move past the imperative of survival to create a more equitable community. Nassun, on the other hand, imagines the only possible end to the world’s suffering as she has experienced it is pure destruction, a nihilistic trauma response to the experiences of oppression she endures. And yet, by the end of the tale, Nassun comes to embody quite the opposite — the breaking of the cycles of violence and abuse which have repeated themselves throughout the trilogy. This evolution and character development are delved into in the next chapter.

CHAPTER 9: NASSUN, EUCATASTROPHE, AND LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

*Let's end with the beginning of the world,
shall we?*

(Nora Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*)

Nassun, Essun's ten-year-old daughter, appears at first to be only a secondary character, peripheral to Essun's story. Since she goes missing along with her father Jija in the first book, it seems as though it will be an essential part of Essun's quest to find and save her, so that she would seemingly remain in the background. However, in the second book, Hoa begins to narrate from Nassun's perspective (using third-person pronouns) as well as her mother's, so that Nassun's story quickly acquires its own dimension. She is brought to the forefront as a main character, and her presence becomes in fact essential for the tale's eucatastrophic conclusion. Nassun's story is also significant because it shows the ways in which the cycle repeats: the parallels between Nassun's childhood and current situation and her mother's past experiences become increasingly obvious, to the point where Nassun can be read as Essun's reflection. The child thus becomes an other, yet not in the sense of an object, but rather in the sense of *another* self, upon which Essun projects the fears and lacks that she was taught to perceive in herself. In fact, Essun's life in the wake³² of oppression can be argued to be at the root of her daughter's life ending up as an almost exact mirror of her own.

9.1 LIKE MOTHER, LIKE DAUGHTER: NASSUN AS ESSUN'S MIRROR

The Fulcrum is responsible for the imprisonment and indoctrination of orogenes throughout the Stillness, and at the core of Essun's trauma, inescapably affecting her relationships with others. This ideological apparatus is never directly experienced by Nassun: she is spared from being assigned to a Guardian, as well as from child labour, and enjoys a rather regular childhood attending creche with other children and playing with her father. However, Nassun still experiences the Fulcrum's aftermath through her mother's training. The way Essun raises her daughter and trains her orogeny is very closely guided by her learning at the Fulcrum, as well as its power dynamics, as can be seen in the following excerpt:

That had been Mama's command, along with all the others: *Don't reach, don't ice, I'm going to make the earth move and you'd better not react, didn't I tell you not to react, even listening is reacting, normal people don't listen like that, are you listening to me, rusting stop, for Earth's sake can't you do anything right, stop crying, now do it again.* Endless commands. Endless displeasure. Occasionally the slap of ice in threat, the slap of a hand, the

³² The wake as Sharpe uses it refers to a post-traumatic state, where the socio-political mechanisms in place prevent the oppressed collective from becoming enslaved, so that they cannot be considered property — in legal terms, if not otherwise. For both Essun and Nassun, however, the mechanisms and institutions perpetuating the enslavement of orogenes are still very much in place. I thus use the term 'wake' more liberally here, to refer to the aftermath of Essun's lived experience in the Fulcrum.

sickening inversion of Nassun's torus, the jerk of a hand on her upper arm.
(*Obelisk Gate* 77-78, italics in original)

It is easy to notice the similarities between Essun's actions as described in this passage and the words and punishments which she herself received from Schaffa and the Fulcrum's instructors. Her chastising her daughter with a "slap of ice" is something the instructors would do, orogenically "administering a quick, stunning slap of icy cold air as a warning" for children to keep their power reined in without causing it to move anything (*Fifth Season* 197). And Essun's words, "*even listening is reacting*", refer back to the following scene as recounted in one of Damaya's chapters:

Schaffa nudges her with his leg. 'Don't.'
Startled, Damaya does not think to lie. 'I wasn't doing anything.'
'You were listening to the Earth. That's something.' (*Fifth Season* 87)

These direct parallels show that Essun is enacting the abusive patterns once imposed on her by the ideological state apparatus and its agents, perpetuating the same violences onto her daughter, therefore evidencing the cyclical nature of abuse. Of course, Essun's violence does not come from the same place as what she herself experienced. She is not driven by a desire to assert power over Nassun, or to subjugate her daughter's identity to the systems in place. She is harsh, rather, because this is the only way she knows to protect Nassun — to shape her in the same ways Essun herself was shaped. These techniques are the only education Essun has known, so that she could not have taught her daughter differently; and the harshness inherent to their application was what made Essun as strong and capable as she is. In other words, she raises her daughter after what the Fulcrum's gaze would have sought to see, as a submissive orogene in full control of her ability. The only difference is that Essun does so because she wants her daughter to have what she will need to survive in a world designed to be hostile against her. She does so, in other words, for Nassun's sake, not for the Fulcrum's.

As crucial as this difference is, it does not justify the perpetuation of abusive behaviours. Nor is it a distinction which Nassun can make or understand, as her mother is unable to communicate her love properly. The social narratives around the otherness of orogeny which have shaped Essun's damaged sense of self, and which force both her and her daughter to conceal their power, inevitably condition the mother-daughter relationship, which becomes rather more like the one between a hard mentor and a difficult student, similar to that which Essun shared with Schaffa and Alabaster. The particular parallel with the latter becomes especially evident in a scene where Alabaster struggles to get Essun to grasp the nuances of magic, a lesson which spirals into argument. Essun is furious at his presumptions, his methods: "You expect me to listen to you, but you don't share, you just demand and proclaim and—and I'm not a child! Evil Earth, I wouldn't even speak to a child this way!" (*Obelisk Gate* 140). In that same instant, however, she realizes that she is lying. She *did* in fact speak to Nassun in those same ways, patronizingly and even violently, which she quickly justifies: "*Because she wouldn't have understood. She wouldn't have been safe if you'd been gentler, slower. It was for her own good*" (*Obelisk Gate* 140, italics in original). There was no time for gentleness; Nassun's youth and inexperience meant she could easily blunder and lose control of her orogeny in front of others, an experience which Essun herself likely remembers all too well. She needed a strong guiding hand to make her understand the true danger her ability puts her in, to protect her. Ironically, Alabaster's reply is an almost word-for-word repetition of Essun's thoughts: "It's for your own

rusting good. [...] I'm trying to protect you, for Earth's sake!" (140), which painfully points out her own hypocrisy. This makes it obvious that the weight of Essun's personal experience, as well as the trauma she still carries from the death of Corundum, made her deeply unaware of how tyrannical she had become towards her own daughter.

Without knowing it, then, Essun becomes much like Schaffa — an agent enforcing the ideological apparatuses over her daughter, instead of the loving mother she might have been. She makes decisions for Nassun's sake, yet without consideration for her wants or feelings, thus silencing her daughter's voice and depriving her of agency. This provokes Nassun's defiance, much as Alabaster's and Schaffa's methods bred defiance in Syenite; against such defiance, instead of talking to her daughter as an equal and showing that she recognizes and values Nassun, Essun imposes her will by using further violence to stamp out that defiance. Though not justifiable, these behaviours become understandable in light of the events structuring Essun's previous lives. Having lost a child to the Fulcrum's greed before, and unwilling to go through the same grief with another, Essun is willing to sacrifice her relationship with her daughter as long as it means Nassun will be safe: "you told yourself it didn't matter if she hated you by the end of it; she would know your love by her own survival" (*Obelisk Gate* 202). This disconnection with her daughter is worsened by Essun's difficulties in expressing and comforting through physical affection, as seen through her character analysis in chapter 7, so that all Nassun knows from her mother is inflexibility, mistreatment, and sharp words. It makes sense, then, that Nassun thinks Essun does not love her at all: "Mama has said occasionally that she loves Nassun, but Nassun has never seen any proof of it" (*Obelisk Gate* 78). Orogeny, which mother and daughter share and which might have brought them closer together as they learned from one another, only truncates the mother-daughter connection and in fact severs it entirely when Jija kidnaps Nassun due to his discovery of it.

Thanks to her mother's teachings, Nassun is able to keep her orogeny under careful control so that she may pass as a non-orogene and get to experience the world from the point of view of a regular child, as Damaya once did before her ability was found out. Interpellated as a functional subject by the society around her, she is sheltered from the worst consequences of orogeny, and so does not fully understand the need to keep it a secret, particularly from her father. It is clear to Nassun that Jija loves her, since his love — unlike Essun's — is physically affectionate, gentle, a lot less strict:

Daddy, who gives her knapped stone kirkhusa³³ to play with or a first aid kit for her runny-sack because Nassun is a Resistant like her mama. Daddy, who takes her fishing [...]. Mama has never lain out on the grassy rooftop with Nassun, pointing at the stars and explaining that some deadcivs are said to have given them names, though no one remembers those. Daddy is never too tired to talk at the ends of his workdays. Daddy does not inspect Nassun in the mornings after baths the way Mama does, checking for poorly washed ears or an unmade bed, and when Nassun misbehaves, Daddy only sighs and shakes his head and tells her, 'Sweetening, you knew better.' Because Nassun always does. (*Obelisk Gate* 78)

Interestingly, echoes of traditional gender roles can be seen particularly clearly in this passage, as from it can be inferred that Essun took on the bulk of the childcare responsibilities, whereas Jija appears to have performed a more leisurely role in the children's lives so that the

³³ A fantastic animal resembling a large otter, which is kept as a pet in off-Season times and which Jija carves out of stone for Nassun.

labour of ensuring that the child is clean and disciplined falls to the mother. The father may then dispense affection and chastise only gently, healing the wounds which mother's punishments and severity leave behind and thus ensuring the child's favour. Of course, if Jija can be a perfectly loving father in this way, it is because he believes that he is raising a child without orogeny — a 'normal' child, precisely thanks to Essun's efforts to conceal it from him. Unlike her daughter, Essun understands that Jija's love is, as mentioned earlier, conditional, dependent on the appearance of normalcy, on their fitting the narratives which rule over their lives. Such a love will not withstand the revelation that his wife and daughter have always been orogenes — always been other —, so that it is under Essun's orders that Nassun is forced to keep it from her father. However, the child unwittingly reveals the secret by her plan to run away from home: she attempts to pay a lorist to take her along as an apprentice by using a valuable gemstone, which the lorist does not take and brings to her father instead. Jija, who works with stone on a daily basis, takes very little time to understand that such a gemstone could only have been found using orogeny — which is the catalyst for his murder of two-year-old Uche, tragically proving Essun right. Being kept ignorant of their difference was the only thing that made it possible for Jija to love his own children.

Even after Uche's death, however, Nassun understands only that her father has always been gentle and considerate, and her mother has not. It was because of Essun's treatment that her daughter planned to run away to begin with, which makes Nassun reject her mother and identify with her father's gaze instead, so that Essun is to blame for everything: "She does not like that her father is so angry now. This seems yet another thing that her mother has done to her" (*Obelisk Gate* 78). If she had not forced Nassun to lie, the child reasons, Jija would undoubtedly have understood and loved her just as he did before. What Nassun is yet to understand is that her father's anger does not come from deceit, or that it is not really anger at all; it is the utter abjection of otherness, the visceral rejection which it inspires, that turns him against his own children by resignifying them as monsters within his perception of the world. Thus, when Nassun desperately pleads her case with her father — "I wanted to tell you!" (*Obelisk Gate* 79) — Jija becomes aggressive towards her, violently pushing her off the wagon where they are travelling. Reeling from the fall, Nassun realizes "that what she sees in his eyes right now is something entirely different from love" (*Obelisk Gate* 83), shattering the illusion that she could be unconditionally loved. She understands now what her mother had always known — that Jija's love existed because otherness had not marked her in his perception; now that she has been recognized as other, Jija's fears of orogeny are instantly projected onto her daughter. She is no longer human, no longer his own; instead, she becomes the other, a dangerous monstrosity that must be either killed or subjugated. This is the first time that Nassun is not hailed as a subject by those around her, and it comes as a bitter shock, especially coming from the father she had previously idolized. Unlike it happened with her brother, however, Jija's violence does not end in Nassun's death — not yet, anyhow. Precisely because Nassun has chosen to identify with her father's gaze, she quickly learns how to perform the version of herself which he wants to see: a helpless daughter. Such a performance is but a fabrication, "manufactured and sustained through corporeal signs" (Butler 185): when Nassun cries and calls him "Daddy", it reminds Jija "that she is his little girl" (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 84), superimposing the image of the child onto the monster's and thus preventing him from hurting her. The only way for Jija to continue caring for her and helping her through the Season is for Nassun to continue performing this way: "It is a manipulation. Something of her is warped out of true by this moment [...]. Her childhood dies, for all intents and purposes" (*Obelisk Gate* 84). And yet, "that is better than *all* of her dying, she knows" (84), which in itself is proof of the success of Essun's training. Inured

to her mother's violence, Nassun has developed a finely tuned survival instinct against the hostility which she now finds her otherness inspires. This is why abuse is difficult to recognize as such in context: it is the core of both women's trauma, but also the reason why they can grow to become powerful survivalists and forces to be reckoned with.

In that sense, Essun's training has ensured that Nassun can control her orogeny in very advanced ways for her age, similarly to her own prowess as top student of her year when she was Damaya. This training allows Nassun to endure even the extreme conditions of commlessness and to protect herself and her father from some of the Season's consequences. On the other hand, Essun's merciless lessons have placed her mother in the oppressor's position, as mentioned above, so that her presence in Nassun's life can be equated to that of the Fulcrum. This is evidenced by the fact that, even under the dire circumstances, trapped with an unstable, violent father whom she can no longer trust, Nassun never once considers returning to her mother. Ironically, though Essun was the parent who loved her daughter unconditionally, the mistrust and resentment bred by her methods ensure that Nassun would rather cling to her father helplessly, hoping he will come around to her orogeny and love her as he once did. The need for a stable, loving parent figure is perfectly natural for a child of Nassun's age, yet was undoubtedly exacerbated by Essun's constant denial of affection and praise — which she was unused to and unfit to give because of her own upbringing. This has left her daughter vulnerable to the manipulation and abuse which she subsequently endures, paralleling how Damaya was manipulated into clinging to Schaffa's shows of affection despite his evident brutality towards herself and others. In being suddenly deprived of the hailing which constructed them as functional subjects, both Damaya and Nassun found themselves constructed as others and hence unable to comprehend their own identities outside of the parameters given by the narratives in power which deem them inferior, monstrous, and unworthy of affection. This is why Jija sets their course for a comm where, it is rumoured, a cure for orogeny was successfully developed. The use of the word 'cure' is itself telling, clearly deeming otherness as a sickness, something to be rid of in order to be 'normal' — to adapt to the norm: "*A cure*. For orogeny? She hardly knows what to think. Be... other than what she is? Be normal? Is that even possible?" (*Obelisk Gate* 114).

Even leaving aside the apparent impossibility of a cure, Nassun is surprised because she had expected her father to take her to the Antarctic Fulcrum, the only one left after the destruction of Yumenes (far enough to survive, despite Alabaster's best effort). Throughout their travels together, it appeared that Jija was growing more accepting, or at least more tolerant, of Nassun's orogeny, allowing her to perform it in front of him whenever it was useful to get them out of tight spots. None of it meant anything, however, since Jija does not want her trained at all — he wants the mark of otherness eradicated entirely. In his own words: "Trained, leashed animals are still animals. [...] I want my little girl back" (*Obelisk Gate* 115). This comparison to an animal, making Nassun less than human — not a "little girl", but an animal — makes her realize that her status in her father's gaze has forever shifted, no matter how well she performs the role of dutiful daughter. It is an instance that mirrors Damaya's realization that "[s]/he is a rogga" (*Fifth Season* 89, italics in original): Nassun has become fully otherized as something evil, foreign, that has replaced Jija's daughter. The only way to be recognized as such again is for her to reject her difference as much as Jija does, to curse it, to want it extirpated, in order to become the version of herself which Jija favours — *his* daughter, *his* little girl. To emphasize the possessive pronouns is important, as it betrays Jija's feeling that his family been taken from him. To avoid angering her father, Nassun performs the submissive acceptance he expects of her, enacting the wishes of his gaze, as Žižek put it. Yet, significantly, she silently resists the idea of such a thing as a 'cure' despite her youth and her evident dependence on Jija's approval (both

emotional, in terms of her affective needs, and physical, in terms of strict survival). Nassun evidently understands that nothing about her has changed, that she is no more a monster than she was when Jija was willing to be a good, kind father to her. The only difference is that the otherness which was invisible to him has made itself visible now, and he cannot ignore it, or love his daughter despite it. This makes it so that she cannot meet her father's conditions, not just because it is impossible to 'cure' orogeny, but because she does not *wish* to. What Nassun had really hoped for was for Jija to recognize her, to interpellate her as herself, *with* her difference and not despite it. In other words, she wanted to be recognized as *another* subject, an impossibility under Jija's current perception of her otherness, sanctioned and reinforced by the social narratives at work around their relationship.

When they reach the comm, Found Moon, they find that it houses a colony of orogene children who live separately from the rest of the comm. Nassun is quick to realize that they are not, in fact, being 'cured', but trained and taught under the care of three Guardians — one of whom is Schaffa himself. After the massacre at Meov, Schaffa was saved from drowning by Father Earth, who repurposed him by using the corestone implanted in his neck to make him forget who he previously was: "Understand: the Schaffa that we have known thus far, the Schaffa whom Damaya learned to fear and Syenite learned to defy, is now dead. What remains is a man with a habit of smiling, a warped paternal instinct, and a rage that is not wholly his own driving everything he does from this point on" (*Obelisk Gate* 42). This moment, in a sense, mirrors Syenite's movement to become Essun, though Schaffa's is a rebirth in a much more literal sense; he only recovers some of his past memories, and does so very slowly throughout the trilogy's last book. It is Father Earth's rage, driven through his mind, that guides him, which is why he ends up at Found Moon — he is looking for an orogene able to fulfil the purpose given to him by the Earth. This is how Nassun comes to be under Schaffa's care as a Guardian, just as her mother once was, albeit outside the Fulcrum's control. In one of the trilogy's greatest ironies, the child almost instantly takes a liking to Schaffa, so that the person who violently traumatized her mother becomes Nassun's major source of care and support. The twisted ways in which Essun's upbringing replicates itself through Nassun are made especially obvious when Schaffa asks the child about her mother, and Nassun tells him a scene which eerily mirrors the one that took place between Schaffa himself and Essun, back when she was Damaya: "I yelled at her once. Told her she was mean. I told her I hated her and she couldn't make me do it. [...] She got really quiet. Then she said, 'Are you sure you can control yourself?' And she took my hand. [...] She broke it" (*Obelisk Gate* 153). Regaining his own memories of the event — of the many times when he did the same thing to the many other orogene children in his care —, Schaffa remarks only that "It's wrong to hurt someone you love, Nassun" (154). To the abused child, this is intensely validating, as it confirms what she had always suspected — that the treatment she received "has always been wrong" (*Obelisk Gate* 155). Schaffa's apparent guilt here may be genuine, and thus argued as a step towards his redemption; however, it results in manipulative behaviour all the same, as it encourages Nassun's unhealthy dependence on his affection. When he hugs her, Nassun "does not care that Schaffa cannot possibly love her, when he has known her for only a few weeks. She loves him. She needs him. She will do anything for him" (155).

Exactly as Damaya once clung to Schaffa, Nassun accepts him as a new father figure very quickly — and unsurprisingly, given that Schaffa reunites the qualities that she had most wanted from each of her parents. Unlike her mother, he expresses physical affection towards her, hugging and comforting her when she needs it; unlike her father, who treats her as a monster, Schaffa accepts *all* of her, including the otherness which Jija is so afraid of. Additionally, Schaffa recognizes Nassun as a subject. He enters dialogue with her, a "talk between two subjects, not

the speech of subject and object” (hooks, *Talking Back* 131), allowing her to express her wishes and being mindful of them (which he did not do with Damaya). Perhaps most importantly, Schaffa gives Nassun the ability to choose. When Nassun notices that the corestone in his neck is causing him pain, Schaffa eventually explains that the Earth is using it to hurt him because he is refusing to force Nassun towards its purpose: “I present its wishes to you as a choice, and I will abide if you say no” (*Obelisk Gate* 191). This directly contrasts against Schaffa’s clear lesson to Damaya, “never say no to me” (*Fifth Season* 99). Instead of depriving this new pupil of voice and agency as he did then, Schaffa now speaks to Nassun as an equal and grants her agency over herself and her fate, constructing her as a subject instead of a tool, as the Fulcrum orogenes were taught to be. Thus, though Nassun’s stay at Full Moon mirrors Essun’s stay at the Fulcrum, Nassun is never indoctrinated into becoming property nor conditioned to abandon her sense of self, as shown by these unusually gentle interactions with Schaffa. Eager for his approval, and fully aware of her own brilliant orogenic skill, Nassun becomes a favourite student and continually turns to Schaffa for reassurance, support, and affection. In spite of the aforementioned crucial differences with her mother’s training, however, Nassun becomes progressively more and more isolated from other meaningful relationships, as Damaya was. Though the orogene children at Found Moon are allowed to interact freely and bond with one another, unlike in the Fulcrum, Nassun’s abilities are much greater than theirs. This quickly sets her apart, preventing her from forming any strong friendships so that she only feels close to one other child, Eitz, the eldest of them. Like her mother, she has no female friendships nor any female figures to look up to, so that she turns to the male gaze — to Schaffa — as superior, and seeks its approval. Deepening her relationship with her mentor, in turn, makes her more and more dependent on him and on his opinion of her. After she discovers the corestone in Schaffa’s neck, he speaks to her harshly, as he had not meant for her to find it out. He even threatens to kill her to keep the secret, yet Nassun does not question it or try to defend herself:

‘You aren’t afraid.’

She shrugs.

‘Tell me why you aren’t.’ His voice brooks no disobedience.

‘Just...’ She cannot help shrugging again. She can’t really figure out how to say it. ‘I don’t... I mean, if you have a good reason?’ (*Obelisk Gate* 156)

Nassun’s incongruous reaction to the possibility that the man she loves like a father could simply choose to murder her shows that she has internalized the violence experienced by orogenes as justifiable or even necessary. Schaffa must have “a good reason”, since he has dealt with orogenes before and knows better; besides, she has seen so much senseless violence — “Daddy didn’t have a reason when he killed my little brother” (157) — that it is comforting to know that there would, at least, be a rationale behind her death. Even as Schaffa himself confesses to having hurt and broken many children in his time at the Fulcrum, she attempts to justify it, showing that her idea of what love is has been warped out of true by both her father’s actions and her own time travelling: “Nassun decides he would not have *meant* it back then, even if he’d done something bad” (*Obelisk Gate* 190), so that she is perfectly willing to put herself in Schaffa’s hands. Secondly, this moment displays just how far her bond to Schaffa has deepened. From this point forward, it is no longer just Nassun projecting her need for a stable parental figure onto Schaffa, but also Schaffa projecting his own needs onto her. Grace Lapointe accurately describes their dynamic thus: “Each ascribes or projects her own feelings onto the other. Each also represents important people the other has lost. Nassun sees Schaffa as

her replacement father. [...] For Schaffa, Nassun represents the generations of orogene children whom he cared for, tried to protect, but abused as a Guardian at the Fulcrum” (“Trauma Bonds”). As Schaffa himself tells Nassun, he is trying to remedy the “great mistake” of having been complicit in the enslavement of orogenes; in other words, he is attempting to redeem himself by being to Nassun what he failed to be for the others. This explains why he behaves so differently with Nassun than with Damaya, something interestingly similar to what Essun was doing with her second son, Uche. She was more affectionate and less severe with him, as a way to make up for her treatment of Nassun: “That never felt right, though, did it? You were gentler with Uche for that reason. And you always meant to apologize to Nassun, later” (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 202). Both adults are thus shown engaging in a futile attempt to redeem themselves through a different child, instead of attempting to make reparations for what they did to the first.

There are yet more disturbing layers to the relationship between Schaffa and Nassun, unavoidable given Schaffa’s cruel nature as a Guardian. He continually takes magic, or “silver”, from Nassun, simply by pressing two fingers to the back of her neck, where her sessapinae are. He does not reveal the reason for this — it relieves the pain the Earth inflicts on him through the corestone — until Nassun finds it out for herself, and often takes the magic surreptitiously, particularly “in moments when they both feel vulnerable”, as he comforts Nassun or sits her in his lap (Lapointe); the first time he does it, Nassun even perceives it as a trespassing, a sort of attack (see Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 123). Though it does not hurt her, it is still an abuse of her trust and something she cannot consent to, yet because Schaffa gives her the affection she so craves, she comes to re-signify this apparent violation as “symbiosis” (*Stone Sky* 132). No symbiosis is possible in a relationship of inequality, however, and Schaffa very clearly holds power over her regardless of whether he chooses to exercise it. Furthermore, he is still clearly full of the unhesitant brutality he showed to Damaya — except he directs it towards others, instead of against Nassun. When Nassun tries to ask him how she can better conceal her orogeny in front of her father — a moment of dramatic irony, since she had tried to get Essun to let her do just the opposite —, Schaffa “looks at her for a long, hard moment, and there is a cold consideration to this look that warns her he’s begun to think of a simple solution to her problem” (*Obelisk Gate* 186). In a way, then, Schaffa also embodies or represents the Earth beyond its sentient presence within his corestone. He is as much a ruthless father figure as Father Earth is, vengeful and quick to anger. And yet, though aware of such cruelty, Nassun decides to think it unintentional or else to justify it, which is easier given that he hardly ever directs this violence towards her. Since he praises her ability and validates her feelings, she has come to believe that Schaffa is the only one capable of loving and accepting her as she is, no matter what happens. This belief is, in no small part, due to the emotional manipulation which Schaffa subjects her to, intentionally or not. During a nightmare, Nassun accidentally connects to one of the obelisks, and her terror combined with its power turns Eitz, who was attempting to wake her, to stone. When Schaffa comes to console her, Nassun calls herself a monster — and he agrees: “‘Perhaps’ Schaffa tells her as she sobs these words. He holds her in his lap again, stroking her thick curls. ‘But you are *my* monster’” (*Obelisk Gate* 198). Here, he concurs with her negative perception of her difference, and agrees that no one else may love her because of it. That is why she is *his*, because only *he* will love her no matter what she does or what she becomes, and Nassun “is so low and horrified that this actually makes her feel better” (*Obelisk Gate* 198). This shows how the process of otherizing can take place through affection, and not only through violence, seizing Nassun’s need “not for another, but for another to want [her]” (Laing et al. 34) as she is, orogeny and all. This need is such that she continues to strive endlessly for Schaffa’s approval, to the point of trusting and valuing his judgement over her own life:

‘And if Schaffa decides you should die?’

‘Then I die.’ That’s what the Fulcrum got wrong, she feels certain. They treated the Guardians as enemies, and maybe they once were [...]. But allies must trust in one another, be vulnerable to one another. Schaffa is the only person in the world who loves Nassun, and Nassun will die, or kill, or remake the world for his sake. (*Obelisk Gate* 277)

This shows how Nassun’s idea of allyship and trust has twisted. She does not realize that this is not an equal relationship, as she is giving Schaffa all the power: he may make the decision that she should die, but *she* would not decide that for him — because her conception of herself as other, as monstrous, ensures that she does not think herself worthy of doing so. Finally, it is in fact for Schaffa’s sake that she begins to sharpen her use of magic: wanting to take the corestone out of his neck, she begins to practice the use of the silver threads in healing animals, and even people at one point. This consistent practice is fundamental for her strength to match and even surpass her mother’s own. In fact, Nassun’s skill grows great enough that she begins to combine magic and orogeny indistinctly, just as her mother is only beginning to learn how to use magic at all. This skill which attracts the attention of the stone eaters, creating yet another parallel with her mother: while Essun has Hoa attached to her, Nassun finds herself being tailed by a particular stone eater whom she refers to as Steel, which finally positions them both as almost exact reflections as their paths begin to align.

In the meantime, Jija has become progressively less and less tolerant of Nassun’s efforts at Found Moon, as her orogeny has not disappeared or even dwindled. He has completely rewritten the story of Uche’s death in his mind, even coming to believe that he killed the child to protect Nassun from him. This “has rewritten Nassun for him as *daughter* and not *rogga*, as if the two can be fissioned from each other somehow” (*Obelisk Gate* 311), a contradiction embodying the split between subject and other in Jija’s mind. He cannot perceive and recognize that this otherness which he abhors and the daughter whom he loves are indissociable from one another. This inability to accept that the difference that marks Nassun as other is an indivisible part of her identity makes him incapable of loving her, not as long as she will not share that rejection of her own difference. Nassun, in a show of insight and empathy, understands the fear that drives Jija, since orogeny has done terrible things to her as well. It was the reason behind her mother’s abuse, the reason why her brother was killed, and has taken from her the father she loved most. In spite of this, and unlike Jija, Nassun can understand that orogeny is intrinsic to who she is, a part of her identity. She cannot help but to love orogeny, not only as part of herself, but also for its own sake: “I like being an orogene, Daddy. [...] I like making things move, and doing the silver, and falling into the obelisks” (*Obelisk Gate* 314). She enjoys this skill and enjoys helping others with its power, even if she cannot forget or forgive herself for the terrible tragedies orogeny has caused. Had she received the same love and acceptance from others, and had others understood the positive aspects of orogeny instead of perceiving only its monstrosity, Nassun would have been able to fully reconfigure her identity as that of a subject. In mutual recognition, as Merleau-Ponty argued, she would have found her identity as orogene reaffirmed by the positive feedback and support of others, just as Essun does in Castrima.

However, the world continually shows Nassun that it is “a terrible thing that she loves herself” (*Obelisk Gate* 314). By the end of the second book, Jija arrives at the barracks where Nassun is living with a knife in his hand. Unable to continue even feigning any affection for her father, Nassun apologizes to him before she reaches for the sapphire obelisk and, rather

spectacularly, shapes it into an enormous blade which runs through Jija and turns him to stone. Hoa, of course, witnesses these events, just as he has been witnessing Nassun's whole journey. He then brings Essun to Jija's remains, where the mother must face the reality of what her daughter has become in her absence — someone much more powerful than herself. Essun “can't even get revenge on him [Jija] for Uche because *your daughter has done that for you*” (*Stone Sky* 170, italics in original), which makes her understand to what extent her actions have shaped Nassun's life. Just as she had wished, Essun made her strong — able to withstand and survive the world's hatred due to her difference —, yet also greatly vulnerable. If Nassun clung to Schaffa, it was because the “conditional, predictable love” of a Guardian was there for her, while “her parents' unconditional love had betrayed her again and again” (*Stone Sky* 168); that is why she was able to forsake Jija, to forsake her mother, because all “fades within the ease of his [Schaffa's] regard” (*Obelisk Gate* 391). If Nassun was capable of killing Jija at all, it was because Essun herself shaped her into a person capable of doing so. In Essun's own words: “*I made her me. Earth eat us both, I made her into me*” (*Stone Sky* 170, italics, bold, and underlining in original).

Thus, the mother/daughter relationship follows the dynamic subject/other, as suggested earlier. Mother and daughter become mirrors to one another in more ways than one: in trying to protect her daughter, Essun inadvertently subjugates her, forcing Nassun to perform as a non-orogene and teaching her to conceal her difference. This reinforces Nassun's self-perception as other, a perception which her father's gaze and which the dominant narratives further perpetuate, so that Nassun comes to hate and resent orogeny as a curse. While becoming more and more similar to her mother is precisely what has kept her alive, it is also what permanently severs their relationship as mother and daughter, as Nassun acquires the self-assurance and stubbornness that once characterized Syenite and firmly refuses her mother's influence just as Essun once escaped Schaffa's. This outcome comes as the inevitable result of the repetition of the cycle of abuse that Essun endured. With her mother's refusal to support and acknowledge Nassun as her equal, she “has found her own, better, protectors. She has found the strength to protect herself” (*Stone Sky* 171), which is exactly what Essun herself was forced to do. As a consequence, however, their ability to relate to others has been severely impaired by their lack of a safe childhood and loving, supportive friendships, so that interpersonal communication cannot take place outside of the abusive parameters which they have been inured to.

It is thus that the mother's experiences are mirrored throughout the daughter's life, the past echoing through the present in a cycle that Nassun herself eventually comes to acknowledge: “The same stories, cycling around and around. The same endings, again and again. The same mistakes eternally repeated” (*Stone Sky* 345).

9.2 NASSUN AS THE ANTAGONIST

As Thomas argued, “[e]verything in our culture, as well as in modern history and contemporary life of the West, demands the positioning of the Dark Other as an antagonist” (28). Given that this narrative position is so closely associated with otherness, Nassun's increasing otherizing — the process of self-loathing and progressive isolation which the society and people around her consistently reinforce — ends up making her into the story's antagonist, or something analogous to it. Unlike the dark other as Thomas conceives it, the one who is “*always already there*” (29, italics in original) meant to occupy the position of the “archetypal monster” (70), Nassun does not occupy this position from the beginning; her construction as something akin to an antagonist is a gradual transformation in this case, yet nevertheless inseparable from the aforementioned process of otherizing. It is the conception of herself, and others like herself, as ‘other’ that ends up making her position diametrically opposite to that of her mother, the heroine.

After losing her father, Nassun loses the very last of her connections to the world beyond Schaffa, save for her mother, whom Nassun has completely rejected by now. She refuses to even consider returning to Essun, partly out of resentment for the treatment received from her, and partly due to having found, in Schaffa, a parental figure who supplies her affective needs in the ways her mother could not. Beyond this lack of supportive relationships around her, the fact that she was forced to kill Jija herself, even in self-defence, is inevitably a source of intense grief that worsens the impact of the loss over her psyche. The mother-daughter relationship truncated, and the father-daughter relationship forced into this tragic end, leave Nassun alone and in a strongly vulnerable state, which Steel, the stone-eater, does not hesitate to prey on. He shifts the blame of these tragedies onto her, intensifying the nihilistic impulse to end this cycle of suffering: “You’ll kill everything you love, eventually. Your mother. Schaffa. All your friends here in Found Moon. No way around it. [...] No way... except one” (*Obelisk Gate* 390). Nassun does not question Steel’s ulterior motives, too heartbroken to consider him anything but right. After all, the orogeny she loves has proven itself to be a deadly curse on herself and all that she holds dear: “She’s a monster. But there must be a way for her monstrosity to be contained. For the threat of an orogene’s existence to be ended” (*Obelisk Gate* 390). Since it is impossible to exist as other without hurting people, or without being hurt in turn, the only possible answer is to put a stop to everything — to die, and hence finally become fully non-existent, erased from subjecthood. And this way, as Steel presents it, is to return the Moon to the Earth, though not exactly by restoring it to its former orbit, as Alabaster wished. It is implied that what Steel wants is for Nassun to smash the Moon into the Earth itself: “It will end the Seasons. It will end every season. And yet... what you’re feeling right now, you need never feel again. No one will ever suffer again” (*Obelisk Gate* 391). The enormity of this power, one that might enable her to destroy the Earth itself, makes Nassun understand, “suddenly, why Father Earth wants her dead” (*Obelisk Gate* 391). Yet she cannot help but be tempted by the possibility of putting an end to this seemingly unending cycle of suffering that she has both witnessed and experienced throughout these past years. Again, destruction is presented as the ultimate equalizer — the only thing that will make people understand what she has gone through, and the only thing able to stop it. She thus consents to journeying to Corepoint, a *deadciv* city on the other side of the planet, where she may find the technology that will help her open the Obelisk Gate and carry the task through. It is thus that Nassun begins the same quest as her mother, yet reversed, with their goals in direct opposition to one another. It is thus arguable that Nassun now occupies the traditional position of the antagonist, the enemy working directly against the hero — the heroine, in this case — to destroy the world. The antagonistic quest here mirrors the heroine’s journey, both sharing a similar goal yet a diametrically opposite end.

However, the archetypal fantasy antagonist is often a person or creature with few or no personal characteristics and no redeeming qualities, an incarnation of ethical evil as part of the “dynamic opposition” that drives the fantasy (see Clute 422). Readers are not meant to empathize or in any way identify with the antagonist, which is why the dark other is so often placed in this position, so as to sustain its otherness and prevent any affective relationship with it from developing. Instead, readers are positioned alongside the hero — or heroine, as in this case — and, by this positioning, encouraged to root for their success. Jemisin, however, complicates this traditional dualistic, good-and-evil structure by having Hoa narrate from Nassun’s position, as well as Essun’s. Though the use of third person pronouns suggests a certain distance with respect to Nassun — which makes sense, given that Hoa is meant to incarnate Essun’s point of view —, the focalization is still very much at work throughout Nassun’s chapters. Her feelings and thought processes are revealed in detail, as seen, for

instance, throughout the chapters during which she must navigate her newly frail, dangerous relationship with Jija:

His hands are still shaking—less now? Nassun cannot tell. She starts to feel uncertain; is he angry? [...] Nassun wants to touch her father’s shaking hand, but she finds herself oddly reluctant to do so. She isn’t sure why—fear? Maybe just because this man is so much a stranger, and she has always been shy of strangers. (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 79)

[... W]hat she sees in his eyes right now is something entirely different from love.

Her heart breaks in this moment. Another small, quiet tragedy, amid so many others. (*Obelisk Gate* 83)

In this way, the use of the third-person narration makes it seem as if the reader was bearing witness to the events alongside Hoa himself, yet the focalized account of Nassun’s inner monologue throughout also creates the illusion that the reader is going through these experiences with Nassun herself. This helps eliminate any sense of fetishization, or of appealing to “sodomasochistic appetites” (Keen 47), that may be argued from the depiction of the child’s experiences of suffering and abuse — since the reader is made to feel *with* Nassun, and not voyeuristically *through* her. The fact that she is a child undoubtedly contributes to this sense of narrative empathy: she is innocent, at least when the tale begins, and quite at the mercy of the adults in her environment, dependent on them for care and protection as well as for affection. This vulnerability invites a certain protectiveness, enhanced by the narrative perspective: since Hoa has been narrating through Essun, and hence inviting the reader to identify with her point of view, Essun’s motherly feelings for the child are also projected into the reading.

In this way, the creation of narrative empathy makes Nassun a sympathetic character despite her position as the antagonist. Her experiences of rejection and violence, added to the extreme survival conditions of the Season, have led Nassun to believe that her monstrosity can never be overlooked nor forgiven; that, however much good she can do using her orogeny, it will inevitably be outweighed by the pain and death which it also causes. This becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy: the general belief that orogenes are inherently evil leads to systemic hatred and violence against them, a system which instils this belief in orogenes themselves, until their self-perception — and hence their actions — progressively alter to fit with these widespread beliefs. They model themselves after what the gaze seeks in them and, in the absence of better choices, they become exactly what they are feared to be. This pigeonholing becomes especially evident to Nassun, who grew up with everyone believing her to be an ordinary, still child and, as such, interpellated and interacted with as a subject worthy of love. It is her desire to end these repeated injustices at any cost, a desire that comes as the consequence of the process of otherizing and the subsequent violences she has undergone, which ultimately creates her antagonistic intent:

‘It isn’t right that people want me to be bad or strange or evil, that they *make* me bad... [...] I just want to be ordinary! But I’m not and—and everybody, a lot of people, all *hate* me because I’m not ordinary. You’re [Schaffa] the only person who doesn’t hate me for... for being what I am. [...] There should be a—a fix. It isn’t right that there’s no *end* to it.’

‘But do you mean to impose a fix, little one?’ Schaffa asks. [...] ‘Or an end?’

‘I don’t know how to fix it. [...] I wouldn’t fix it. Not even if I knew how.’
(Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 87-89)

Her refusal to ‘fix’ the situation and her turn towards destruction does not seem as evil or unforgivable as it might when coming from a stereotypical antagonist, because the sense of narrative empathy that has been built up achieves an *understanding* of Nassun’s motivations. Narrative empathy encourages what Henze called “imaginative identification”: the readers understand that their experience is not equivalent to that of the character, but they do recognize it as “like that of others” (Henze 241), meaning that the empathic response encourages a shift in the readers’ orientation that makes Nassun’s experience accessible to them. However quickly she has matured, Nassun is still a child, afraid and desperate for connection, overburdened by the hatred and abuse she has both endured and witnessed. These feelings can be recognized by the readers as explanations to her actions, so that this sense of empathy is crucial to understanding the destruction of the world from Nassun’s perspective — as necessary, or even beneficial, instead of ethical evil as it initially appears to be. To those who are suffering, an end to that suffering seems a mercy, even if it means death; this ethical quandary is strikingly similar to Corundum’s death, which was framed by Essun as mercy, the final act of love she could give him. Furthermore, Nassun’s current position is not so different from Alabaster’s: he decimated millions of lives for the sake of producing systemic change, even if by forceful, violent means. However, Alabaster’s and Essun’s rage was useful to fuel their respective acts of defiance because they could recognize the injustices around them as such. Nassun, on the contrary, has interiorized the blame placed on her and on orogenes as a whole, so that she comes to think that these atrocities happen because orogenes somehow deserve them. Her act of destruction is not a gateway to something better, like Alabaster’s, but a full stop: “I *wouldn’t* fix it, Schaffa, I wouldn’t, I’m sorry, I don’t *want* to fix it I want to *kill everybody that hates me— [...] I want it all GONE, Schaffa! I want it to BURN, I want it burned up and dead and gone, gone, NOTHING l-l-left, no more hate and no more killing just nothing*” (*Stone Sky* 90, italics in original). This distraught, desperate anger cannot sustain an act of rebellion because it lacks the necessary “reserves of hope” (Chabot Davis 404). It cannot go beyond retribution, the ultimate equalizer that will end all suffering — and all joy — in the world, which Steel uses to manipulate Nassun: the destruction of the world, he makes her believe, will be as much an end to her own pain as to everyone else’s, and it will be for the best if nothing at all is left of this warped, hateful world (see Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 90).

It is through the depiction of this fraught internal life, and the empathic response which it produces, that the traditional fantastic antagonist becomes a complex figure worthy of compassion and understanding. The good and evil binary is thus never clearly defined, especially since Nassun is not the only major antagonist of the tale. Until Steel’s intervention, which steers Nassun towards her ill-fated quest, the main enemy of the tale was the Earth itself — the Evil Earth. Such an epithet encapsulates its perception in the eyes of humankind, since, as explained earlier, the Earth summons the Seasons in endless attempts to destroy, to obliterate humankind. Of course, unlike Nassun, the Earth is not a human, helpless child that is easy to empathize with, so that it fits much more closely with the archetypal idea of a powerful, impersonal, one-dimensional antagonist. And yet, as explained in chapter 8 and much as it happens in Nassun’s case, the narrative *does* after a certain point begin to offer the Earth’s perspective, so that the reader comes to understand that its all-consuming wrath was not, in fact, unprovoked. As discussed in previous chapters, humankind abused the Earth’s gifts and caused it enormous pain, as well as taking away its child, the Moon, so that the parallel between the exploitation of

the Earth and that suffered by orogenes becomes evident. There is a scene where Nassun and Schaffa use a deadciv transportation system, in appearance similar to a high-speed train, that will take them to Corepoint; because the city is on the opposite pole of the planet, they must travel through the Earth's very core, the volcanic nucleus at its centre. Inevitably, Father Earth's attention is brought directly upon them, and when he addresses Nassun, his voice seems to impress upon the child its memories — the grudges he bears for the wrongs and injustices he was subjected to, which is how Nassun is led to realize that the humans who built the obelisks and the technological marvels whose ruins she has seen were not “so very different, really, from the people who run the Fulcrums, [...] or her father” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 248), because “where they should have seen a living being, they saw only another thing to exploit. Where they should have asked or left alone, they raped” (*Stone Sky* 248). This evidences how the narratives of objectification and otherizing have remained the same throughout the centuries, throughout societies and individuals; there is also a noticeable echo of the parallel between woman and nature here, as both are exploited, “raped”.

In light of these revelations, Nassun cannot help but feel a sense of kinship with the Earth's suffering, which so much resembles her own:

It [the Earth] did not start this war, but it will rusting well *have. Its. Due.*

And oh. Does Nassun not understand this? [...] Can she not empathize?

For the world has taken so much from her. She had a brother once. And a father, and a mother [...]. And a home, and dreams. The people of the Stillness have long since robbed her of childhood and any hope of a real future, and because of this she is so angry that she cannot think beyond THIS MUST STOP and I WILL STOP IT—

—so does she not resonate with the Evil Earth's wrath, herself? (*Stone Sky* 248-249, italics in original)

This newfound parallel extends the readers' empathy to both of the narrative's antagonistic figures: the Earth's perspective fuses with Nassun's, and as she comes to understand its perspective, so does the reader, thus achieving an understanding of both — and hence of the wish to exterminate humanity, which has perpetrated such evils. This may even lead readers to hope for Nassun's success, for these figures deserve some success, some relief, after having suffered long enough to become evil in the eyes of the world. Despite this understanding, however, the Earth remains hostile to Nassun, as he knows the child intends to destroy him — not only the humans. In a bid to stop her, then, Father Earth seizes Schaffa's corestone and uses it as a torture device, causing him unbearable pain that ends in what, at all practical effects, may be called lobotomy: “Everyone breaks, if torture goes on for long enough. The mind bears the unbearable by going elsewhere. Nassun is ten years old, going on a hundred, but she has seen enough of the world's evil to know this. Her Schaffa. Has gone away. And might never, ever come back” (*Stone Sky* 249).

The last supportive figure that Nassun had in her life is thus taken from her, leaving Nassun in total isolation. Though Schaffa is rendered unable to speak or move, the child still refuses to abandon him and painstakingly carries him into the long-abandoned living facilities of Corepoint. As Nassun becomes Schaffa's caretaker, she spends a length of time in a stage that may very well be identified with Thomas' haunting: she is alive, but not quite living, trapped in the helpless cycle of the daily processes of keeping Schaffa and herself clean and fed, while she — seemingly to no avail — researches a way, any way, of helping him. There is no one to

help her; stone eaters can be seen around Corepoint, but they do not speak to Nassun, so that this period of isolation impacts her mental health for the worse. After all, “there is no isolated individual person” (Laing et al. 27) — the self can only exist in interaction with others, so that this extended lack of intersubjective communication threatens to obliterate Nassun’s sense of self entirely. Though she proves a capable carer thanks to both her previous experience and her personal diligence, she is far too young for the role. It is easy, watching Nassun’s mature behaviours and impressive insight, for readers to forget that she remains a child of barely ten years old by the time the trilogy ends:

Until now, some part of her has nursed the irrational hope that Steel, as an adult, had all the answers, including some sort of cure [for Schaffa]. Now she knows that her hope has been foolish. Childish. She *is* a child. And now the only adult she has ever been able to rely on will die naked and hurt and helpless, without ever being able to say goodbye. (*Stone Sky* 309)

The dismissiveness implicit in the word ‘childish’ is thus instantly resignified — she *is* a child, and every adult in her life has failed to protect her. This is where readers understand, if they had not by now, that Nassun depended so much on Schaffa not just because she attached herself to his affections, but also because he was an adult — one she could respect and one she felt protected by. Distraught by the state of him, it eventually occurs to Nassun that the solution may be for Schaffa to become a stone eater. That way, he would not grow old any longer, and would be able to continue living without ever experiencing pain. Nassun knows the Obelisk Gate is powerful enough to achieve this transformation, but her experiments with the obelisks also make her understand that it will not work at such a small scale. If she “makes Schaffa into a stone eater... every human being on the planet will change in the same manner. [...] All the world will become like Corepoint” (*Stone Sky* 304), cities full of still images of once-humans that can no longer behave or live as such.

This does not seem like such a terrible outcome, at first; after all, she had already determined to bring the Moon crashing into the Earth. For humanity to persist, even as stone eaters, might seem a preferable circumstance, and certainly fitting to stonelore’s valuation of survival above all else. What makes this possibility attractive to Nassun, however, is the fact that with humanity in such a state “there will be no more orogenes and stills. No more children to die, no more fathers to murder them. The Seasons could come and go, and they wouldn’t matter. No one would starve to death ever again” (*Stone Sky* 304). With the existing power dynamics thus altered, the cycle of abuse would, theoretically, end, consequently creating the better world imagined by Essun and Alabaster — if not in the way they had envisioned. However, the cost of such a transformation quickly proves too high, as Steel’s reasons for wishing the world to end are revealed as not so different from Nassun’s own. Stone eaters, like Guardians, are functionally immortal, since their life cycle is tied to that of Father Earth himself; they are both trapped in a stagnant state, unable to grow and change and experience the world as they did as regular humans. Yet it is possible for a Guardians to die, if their corestones are removed, whereas stone eaters — as they are made of raw magic, shaped into stone — will survive anything that happens to them, and their bodies simply reform over time. Steel himself is “forty thousand years old [...]. Give or take a few millenia” (*Stone Sky* 307), and the glimpses he gives Nassun of this immortal life are far from the ideal, peaceful stretch of years that the child first envisioned. “Imagine”, Steel says, “[w]atching everyone you know and care about die. Watching your home die, and having to find a new one—again, and again, and again. Imagine

never daring to get close to another person. Never having friends, because you'll outlive them" (306). Furthermore, to turn Schaffa into a stone eater may punish him more so than save him, because it is likely that using the Gate will cause Nassun to die — and Nassun is the only person who has ever truly and unreservedly loved him. As Steel warns her,

‘[W]hatever you do, Schaffa will lose you. He’ll lose the one thing that has kept him human throughout the Earth’s efforts to devour his will. He’ll find no one new to love, either—not here. [...] So whether he heals somehow, or you change him into one of my kind, he will have no choice but to go on, alone, endlessly yearning for what he will never again have. [...] You have no idea what that’s like.’

And then, suddenly, shockingly, he is right in front of Nassun. No blurring, no warning, just flick and he is *there* [...]. ‘**BUT I DO**,’ he shouts. (*Stone Sky* 307-308, bold in the original)

This is the first time a stone eater shows such perceivable emotion by raising his voice, which frightens Nassun; given the general imperturbability of stone eaters, a fate capable of making one show this much feeling is certainly something to be reckoned with. Steel is here projecting his own experience over that of every stone eater, yet his point of view should not be dismissed: it shows that immortality is not the liberating blessing it appears to be, as it comes fraught with its own kind of suffering. After all, Father Earth had meant it as a punishment. It also further confirms — though Hoa’s very presence already suggested it — that stone eaters are not exempt from human feelings, and crave the company and love of others. Their immortality involves suffering not only because it is an unfathomable state of existence which distances them from their identity as human (and deprives them from the bodily experience of interpersonal communication), but also because it involves losing everything and everyone that they cared about. Being forced to acknowledge this places Nassun back where she started, deprived of options and by now completely bereft of love, consumed by the utter loneliness of Corepoint — populated only by seemingly unfeeling, unresponsive stone eaters who care nothing for her presence. This is why she finally determines to go through with her initial plan and drag the Moon to its collision course, which has become the more merciful choice after Steel’s intervention: “Some things *are* too broken to be fixed, Schaffa. [...] I can’t make anything better. But I can at least make sure the bad things stop” (*Stone Sky* 345). If there is no way to save Schaffa, then she would rather allow everything to die, as nothing else about the world is worth saving. This again proves that Nassun’s destructive impulse comes as a consequence of her process of othering: cut off from all other options — unable to either acquiesce to the oppressive system or to fight to change it —, she cannot bear suffering any longer, and decides to grant the world the only mercy she knows.

Yet Father Earth “wants to live” (*Stone Sky* 369), and knows exactly how to make Nassun reconsider her decision. Showing an aptitude for manipulation, Father Earth commands Schaffa’s body into the underbody of Corepoint — the under-city of Warrant, where Guardians are made and slumber between Seasons. There, it coaxes Schaffa into one of the machines, which removes the corestone from his neck. He recovers, becoming able to move and speak again, yet Nassun — thanks to her awareness of the magic within him — realizes that he is, nonetheless, dying. “He could last a few weeks or months, perhaps as much as a year”, but without “his corestone, as he warned her, he will not last long” (*Stone Sky* 368), as his body resents his years of immortality and begins to quickly age out. Yet now, with him conscious and

free from the Earth's control, back to the Schaffa she cherished, Nassun has a reason to wish for the world to continue existing. This gesture is, of course, blackmail — yet the child is innocent, despite her maturity beyond her years, and will cling to any possibility that Schaffa might be happy after all:

Now he is free, the Earth taunts by this wordless gesture. Now he can have peace without death. And if you want him to live, little enemy, there is only one way.

Steel never said that it couldn't be done, only that it shouldn't. Maybe Steel is wrong. Maybe, as a stone eater, Schaffa won't be lonely and sad forever. Steel is mean and awful, which is why no one wants to be with him. But Schaffa is good and kind. Surely he will find someone else to love.

Especially if all the world is stone eaters, too. (*Stone Sky* 369)

These justifications seem childish, but, again, Nassun *is* a child. For all her experience of the world's hardship, she needs to reassure herself that it would not, in truth, be such a terrible outcome as Steel warned her. She needs this reassurance because it is unbearable, now that Schaffa has a chance to live on, to think of ending the world — and to not commit to either outcome, to continue suffering, is no longer an option. It is no wonder, either, that it is easy for Nassun to judge Schaffa's life to be more valuable than the world which has continuously turned its back on her, and violated everything she has ever held dear: "Humanity, she decides, is a small price to pay for Schaffa's future" (*Stone Sky* 369).

It is at this point that the trilogy reaches its climax, as Essun finally makes it to Corepoint and must fight against her daughter's power for control of the Obelisk Gate.

9.3 NASSUN AS THE HEROINE: BREAKING THE CYCLE

When they first meet after so many months of separation, Essun instantly tries to reach out to her daughter — yet it is an awkward, futile attempt, with an abortive reaching of her hand for some sort of physical contact which Nassun remains unresponsive to. Her daughter's calm and collected demeanour make it so that Essun hardly recognizes her; both Nassun and her skill have grown, so that Essun begins to realize just how much she no longer needs her mother. Nassun, for her part, understands her mother "better now than ever before in her life" (*Stone Sky* 373), as she now knows what Essun had been trying to protect her from: "She's seen a Fulcrum, and the ways in which it warped its inmates. She remembers how you used to go stiff, just the way you are now, at even a glimpse of the color burgundy", that of the Guardians' uniforms (372). Even though Nassun knows, now, why her mother acted the way she did towards Jija and herself, and even though she has learned how cold and abusive Schaffa was to Essun, he is still "the man who protected her [...], who soothed her when she was afraid, tucked her into bed at night. She has seen him fight his own brutal nature, and the Earth itself, in order to be the parent that she needs. He has helped her learn to love herself for what she is", everything which her mother could not do (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 373). And now, this moment of reunion is proof that it did, indeed, matter that Essun was not able, as a parent, to meet her daughter's affective needs; though her teachings are undoubtedly much of what ensured Nassun's survival, they are also the very reason why her attempts to reach out to her daughter at this critical point are futile. In the time they have spent apart, Nassun has grown past her mother's influence. Due to the impact of systemic oppression, "there can be no relationship, no trust" between mother and daughter, "because the two of you are what the Stillness and the Season have made you" (*Stone*

Sky 373): they were both silenced, and hence unable to communicate, to mutually recognize one another as subjects. They needed secrecy to stay safe, so that orogeny could never be resignified in their perceptions; and they cannot recognize their experiences as similar, enter “imaginative identification” (Henze 241), until it is already too late for it to have a positive impact at all.

It is thus that Nassun’s rejection of her mother’s overtures positions them into opposing sides, with Nassun unable to trust the mother that set her on the path to become who she is, and Essun unable to allow her daughter to make the choices that will unmake her. There is, however, a crucial difference between the Essun that raised Nassun and the Essun that comes to Corepoint to retrieve the Moon. Nassun’s mother was the same person who felt “a kind of cold, monstrous love” when her son Corundum was threatened: a “determination to make sure your son’s life remained the beautiful, wholesome thing that it had been up to that day, even if it meant you had to end his life early” (Jemisin, *Obelisk Gate* 105). This same kind of “monstrous love” is what drove her mercilessness towards Nassun, a determination to see her daughter live at any cost. If Essun had not changed during the time she spent at Castrima, if she had not learned to be vulnerable and to give back the love and support she receives, that same determination would have kept her from Nassun now, as she would have tried to impose her will over her daughter’s. But what drives her now is the love she feels for others, the love she has learned to feel for the world and for her daughter — and what leads her to attempt to wrestle control of the Gate from Nassun’s hands is, fundamentally, “a driving need to make the world better” (*Stone Sky* 381). While Essun has been able to change in this way, Nassun has undergone the opposite evolution, so that their confrontation is at its core a mother’s hopefulness against a daughter’s hopelessness. It is then that Nassun, in the midst of opening the Gate for her own ends, hesitates: the power coursing through her heightens her awareness, extending it to a reach far beyond herself. The supernatural enhancement of her perception means that she can perceive her position accurately, which makes it impossible not to see beyond her own selfish wants, or to continue deluding herself into the fantasy of a family which she built for herself and Schaffa:

Impossible not to understand that Nassun has known Schaffa for barely more than a year, and does not truly *know* him, given how much of himself he has lost. Impossible not to realize that she clings to him because she has nothing else—

But through her determination, there is a glimmer of doubt in her mind. It is nothing more than that. [...] But it whispers, *Do you really have nothing else?*

Is there not one person in this world besides Schaffa who cares about you?

(*Stone Sky* 382, italics in original)

After all, her mother has come for her, despite everything; Essun followed her trail for years, to the very ends of the Earth, and even now is willing to risk herself for Nassun’s sake, to take the cost of using the Gate upon herself so that Nassun will not have to. This is the demonstrable, physical show of love which Nassun had been craving all along, and which Essun is now able to express. And yet, their goals still differ in ways impossible to reconcile; though they are both driven by love — “you for her, and she for Schaffa” (*Stone Sky* 383) —, this is still “a battle for the fate of the world” (384). This face-off is a clear re-enactment of the epic culmination of the quest, the ultimate battle of good against evil, of protagonist or hero against antagonist. It echoes the hero facing “the ultimate enemy — a figure that represents his dark side, his evil and submerged half”, but turns the metaphorical “war with the father figure” (Estelle Frankel 2-3) into a rather more literal confrontation between mother and daughter. This

is thus not a confrontation between heroine and antagonist, nor with a stifling, abstract male figure, but a direct confrontation of Nassun against her mother, who shaped her daughter after herself. Essun reaches for the onyx obelisk and for the life force within the Guardians, dormant at Warrant below them, to fuel her power; Nassun extends her awareness to every obelisk in existence to drive her will forward. As they both harness impossible, world-shifting powers, the battle for control grows to be of increasingly epic proportions:

The titanic energies of the Gate, of the Rifting, whip and shiver around you both in a cylindrical aurora borealis of energies and colors [...]. It is the onyx and the Rifting versus the Gate, you against her, and all Corepoint trembles with the sheer force of it all [...]. But for either of you to achieve your respective goals, you will need to claim both Gate and onyx, and the additional fuel that the Rifting provides. (*Stone Sky* 384)

This battle, echoing traditional epic fantasy, does not take place between enemies or clear-cut forces of evil and good, but between a mother and a daughter touched by tragedy, who cannot help but love one another despite their many confrontations and resentments. This generally straightforward structure of the battle of good and evil is further complicated by how Hoa's narrative voice dissects the scene from both points of view, showing both Nassun's and Essun's thoughts. This moment encapsulates the complexity of the plot and morals in the narrative, since the readers are encouraged to root for both women for different reasons — and led to hope for a resolution that will reconcile these conflicting interests. With the powers of mother and daughter evenly matched, the stalemate progresses until the energy running through Nassun's body begins the process of crystallization — of turning her body to stone, as Essun's own is. Though her mother is terrified for her, Nassun does not react; she knew that this would happen, and, as determined (or stubborn) as her mother is, "is prepared for the inevitability of her own death" (*Stone Sky* 385).

Essun, however, is not. Unwilling to watch another of her children die, she makes the choice that only her personal growth has made possible: she gives up, relinquishing full control of the Gate to her daughter and allowing the excess power to turn her body completely to stone. This pivotal moment should, by all accounts, seem completely hopeless: the major heroine of the story, unlike the heroes of high fantasy who fight to the very last, has simply surrendered, the fate of the world no longer in her hands. She gives up both the quest and her own life, becoming "a brown sandstone lump frozen on the lower steps" (*Stone Sky* 386). No one else can wield enough power to even attempt to stop Nassun, so that the hopes and dreams of a better world which Alabaster had passed on to Essun are now dying along with her: "I ache with the look on your face, because I know what it costs you to give up Alabaster's dream—and your own. You so wanted to make a better world for Nassun" (*Stone Sky* 385). Her daughter is left full control, free reign to condemn the world to a joyless immortal life if she sees so fit. The balance has tipped, and the heroine has lost the battle — and yet, this act is never depicted as a tragic sacrifice, or a quick resolution to remove Essun's presence from the story. Nor is it conducive to what Thomas called haunting, leading to a "present-absence" (27) unto which the narrative's conflicts may be displaced. It is, as such, not part of the dark fantastic cycle, but a moment of fulfilment — of emancipation, to continue borrowing Thomas' words. As she is dying, with the last of her strength, Essun *smiles* with overflowing love and motherly pride:

Your little girl. So big, here beneath the onyx and the Moon. So powerful. So beautiful. And you cannot help it: You burst into tears at the sight of her. You

laugh, though one of your lungs has gone to stone and it's only a soft wheeze instead. So rusting amazing, your little girl. You are proud to lose to her strength.
(*Stone Sky* 386)

The significance of this moment is heightened by the fact that this is the first smile she has given her daughter — “You have never, ever smiled at her before” (386) —, because this is also the first time she has truly seen her. Looking at her daughter now, Essun exercises mutual recognition, hailing Nassun as a communicative, agential subject. This, and her acceptance of defeat in such a selfless, self-sacrificing way, is not something Essun could have done before this moment. Not as Syenite, when she would have been too proud or too stubborn to surrender; nor could she have done it as the Essun she was before, who would have tried to force her daughter into submission, believing that she knows what is best. Now, however, “more than anything else, you want this last child of yours to *live...*” (*Stone Sky* 385, italics in original), so that prioritizing Nassun’s survival no longer involves instilling in her the fear and caution of the oppressed, but to allow her the agency to make her own choices. Essun thus places her trust and her hopes with her child, entrusting her with the Gate to remake the world as she sees fit, as will make her happiest — even if it is not what Essun herself would have chosen, or wanted, for her.

It is this act of true, selfless love that changes Nassun’s mind. Grief-stricken at the sight of her mother’s lifeless body, nihilism threatens to overtake the child, robbed of everything that she could possibly have to hold on to: “there is nothing, *nothing* inside her, she has killed her father and she has killed her mother and Schaffa is dying and there is nothing left, nothing, the world just takes and takes and takes from her and leaves *nothing*” (*Stone Sky* 387, italics in original). Still, in her distress, Nassun notices how her mother’s face is streaked with tears, yet frozen in a smile. Even as she died, Essun was proud and full of love, and she was “reaching for the Moon. [...] And for her” (387), for Nassun herself. Essun loved her daughter enough to give up the goal that she had inherited from her mentor, the goal that she suffered, and turned to stone, and travelled to the other side of the world for. Giving up is here an act of love, for she sacrificed herself for Nassun to live, and an act of trust, for she allowed her daughter the choice instead of imposing her own will, as she had always done before. Thus, the extension of empathy and of love towards Nassun is what touches her, and what seals the Earth’s fate, as Nassun becomes able to extend the same empathy and love from her mother to the rest of the world: “Open the Gate, pour the Rifting’s power through it, catch the Moon. End the Seasons. Fix the world. This, Nassun senses-feels-knows, was your last wish” (*Stone Sky* 387). Only upon recovering her sense of love, and of hope, can Nassun take up Essun’s quest and carry it through; in so doing, she becomes the heroine of the story in turn, “the champion not of things become but of things becoming” (Campbell 311), as she creates a new status quo from which to begin building a new future.

This is the moment of eucatastrophe, the third essential feature of fantasy: with Nassun’s restoration of the Moon comes the restoration of hope after suffering by breaking both cycles — the cycle of abuse that had begun with Hoa and his companions, so many centuries ago, and the dark fantastic cycle. Restoring the Moon is not by any means a fix to everything wrong, nor an end to all evil: the Season is still ongoing, as are the prejudices against orogenes, and both will likely remain rampant for a long time to come, even when the Fulcrums are gone and the Moon restored. However, Father Earth’s fury is placated enough for the stone eaters to renegotiate an accord with it, ensuring that the Seasons will end. This, in itself, is a promise for a future, as an end to the constant natural disasters will enable humanity to build societies beyond the sole goal of survival, without needing to rely completely on stonelore to structure

their societies and culture. Furthermore, as Essun had wished, Nassun lives on, embodying hope for the future even after tremendous grief — and she must grieve, both her mother’s passing and Schaffa’s, who goes a few months after the retrieval of the Moon. The happy ending, as Tolkien would have it, “does not deny the existence of *dyscatastrophe*, of sorrow and failure” (75, italics in original). Nassun, and the rest of the world, will undoubtedly have to endure more suffering. Ironically, she is especially hesitant to hope precisely because the Seasons are over: without them, the power of orogenes will no longer be essential, or even helpful, and as Nassun herself puts it, “People killed us and hated us when they *needed* us. Now we don’t even have that” (*Stone Sky* 395, italics in original). However, Nassun is (understandably) missing the point here. The narratives in place encouraged and sustained the otherness of orogenes because it was necessary to ensure that they would “submit freely to the commandments of the Subject” (Althusser 56) — in this case, of the Fulcrum and the government it answered to, making sure orogeny would remain in control of those with the most power. Now, though, as Hoa points out, there are no more Guardians and no more Fulcrums. With the long-standing, society-wide ideological apparatuses of oppression no longer in place, all that remains is ill-founded prejudice and fear in the general population, so that orogenes are free to reconstruct and resignify their position. It would, in fact, be easy for orogenes to conquer or even eliminate stills altogether, should they so choose, with no Guardians to stop them — which was also the reason why they were subjugated in the first place. Yet it would be equally easy, it is implied, for them to impose a different fix. Though Nassun recoils at the thought of further violence, which would again perpetuate the wrong cycles, there is no denying that orogeny is power — and those with power have the capacity to remake the world as they see fit, as Nassun herself has already done. Even so, Nassun reaches no definitive answer as to what ought to be done; with humankind having become trapped in the prior social order, it has come to seem natural — almost inevitable — that someone needs to suffer for the world to function. Once again, it is Hoa who bluntly disagrees: having already gone through and escaped systemic oppression himself, he knows that there is no such thing as an inevitable oppression. The “[i]mprisonment of orogenes was never the only option for ensuring the safety of society. [...] All of these were choices. Different choices have always been possible” (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 395). Oppression was never a predetermined, essential, immutable truth, but a series of social and individual choices; this demystifies the narrative of oppression by revealing its constructed nature, and hence making it *deconstructable*. If coexistence has always been a viable option, Nassun need only start to put in the work to make everyone else see that. Though it will take years and much work to undo existing prejudice and unravel the wake of the Fulcrums, by making new choices, a more equal society that can function without necessitating the oppression of any group of people can be made.

Where survival was the major focus and goal throughout the trilogy, given both the extreme environmental conditions and the oppressive systems in place, the focus now turns to life — to building and re-building a world where it is possible to live and not just survive. Nassun is the incarnation of these hopes, and this goal, to slowly make the world a better place: the world-ending antagonist has been redeemed through its choice to use its power to renew and restore the world, rather than destroy it. She has become a liberated subject who sets out to redefine her identity in the eyes of the world as well as her own. In a way, both she and her mother have fulfilled the heroine’s journey as Murdock envisioned it: they retrieve “affiliation and community; [...] the positive, strong nurturing qualities of the feminine that have been missing from this culture” (125), and use this encounter to change the world for the better. Nassun thus represents the future, a new generation of people willing to change, to deconstruct the

oppressive patterns that have thus far ruled over human relationships; to create communities that thrive in coexistence, mutual empathy, and mutual care. And she will no longer be alone to face such an endeavour: Essun's hard-earned friends are there to support her, and furthermore, in a quintessential "Consolation of the Happy Ending" (Tolkien 75), Essun herself will be there. Having been reborn to the immortal existence of a stone-eater, Essun is revealed to be the audience which Hoa was narrating this tale to. This explains why the narration works in the way that it does, and why Essun cannot be the one to tell her own story: the transformation is a rebirth in the purest sense of the word, and has caused her to forget all of her previous memories of herself and her loved ones. Unlike the wilful forgetting she carried out each time she changed her name, this is true loss, as though those memories belonged to someone truly other than who she is now. This forgetting is a tragedy, in a sense, given that it entails the loss of her identity; however, it is also a chance to re-learn her own life from an outside perspective. This is why Hoa is telling her the story of her different selves as if they were different people, showing stone-eater Essun how humans constantly reinvent themselves. This is also why he includes every person that was ever important to Essun, everyone that was "part of you" (*Stone Sky* 230, 311, 393, 396), as they were crucial to shape the person that she eventually became. Thus, in a metafictional exercise, readers find out that Essun has been listening — within the fiction — to the same tale that they, in primary reality, have been reading this whole time.

While this is an attempt on Hoa's part to bring the Essun he knows and loves back into the world after her rebirth, he is not necessarily attempting to force her back into becoming that person, or to shape her identity in any specific way: "From here on, you may become whomever you wish. It's just that you need to know where you've come from to know where you're going" (*Stone Sky* 397), meaning that this is a chance to rebuild but also to remake the self. This is strongly reminiscent of conceptions of identity as rooted in memory, but also crucially reminds us that the narrative identity of an individual is built from and crucially dependent on relationality: "[A] person is herself, and others" (*Obelisk Gate* 1). The fantastic premise of this rebirth as an immortal, ageless creature also reframes the Black, female body in new terms. It allows a distance from one's own trauma, and hence a new healing process through the re-evaluation of previously lived experiences that gives Essun the choice of *how* she wants to evolve and in what direction she wants to move forward from this knowledge — rather than simply reacting to and surviving through the traumatic events that shaped her. If she so wished, she could reinvent herself entirely, as she has done many times before. Yet having listened to the story of the memories and experiences that made up her previous self, Essun reflects for a moment and finally tells Hoa: "I want the world to be better", which is, in turn, how Hoa realizes that Essun lives on in this new body: "It's you. It's truly you" (Jemisin, *Stone Sky* 398). The tragic sacrifice has led not to a haunting presence or death, but to a liberating rebirth, to "the final step of the dark fantastic cycle" — emancipation (Thomas 28). She is "liberated from spectacle, embodied hesitation, violence, and haunting" (28), moving beyond not only her previous self but also her traumatic baggage, which allows her to heal from it while achieving newfound strength. It is nonetheless telling, however, that Essun needed to transform into a wholly different, not-entirely-human entity — one able to transcend the physical and ontological constraints of race and gender — to do so; the transformation can thus be read as a metaphor for the "radical rethinking of everything that we know" which "subverting the traditional positioning of the Dark Other in the fantastic requires" (Thomas 28). And yet, this radical transformation makes it possible for Essun to remain in essence, however altered in form, and willing to work tirelessly towards the better world which she and Alabaster had envisioned.

It can thus be concluded that Nassun's presence in the story is essential for the creation of eucatastrophe, and for its working as Tolkien envisioned it. This ending reconciles conflict, violence, and suffering, "sorrow and failure", with the hopefulness and the promise embodied in the bittersweet, yet happy ending: "the joy of deliverance" (Tolkien 75) achieved as Nassun turns, in a single epic moment, from the antagonist of the tale to its heroine. She uses the great power that she fought her own mother to harness to restore the Moon and end the Seasons, for the sake of the world, and not simply for the sake of one person. The key in causing this radical shift from enemy to heroine, in saving the world from its terrible fate, lies not in the battle itself, but in the love between mother and daughter. It is only thanks to this moment of hope that the characters who remain after the apocalypse can look to the future without despairing, in spite of the enormity of the task ahead of them. The joy in this ending comes partly from the relief of seeing the characters that we have grown attached to reach a conclusion that we deem satisfactory; however, it also stems from the fact that, as Tolkien puts it, "there is a sudden glimpse of the underlying reality or truth" (77) beneath the fantasy. Readers not only witness, but actively partake of the feeling of renewal, of rebirth, with both Essun and Nassun, because these fantastic events can be extrapolated as a message of hope for the primary world — an "inspiration", in Quashie's words, "to imagine how we want to be in the world" (147). The empathic response invites identification with the perspective of the orogenes, the oppressed group in the secondary world, and hence with experiences that will resonate familiarly with the primary world's own dark others. And yet, these characters also experience what it is like to break through the systemic cycles of violence, to shed the dregs of the wake in favour of a forward-facing future. This embodies "the Escape of the Prisoner" (Tolkien 69), the positive connotation of escapism which Tolkien argued for — this is fiction offering solace, a respite from the primary world which social others are often unlikely to find. One might argue that it is the presence of the fantastic that allows this breakthrough, but the immense magical power which these characters wield is only a part of their quest, and not exactly what makes the breaking of the cycle possible. Rather, the focus throughout the trilogy and what is truly highlighted as important is not orogeny and magic, but the relationships the characters build — the communities that they foster. Though Jemisin seems to posit the violent acts committed by both Essun and Alabaster as necessary, in some measure, for the destruction of the Fulcrums and the society which endorses them, it is through love that the characters gather strength to push forward. If Essun continues striving for a better world at all, it is thanks to her acceptance of the love of others, and Nassun decides to save the world and share that hope because she receives — and accepts — her mother's love. Love is the driving force behind the tale, and what gives Nassun what she needed to live on, to believe that there is possibility in the world. These are not simply relationships of mutual dependence, like the ones modelled on stonelore as a path to survival, but of mutual care. This makes for a message of hope directed specifically towards the (dark) other of the primary world, as the eucatastrophic ending models the ideal outcome for their real experiences: a future with prospects, with hope, for a way out of the oppressive system. And this way out is represented by the communities in the trilogy, the interpersonal relationships that grow and evolve towards an ethics of radical care, towards embracing difference and weaponizing it into a movement of effective resistance against the current system, one that looks forward to a better world. Even if the primary world does not share the fantastic elements that make it possible for these characters' actions to be as impactful as they are, such as Alabaster's decimation of Yumenes, and though the wake is still very much at work in primary reality, primary-world readers are still able to find in this story a message of hope: "that is how one

survives eternity [...] or even a few years”, by relying on others — “Friends. Family. Moving with them. Moving forward” (*Stone Sky* 397). The quest fantasy is thus deconstructed and reconstructed specifically *for* this dark other to reclaim a central space within the fantasy, as well as in the readers’ imagination; in other words, it is thus that Jemisin builds a fantasy of Black female subjectivity.

CONCLUSIONS

*Myth-making may be dangerous indeed for
those of us who play in the dark.
But let's play anyway.*
(Thomas 34)

This dissertation has interpreted Nora K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* as an example of how fantasy and the fantastic enhance the possibilities of representation which fiction already offers. The analysis of the trilogy is framed by the discussion on the relationship between identity and narrative, my own attempt to elucidate the reasons behind the importance of fictional representations for the individual's identity construction, particularly as far as the social other is concerned. This importance is explained mainly through the image of the mirror, to which I resort to contend that fiction acts as a reflection where individuals seek to find themselves, or someone like themselves, whose image they can identify with in order to reaffirm and reassure themselves in their own identities.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS

The first chapter contextualized my approach to the theoretical texts by delving into the necessary situatedness of representations, which are subject to and affected by individual perspectives and orientations. The binary dynamic between subject and other was here described as essential, and as based around the dynamic of the mirror, an image which informs the theoretical framework as a whole. Chapter 1 also indirectly expressed the thesis statement — the possibility that fictional representations can contribute to the resignification of otherness, as the increasing demand for a space within fiction is connected to a demand to speak for oneself and use one's agency to empower others who share the same position, which the analysis of Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* attempts to demonstrate. The binary subject/other as a power dynamic was then deconstructed through Merleau-Ponty's theory of embodiment in chapter 2, from which two conclusions were extracted: 1) that this relationship need not be one of domination, as the gaze can be a dynamic of recognition instead of subjection, and 2) that, consequently, intersubjectivity — interaction and communication with others — is at the core of identity construction. The self cannot be conceived of without the presence of others, whose mental and emotional states can be partly accessed via their body signals and language, which in turn proves identity to be fundamentally relational. This relationality is, however, complicated by the fact that it is impossible to be certain that one is interpreting the other's actions and speech correctly, so that there is an inevitable imposition of one's bias ("way of seeing", to use Berger's words) over interpersonal communication.

Hence my subsequent recourse to the approach of identity-as-narrative in chapter 2 to establish the marked relationship between identity and fiction. Narrative was here proven to be essential, as a concept, for both the formation and articulation of individual identity as well as the structuring of society at large, as explained via Ricoeur's emplotment and Lyotard's concept of *grands récits*. Crucially, chapter 2 showed how social others are considered such in part because they cannot be located in the social narratives at work, nor can they create their own self-narratives under their parameters in the same ways as individuals who are interpellated as

subjects by the system can. The other is thus concluded to be the individual that is deprived of voice and agency under dominant systems, both silenced and spoken for, both idealized and vilified. This ambivalence was demonstrated by the use of women as an example, showing how woman is constructed as a social other and specularized into an inferior reflection of man, who is in turn bolstered as the universal subject — the foremost representative of the hegemonic norm. Yet if the construction of gender in general, and of one gender as inferior to another, is nothing but a grand, totalizing social construction, mechanisms such as fiction will be able to work towards its *deconstruction*.

This is what chapter 3 focused on, by describing how fictional narratives can act as mirrors in a twofold manner: by either replicating these totalizing ideological discourses, and therefore contributing to the endless presence of the hegemonic subject — white, male, and cis-heterosexual —, or else by becoming a space for difference to be reframed. This chapter showed that the conception of characters as fictional minds explains the effect which fictional images are able to have on the readers: because characters are constructed in the same ways as non-fictional people, the readers have access to their thoughts and emotions in ways which create an engagement similar to interpersonal communication, so that fictional characters are incorporated into the readers' identity construction in the same way as non-fictional others. By virtue of its very fictionality, then, fiction was concluded to be capable of creating images of difference which social others are able to not only recognize, but also to identify with positively. The ability for social others to recover their voice and their ability to self-represent was therefore underlined as crucial to the creation of such representations, fictional counterfigurations which resist the influence of hegemonic ideologies and discourses and which enable the use of the mirror of fiction in ways that validate and reaffirm otherness. The effects of such counterfigurations can be perceived at a local level, through the responses of individual readers, which is why chapter 4 focused on reader-response and narrative empathy to explain how fiction can affect the primary world despite its condition as fictional. From this examination was concluded that the ideal outcome of fiction-reading is for a change to be produced in the readers' perceptions, for new perspectives to be incorporated into their worldview, as fiction possesses the virtue of and ability to familiarize the unfamiliar — to "imagine what is not the self" (Morrison 15). Such changes in the readers' perceptions are often argued to take place through narrative empathy, which encourages the extension of love and compassion towards others — and, since fictional characters are interacted with as if they were non-fictional people, such empathy will theoretically extend to others in primary reality as well. Though whether such an outcome actualizes at all is debatable, and despite the very evident limitations of narrative empathy, the chapter nevertheless concluded it to be a plausible trigger for changes in the worldview of readers who are positioned as oppressors within the binary subject/other, but most especially for changes in readers placed in the 'other' position. For the latter, the extension of empathy towards those who look like oneself was argued to be fundamental in encouraging the recognition of oneself as worthy of love and compassion, which in turn would facilitate the conception of oneself as a worthy subject despite one's construction as 'other' within dominant narratives.

In short, then, this combination of theories was used as a set of tools to demonstrate the importance of fictional representations for an individual's identity construction and self-perception, while also constituting my own attempt at explaining why certain representations are conceived of as worse than others — because they shape their fictional universes and characters "according to oppressive and objectionable ideological assumptions", as Moi put it (45-46). In this sense, the fantasy genre's creation of secondary worlds is argued through chapters 5 and 6

to broaden the range of possibilities for the representation of marginalized individuals, precisely because of its reduced dependence on primary world ideologies and constructs. Chapter 5 described the genre's characteristic resistance to definition and its deviation from or defiance of reality; in spite of this, as the chapter also proved, fantasy — canonical fantasy in particular — still has shaped itself according to primary world principles, insofar as it replicates the presence of the other *as* other, and hence repeats patterns of oppression already present in the primary world. The revision of the fantastic canon provided in this chapter showed how “the fantastic, the speculative, and the collective imagination have rendered Black presence impossible and Black nonexistence compulsory” (Thomas 151), a trend affecting not only Blackness but also any other differences deviating from the universal subject, which became practically a feature, an inseparable part of the genre, in no small part due to Tolkien's enormous influence on fantasy. This made it difficult to imagine the presence of social others “even within realms of supposedly infinite possibilities” (Thomas 151). Against this, I traced the growing tradition of increasingly diverse works within the fantasy genre, which contextualized Jemisin's trilogy as part of this growing movement of deviation or subversion of the genre's central characteristics.

On its part, Chapter 6 closed the theoretical section by mirroring chapter 4 and focusing, specifically, on the ways in which fantasy is able to have an effect over reality — even to defy it — despite its inescapable connection to it. It is argued that the parallel between fantasy and the position of the other makes the fantasy genre particularly suitable to represent that which has been repressed, or made invisible. In spite of this suitability, however, the chapter showed that social others are often excluded from the experience of the fantastic because of their absence from it, as chapter 5 also implied. Given that this is the case, the importance of emancipating imagination from existing power structures became evident. While realist fiction can work subversively, insofar as it is able to recognize and denounce oppression as it takes place in the primary world by showing experiences of it and forms of resistance against it, I argued that fantasy fiction can work beyond these possibilities by resisting or even entirely overcoming the idea that identity categories can be grounds for oppression at all. Fantasy's deviations from primary reality, its focus on what is by definition impossible, is what allows it to imagine possible worlds where the positions of subject and other no longer work as such, or are no longer bound by the ideological systems of sexism, white supremacy, and other discriminations whose insidious rule over the primary world is yet to be overcome. Thus, chapter 6 showed the potential of fantasy to become a site of resistance against generalized perceptions of otherness, deconstructing these discourses through the influence of the secondary world and its characters over the readers' minds. It has been shown that Jemisin's trilogy can be considered an example of such deconstruction.

Chapters 7 through 9 thus offered a practical examination of *The Broken Earth* in three major arcs. Chapter 7 relied more closely on character analysis, specifically of Essun's character, gaining insight into how a Black woman is represented in the secondary world and showing in what ways the mechanisms of subjugation at work in the fictional context affect the construction of her identity at a fictional level. Chapter 8, on the other hand, focused more particularly on proving that Jemisin's use of a fantastic trait — orogeny — as the source of otherness in the secondary world is able to overcome or circumvent the perception of Black womanhood as ‘other’ within the readers' *gestalt* (borrowing Iser's term). Despite Essun's and Nassun's status as oppressed individuals within the secondary world, their oppression does not stem from the same sources as it would in the primary world due to the absence (or near-absence) of the superstructures of sexism and white supremacy. Instead, the superstructure of stonelore has orogenes occupying the space of the social other, which shapes the systems and discourses of

oppression around the supernatural ability instead of around identity categories like race or gender. The possibility to establish a direct equivalence between orogeny and the enslavement of African-Americans in the United States was then taken as a major example of how Jemisin uses fantasy to provide insightful commentary on the dynamics of subjugation and the creation of otherness, while still enabling the creation of Black female agency and subjectivity thanks to the narrative's focus on restoration — both of the voices of the previously silenced protagonists and of the hope for the creation of a better world thanks to their actions. Such hope is what chapter 9 focused most particularly on, explaining how Jemisin employs essential features of fantasy — such as the quest motif, the presence of an antagonist, and particularly eucatastrophe — to provide readers, and particularly readers who partake of the 'other' position in some way, with images of hope for a better future that work as consolation, thus consolidating the function of escape as Tolkien positively defined it: as relief, and not as avoidance or flight from real world problems.

Therefore, chapters 7 through 9 demonstrated how Jemisin's fantasy orients, in Ahmed's terms, the secondary world of her fantasy towards the female, Black body, thus effectively repositioning this body from the margins to the centre. This makes it possible for Black female characters to become "liberated Dark Others" (Thomas 28), as their presence and the process of emancipation they undergo is centred as essential to the story. By thus shaping the secondary world around the presence of the Black woman, Jemisin interpellates and represents her as a full, agential subject, so that these female characters become counterfigurations that actively contradict and resist the patriarchal, white-supremacist discourses of the primary world. The trilogy is thus read as an instance of fantasy working as possibility, enhancing the representation of Black female characters beyond the insidious position of the dark other: despite the presence of secondary-world oppressive ideological apparatuses around their orogeny, both Nassun and Essun are shown working to resist the source of their subjugation, so that readers empathize with their suffering while watching both women overcome injustice, reclaiming their voice and their agency as Black, female, orogene subjects as they make their way into a hopeful future. In turn, this prioritizes the Black female perspective in the readers' perceptions, as the primary-world narratives they use as interpretive frameworks are forced into a radical reorientation by the structures and features of the secondary world of the fantasy, which intentionally places Black womanhood at its core. For otherized readers, those who do not identify with the universal subject and fail to locate themselves within the norm, Jemisin's trilogy becomes that "more benign kind of mirror" (Jay 533), an image of functional Black female subjectivity that produces a positive identification and thus acts as "inspiration" to "navigate the world that we indeed live in, the one [...] that resists and resents and despises our being" (Quashie 154). This is how fantasy constructs itself as a site of resistance — by becoming the alternative way of seeing, the "view from elsewhere" (De Lauretis 25) that actively resists the male, colonial gaze that would make these Black women into others, fetishized objects of consumption. By, in other words, enabling the movement of the primary world other to a secondary world subject.

There is much that remains to be addressed about Jemisin's work in particular, and about fantasy as a site of resistance for otherized identities in general. The importance of a feminist analysis of Jemisin's work cannot be dissociated from the importance of its representation of Blackness, so that I have here attempted to read Blackness and womanhood together. However, the dual focus which this produces has undoubtedly harmed the completeness of both readings, which in turn implies potential for further, more detailed examination of these dynamics as they take place in the secondary world against primary reality. Beyond this, there is, for instance, untapped potential for a discussion of Jemisin's narrative as climate fiction, given the relevance

of its fantastic setting as a warning against climate disaster; and the affective relationship between stone eaters and the orogenes they attach themselves to, as well as stone eaters themselves and their posthuman nature, would certainly benefit from further research. This work was nevertheless always intended primarily as an approach to explaining the importance of fictional representations for personal identity, and for otherized identities in particular, as well as the possibilities which the fantastic affords for such representations. The analysis of Jemisin's novels carried out here is thus only one way of approaching this topic, one example of the manifold possibilities fantasy offers to dismantle the presence of patriarchal, white supremacist norms in the secondary worlds of fiction. This idea of boundless potential is crucial in fantasy theory, often held to be the reason behind the genre's versatility and endurance through the centuries. I now put this work forward in the hopes of contributing to that impression — and in the hopes that the imagination of both authors and readers continues to be emancipated in its exploration beyond the boundaries of the 'real'.

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APPENDIX: RESUMO

A historia do xénero fantástico pode resumirse a través dunha palabra: reinvención. Mentres que a literatura realista adoita presentarse como superior ou máis lexítima, a fantasía aparece como separada da realidade, e polo tanto inferior ou, dalgún xeito, falsa. Esta aparente desconexión, porén, tense interpretado doutro xeito moito máis positivo: como potencial. Dado que o xénero e as súas descrições non deixaron de cambiar considerablemente ao longo dos séculos, estes cambios conseguiron alterar a súa habitual percepción negativa nos tratados críticos e teorías académicas máis recentes. Na actualidade, argúmentase que a capacidade da fantasía para explorar diferentes posibilidades e experimentar coa realidade que coñecemos, e mesmo deixala atrás para ir máis aló, enchen este xénero de maiores posibilidades que outros. Cabe mencionar tamén, por suposto, a continua popularidade da literatura fantástica ao longo dos anos e a súa persistencia nas listas de libros máis vendidos, ademais dos seus acérrimos fans, todo o cal representa o interese que o xénero conserva tanto para lectores como para autores. É posible, de feito, argumentar que este interese é unha consecuencia da relevancia que posúen as historias de fantasía para os seus lectores e para o mundo no que estes viven.

Esta relevancia da literatura fantástica, tanto no sentido cultural coma no social, é a idea que inspira e dirixe este proxecto de investigación. A capacidade que a literatura posúe para representar, para crear imaxes de eventos e persoas e imbuílas de significado, considérase xeralmente un dos seus maiores atractivos. Isto fai que a demanda para máis cantidade de representacións positivas e responsables de individuos e identidades que foron relegadas ás marxes sociais e culturais se atope no centro deste estudo, dado que o devandito potencial da fantasía podería facer deste un xénero particularmente axeitado para a representación destas identidades en posicións centrais, no canto de marxinais. Brian Attebery escribiu recentemente que “parte do traballo cultural do fantástico é dicirnos que as cousas non teñen que ser como son” (*Fantasy 3*, tradución propia), o que significa que o xénero non soamente explora posibilidades, senón que presenta alternativas. De xeito máis específico, presenta alternativas aos discursos, a miúdo discriminatorios, arraigados na nosa realidade que lle dan forma ás identidades individuais. Ao facer este traballo de re-imaxinación, a fantasía pode deconstruír estes discursos, ou mesmo construír outros novos que deixen atrás esas discriminacións.

Este potencial revolucionario das alternativas presentadas polo xénero fantástico é o que me levou a interesarme polo traballo de Nora Keita Jemisin, unha autora Afroamericana condecorada con varios premios de prestixio, entre eles o Nebula, o Locus e, máis notablemente, o Hugo, tendo recibido tres destes últimos á Mellor Novela pola triloxía que ocupa este proxecto: *A Terra Fragmentada* (*The Broken Earth*, no orixinal inglés). Foi a primeira autora negra en acadar este recoñecemento, e a primeira autora en xeral en onseguir tres premios consecutivos, un por cada un dos tres libros da triloxía, o que cimentou a súa posición como unha das voces máis prestixiosas e máis celebradas da fantasía e a ciencia ficción contemporáneas. O seu traballo céntrase de xeito moi particular en temas como o conflito e a opresión, e adoita ser especialmente loado polas súas representacións de mulleres negras como protagonistas e personaxes centrais. As imaxes que Jemisin crea no seu traballo son, polo tanto, exemplos da centralización da experiencia da muller negra dende o punto de vista dunha escritora que comparte esta posición.

O argumento principal desta investigación é, polo tanto, que as representacións creadas a través da ficción constitúen espellos para os individuos a través dos que poden reafirmar e validar a súa identidade persoal; e que a fantasía, moi particularmente, pode ampliar as posibilidades para representar ao outro social e cultural, como pode comprobarse a través do traballo de N. K. Jemisin.

Hai varios motivos polos que se escolleu *A Terra Fragmentada* como caso de estudo, sendo a primeira o meu interese e aprecio persoal pola complexidade e perspicacia da súa narración. Outro motivo é a mestura de xéneros literarios que se produce na triloxía, unha combinación que ilustra a mutabilidade do xénero fantástico e o seu potencial innovador ao desenfocar as barreiras que separan á fantasía doutros xéneros similares. O principal motivo para a súa elección foi, non obstante, a devandita centralización de identidades que no noso mundo se considerarían como social e culturalmente outras, particularmente as de mulleres racializadas. Esta tese argumenta principalmente que, ao centrar deste xeito a perspectiva dunha identidade marxinalizada, as novelas de Jemisin forzan a reorientar a perspectiva dun lector hexemónico ou privilexiado, ofrecendo novos xeitos de observar o mundo. Ao mesmo tempo, e quizais de xeito máis deliberado, a triloxía proporciona aos lectores marxinalizados un espello: imaxes que reflicten as súas identidades e experiencias, contribuíndo así a constituír un sentido positivo da súa identidade como suxeitos. Polo tanto, a tese ten dous obxectivos principais:

Primeiramente, a tese intenta demostrar a importancia que as representacións ficticias teñen para a identidade individual mediante a análise de diferentes teorías sobre a construción da identidade en relación á narrativa. Este exame explica de que xeito os outros sociais poden beneficiarse dunha presenza máis ampla e variada de representacións que reflictan a súa experiencia, o que tamén aclara por que o xénero fantástico é especialmente axeitado para este propósito, dadas as súas particularidades respecto doutros xéneros máis realistas.

En segundo lugar, o anterior demóstrase a través do caso de estudo da triloxía de Jemisin. Esta análise estrutura a segunda parte da tese e considera *A Terra Fragmentada* como un exemplo do uso da fantasía e as súas características para mellorar a representación da marxinalidade.

Para acadar estes obxectivos, a tese utiliza unha combinación de teorías xa existentes e reúneas en forma de caixa de ferramentas. Os seus conceptos e explicacións da identidade persoal e da súa relación coa ficción e a narrativa proporcionan unha explicación do xeito no que os individuos se relacionan cos mundos e personaxes ficticios, ademais de por que isto posibilita que a ficción teña un impacto plausible e positivo sobre ditos individuos. Esta combinación serve como unha serie de conceptos e marcos teóricos aplicables á análise práctica que iluminan as posibilidades e os problemas arredor do concepto de representación, tales como: o funcionamento da representación nun contexto literario, o que precisa un individuo para sentirse representado neste contexto ficticio, e que características ou requisitos fan que unha representación ficticia sexa ‘boa’, ou se adecúe á experiencia que intenta reflectir. O primeiro capítulo, polo tanto, dedícase a contextualizar os textos teóricos definindo o concepto de representación nun contexto literario (e, polo tanto, ficticio). Nesta argumentación considérase ás representacións como fundamentalmente situacionais, isto é, condicionadas e afectadas polas perspectivas e orientacións individuais de cada suxeito. Este capítulo describe tamén a dinámica entre suxeito e outro como esencial para a discusión teórica, e basea a súa definición arredor da dinámica do espello, cuxa imaxe informa o marco teórico ao completo. Exprésase, deste xeito, a hipótese principal do traballo: a posibilidade de que as representacións ficticias poidan contribuír a resignificar a marxinalidade, como se demostra a través do caso particular de *A Terra Fragmentada*, de Jemisin. A demanda crecente destas identidades marxinais por un espazo propio dentro da literatura, e da ficción en xeral, preséntase así como conectada coa

demanda por falar por e representarse a un mesmo, utilizando a axencia propia para devolve-lo poder a aquelas identidades que compartan esta posición marxinal.

O capítulo 2 dedícase á deconstrución do binarismo entre suxeito e outro como dinámica de poder a través da teoría da corporeidade de Maurice Merleau-Ponty, da que se poden obter dúas conclusións principais. A primeira, que esta relación entre suxeito e outro non precisa da dominación, dado que a dinámica da mirada pode ser unha de recoñecemento e non de suxeición. A segunda, como consecuencia, é que a intersubxectividade (a comunicación e interacción con outros individuos) é clave para a construción da identidade individual. Adicionalmente, este capítulo considera as maneiras nas que a muller é constituída na sociedade e no discurso ideolóxico como un outro social, e polo tanto como inferior respecto do home, o que nesta tese se coñece como suxeito universal. Non obstante, se a construción do xénero en xeral, e dun xénero como inferior ao outro en particular, pode considerarse como construída socialmente (e, polo tanto, como non inherente á bioloxía ou á orde social), debe haber tamén un xeito de deconstruíla. Esta análise argumenta que a ficción é un dos mecanismos a través dos cales pode ter lugar esta deconstrución. No capítulo 3 elabórase este argumento mediante a descrición das narrativas ficticias como espellos. Establécese, polo tanto, que a ficción pode funcionar como espello fundamentalmente de dous xeitos: reflectindo os discursos hexemónicos e totalizadores que contribúen á ampla presenza do suxeito hexemónico (caucásico, masculino, cisheterosexual) tanto na ficción como fóra dela; ou ben converténdose nun espazo a través do que alterar a percepción da diferenza e a marxinalidade. Neste capítulo móstrase que entender os personaxes ficticios como ‘mentes ficticias’ (concepto de Alan Palmer) explica os efectos que chegan a ter sobre os lectores: debido a que os personaxes se constrúen das mesmas maneiras que as persoas non-ficticias, os lectores obteñen un acceso aos seus pensamentos e emocións que crea unha relación similar á que se produce na comunicación con outro individuo fóra da ficción. Isto fai que os personaxes ficticios se incorporen no proceso de construción da identidade individual do lector do mesmo xeito que ocorre cos individuos non-ficticios.

O capítulo 4, por outra banda, céntrase na resposta do lector e na empatía narrativa para explicar de que maneiras a ficción pode impactar a realidade a pesar da súa condición como ficticia. Dos argumentos destas teorías pode extraerse a conclusión de que o resultado ideal da lectura é que se produza un cambio na perspectiva e percepcións do lector. O obxectivo é que se incorporen nova información e novos puntos de vista á súa visión do mundo, de tal xeito que se pode argumentar que a ficción ten a capacidade de familiarizar co que resulta descoñecido ou foráneo e, polo tanto, de facer ao lector máis receptivo ou tolerante. É debatible se este resultado se produce realmente, e existen límites á empatía narrativa, tales como a desensibilización. Porén, o capítulo conclúe que a empatía producida pola lectura é un mecanismo que, de xeito plausible, pode producir cambios na mentalidade daqueles lectores que ocupan a posición de opresores na oposición binaria suxeito/outro. En canto aos lectores posicionados como outros, a empatía de cara a aqueles personaxes que comparten aspectos da súa identidade arguméntase como fundamental para o recoñecemento de si mesmos como suxeitos dignos de amor e compaixón. Isto, como consecuencia, facilitaría que acadasen unha percepción de si mesmos como suxeitos válidos a pesar da súa construción como ‘outros’ nas narrativas socio-culturais dominantes. Esta combinación de teorías dos catro primeiros capítulos preséntase, en resumidas contas, como unha serie de ferramentas que amosan a importancia das representacións ficticias para a construción da identidade individual e para a autopercepción dos individuos; constitúen, ademais, un intento de explicar por que certas representacións se perciben como peores ca outras, a pesar da súa condición como ficticias (e, polo tanto, presuntamente carentes de efecto sobre a realidade).

Neste sentido, ao longo dos capítulos 5 e 6 argumentase que a creación de mundos secundarios ou alternos do xénero fantástico permite aumentar as posibilidades para representar a estes individuos marxinais, precisamente porque a súa dependencia das ideoloxías e construcións do mundo real é máis reducida que a doutros xéneros. O capítulo 5 describe como o xénero fantástico resiste a definición, e elabora sobre a súa desviación ou desafío da realidade. A pesar disto, o capítulo amosa tamén como a fantasía, e especialmente a fantasía canónica, prodúcese de acordo cos principios que rexen a realidade coñecida: estas novelas fantásticas tenden a reflectir a posición do outro como tal, mesmo dentro do mundo alternativo, e polo tanto repiten patróns de opresión xa presentes na realidade. O capítulo 6 constitúe o peche da sección teórica reflectindo o argumento do capítulo 4 e centrándose, especificamente, nos xeitos nos que a fantasía pode afectar á realidade ou mesmo desafiala a pesar desta inevitable conexión coa mesma. Argumentase que a posición da fantasía na dicotomía realidade/fantasía ocupa a posición do outro, de xeito que se crea un paralelismo co binarismo suxeito/outro, paralelismo que convirte á fantasía nun xénero particularmente axeitado para representar todo aquilo que é reprimido ou invisibilizado. A pesar disto, o capítulo amosa tamén que estas identidades marxinais son a miúdo excluídas da experiencia do fantástico debido á súa ausencia nos mundos alternativos que presenta, como xa suxería o capítulo 5. Con todo, a tese considera a separación ou desviación do fantástico respecto da realidade como unha vantaxe que lle permite imaxinar mundos posibles onde as posicións de suxeito e outro non funcionan como tal, ou non se atopan atadas a sistemas de opresión como o sexismo ou a supremacía branca, cuxa dominancia sobre o mundo real continúa. Deste xeito, o capítulo 6 amosa o potencial do xénero fantástico para a resistencia contra as percepcións xeneralizadas da diferenza e a marxinalidade, contrarrestando estes discursos opresivos a través da influencia do mundo secundario e os seus personaxes sobre as mentes dos lectores.

A triloxía de Jemisin considérase, na análise práctica, como un exemplo desta capacidade. Esta análise ocupa os capítulos do 7 ao 9, e estrutúrase polo tanto en tres eixes principais. O capítulo 7 apóiase na análise dos personaxes, e particularmente de Essun, a personaxe principal. O obxectivo é comprender de que xeito se representa á muller racializada neste mundo secundario, e amosar como os mecanismos de sometemento e dominación funcionan e afectan á construción da identidade deste personaxe no nivel ficticio. O capítulo 8, por outra banda, céntrase na demostración de como Jemisin fai uso dunha habilidade fantástica, a oroxenia, como orixe da marxinalización que ten lugar no mundo secundario. Isto permite que a autora poida evitar a percepción da raza e o xénero como características correspondentes ao 'outro' social dentro da *gestalt* (termo de Wolfgang Iser) do lector. A pesar de que tanto Essun como a súa filla, Nassun, son percibidas como oprimidas dentro do mundo fantástico, esta opresión non orixina polos mesmos motivos que o faría no mundo real debido á ausencia (ou práctica ausencia) das superestruturas do sexismo e a supremacía branca no mundo secundario. Este capítulo explica, polo tanto, como a orixe da opresión se substitúe na triloxía por unha característica fantástica (un poder sobrenatural) sen recaer no escapismo nin na vacuidade. O capítulo 9, finalmente, describe como a triloxía remata cun mensaxe esperanzador a través do emprego de certas características fundamentais do xénero, tales como o motivo da viaxe do heroe, a presenza dun antagonista, e o que Tolkien denomina eucatástrofe. Isto permite que os lectores, e especialmente lectores marxinais, reciban imaxes de esperanza de que a rebelión e a loita pola xustiza poden dar lugar a un futuro mellor; estas imaxes funcionan como consolación, consolidando dese xeito a función do escapismo tal e como Tolkien o entende, como un alivio e non como unha fuga ou escapatoria dos problemas do mundo real.

Como se pode comprobar, a triloxía de Jemisin dálle forma ao mundo secundario arredor

da presenza da muller racializada. Desta maneira, a autora representa estas identidades como suxeitos plenos, posuidores de poder e axencia persoal, de xeito que estes personaxes se converten no que Diana Tietjens-Meyers chama *counterfigurations*, ou figuras contrarias; é dicir, figuras que contradín e resisten os discursos patriarcais e supremacistas brancos que se atopan de xeito insidioso no mundo real e nas súas políticas. A triloxía lese, polo tanto, como un exemplo do funcionamento da fantasía como posibilidade e alternativa, poñendo de relevo as representacións de mulleres negras máis aló da posición do que Elizabeth Thomas chama o ‘outro escuro’. Jemisin consegue que os lectores poidan empatizar e sentir co sufrimento das personaxes principais, mais representa a estas mulleres loitando contra situacións de inxustiza e, o que é máis importante, superándoas. Deste xeito ofrece imaxes de mulleres racializadas recuperando a súa voz e a súa capacidade de actuar e falar por si mesmas como suxeitos que se encamiñan cara a un futuro mellor e cheo de esperanza. Ao mesmo tempo, dálle prioridade á perspectiva destas mulleres racializadas na percepción dos lectores, de tal forma que os discursos e narrativas da realidade que se utilizan como marco interpretativo para a lectura sofren unha reorientación radical a medida que o lector debe acomodarse ás estruturas e características do mundo secundario, o que sitúa á muller negra no seu centro e permite a súa representación como suxeito. *A Terra Fragmentada* pode considerarse polo tanto como exemplo do xénero fantástico creando unha maneira alternativa de percibir o mundo, a “vista dende outro lugar” (De Lauretis 25, tradución propia) que resiste activamente a mirada colonial e masculina que convertería a estas mulleres negras en ‘outras’, en obxectos fetichistas para o consumo. Noutras palabras, esta análise amosa como Jemisin permite que unha identidade percibida como ‘outro’ no mundo real se converta nun suxeito no seu mundo secundario.

This dissertation focuses on the representation of human subjectivity, and of marginalized identities in particular, through fantasy fiction. The main objective is to discern how, if at all, fantasy's particular affordances enhance or make possible the representation of an other (a marginal identity who has been denied a functional subjectivity) as a subject.

To do so, this thesis reviews philosophical and critical theories focused on identity and its relationship to narrative, linked through the image of the mirror, in order to explain the importance of fictional representations. This theoretical framework supports the analysis of Nora Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy as an example of how fantasy presents alternatives to the ingrained structures and discourses of discrimination which shape individual identity.