

The entanglement of climate change,
capitalism and oppression in *The Broken
Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin

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Abstract

In this thesis, I will argue that the science fiction/fantasy literature series *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin (2015-2017) portrays the entanglement of exploitative capitalism, colonialism, and its relation to the natural world and natural disaster. I will argue that through this entanglement a cycle of inheritance of oppression and dehumanization is shown, and that ultimately, the trilogy as a whole makes an intervention in how we see the past, and how we might reconcile with it in hope to make a better future. In the first chapter of the analysis, I will show the entanglement of exploitative capitalism and colonialism and its oppressive and dehumanizing forces as portrayed in these novels. In the second chapter I will argue that this entanglement is intrinsically linked to the natural world through the concept of magic as portrayed in these novels, and that this leads to the dehumanization of nature as a whole, with natural disasters as a consequence. In the last chapter I will argue that this entanglement of capitalism, colonialism and the natural world is inherited by those who are marginalized and dehumanized through their cyborgian transgressions. I will argue that this cycle of inheritance as shown in these novels shows us the importance of reconciliation with the past, if we wish to make a better future.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----|
| Acknowledgements | 2 |
| Abstract | 3 |
| Introduction | 5 |
| The entanglement of climate change, capitalism and oppression in <i>The Broken Earth</i> Trilogy by N.K. Jemisin | 5 |
| Research Questions and Overview of Structure | 5 |
| Theoretical Framework and Methodology | 8 |
| New Materialism | 8 |
| Donna Harraway's Cyborg Manifesto | 9 |
| Agency of Matter | 10 |
| Methodology | 12 |
| Chapter 1: Colonialism, Structural Racism and Technologically Advanced Capitalism in N.K. Jemisin's <i>The Stone Sky</i> (2017) | 14 |
| 1.1 <i>The Broken Earth</i> | 15 |
| 1.2 The Exploitative Hybris of Advanced Capitalism in Syl Anagist | 17 |
| 1.3 Dehumanization and Exploitation of the Niess in Colonial Syl Anagist | 20 |
| Chapter 2: Magic, Matter, and the Conscious of the Earth | 26 |
| 2.1 Rebellions of the dehumanized | 27 |
| 2.2 Nature matters | 29 |
| 2.3 The end of Syl Anagist as a Climate Change Metaphor | 31 |
| Chapter 3: The Cyborgian Inheritance of Oppression and the Importance of the Past in the <i>Broken Earth</i> trilogy (2015-2017) | 34 |
| 3.1 Orogenes | 37 |
| 3.2 Stone eaters | 40 |
| 3.3 The past and reconciliation | 42 |
| Conclusion | 47 |
| Bibliography | 50 |

Introduction

The entanglement of climate change, capitalism and oppression in *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin

The *Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin is a science-fiction/fantasy trilogy of novels, consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017). With this trilogy, Jemisin gained much critical acclaim, best illustrated by the fact that she was the first ever African-American writer to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel with *The Fifth Season*. Furthermore, she was also the first writer in the history of the Hugo Awards to win Best Novel for every book in a series, in the subsequent years for *The Obelisk Gate* and *The Stone Sky*. The novels deal with themes of oppression and slavery, colonization, capitalism, natural disaster and climate change. I am interested in how these themes intersect, how they are connected, and what they can teach us about these topics in the real world.

Research questions and overview of structure

This, then, leads me to my research questions. I want to understand how the relation between ecological disaster, capitalism, dehumanization and oppression is fictionalized in *The Broken Earth Trilogy* by N.K. Jemisin, in order to show that this entanglement presents a way of looking at, and perhaps reconciling with history and the past that we need to move towards a better future. For this, I need to understand:

- How and to what extent the fictionalized histories of the world in the novels and the concept of magic illustrate the entanglement of ecology, capitalism, dehumanization and oppression;
- How do the figures of the 'stone eater' and the 'orogene' challenge and transgress the boundaries of hegemonic discourses in the world of these novels and how does a cyborgian reading of these figures illustrate the inheritance of the history of this entanglement of ecology, capitalism, dehumanization and oppression;
- How and to what extent the use of formal aspects of the text such as narratological perspective amplify this transgression of boundaries and cyclical

inheritance of the entanglement of ecological disaster, capitalism and oppression.

In the following chapter I will outline my theoretical framework, which takes a new materialist angle, and methodology, which consists of a critical close reading practice. Then, my analysis will trace the trilogy's discussion of the process of dehumanization and oppression, and the entanglement of the exploitative nature of capitalism, colonialism and climate change or natural disaster. I will argue that the last novel, *The Stone Sky* (2017), discusses the intersection of a particular *capitalist* reading of this exploitation and colonialist racism, by revealing and tracing the history of dehumanization and oppression of a group of people called the *Niess*, and by doing so offers the historical context of the intersections of colonial racism-climate change/natural disaster and capitalist exploitation-climate change/natural disaster as discussed in the earlier novels. In other words, I will argue that *The Stone Sky* (2017) provides the historical structure and background with which the reader can fully understand the process of dehumanization and the entwinement of these three elements. I will then continue my analysis of the series as a whole. In the second chapter I will be discussing the conceptualization of magic and the consciousness of the Earth as portrayed in the novel through the theoretical perspective of vitality or agency of matter, arguing that these conceptualizations form a fictionalized warning for issues around climate change. In the third and last chapter I will then read the figures of the stone eater and the orogene through a cyborgian lense, arguing that their dehumanization and oppression is inherited from the history of this entanglement of capitalism, colonialism and ecological disaster, and that this portrayal of the cycle of inheritance of oppression in the thematic and narrative structures of these novels makes an argument for reconciling with history and the past, in order to move towards a better future.

Structurally, then, I will work backwards through the series, starting with the third novel. This has several reasons. Firstly, each novel introduces new elements of worldbuilding, the magic-system and information about the different figures I will analyze, which is enjoyable and exciting as a fiction reader, but in a thesis, retaining the same structure would only lead to confusion, at the expense of the clarity and

strength of the arguments. Secondly, the novels narratological structure is quite complicated, and since the narration and focalization in particular are an important part of my analysis, explaining and tracing the different changes and reveals from book to book would also be confusing. Instead, in the first chapter I will give an overview of the whole story, spanning the whole trilogy, as well as a breakdown of the structure of the narration and focalization of the novels. Lastly, thematically, starting with the last novel in the trilogy also makes more sense, as this novel explains and traces the history of the worldbuilding and much of the magic system. My arguments will be stronger and more understandable if I start with this history, and work my way back to the present day of the novels.

This, then, will lead to my conclusion that *The Broken Earth* trilogy shows the process and inheritance of dehumanization and oppression through the intersection of these three elements, namely technologically advanced capitalism, colonialism and structural racism, and climate change and natural disaster, and that if we want to make the future better, we need to reconcile with the history of this entanglement and the inheritance of dehumanization and oppression that it entails.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

In this section I will explain my theoretical framework and methodology. I will first discuss new materialism as a general theoretical framework from which I will critically read these novels, as I argue that the topics and themes that new materialism focuses on are important themes in *The Broken Earth* trilogy as well. After this general discussion, I will focus in particular on the centralisation of matter and the transgression of boundaries and dualisms that are important aspects of new materialism, as I argue that these theoretical frames offer an interesting perspective on how historicity is conceptualized in these novels. Lastly, I will briefly explain my methodology of a close reading practice that is informed by this theoretical framework.

New materialism

In their article 'The Transversality of New Materialism', Iris van der Tuin and Rick Dolphijn (2010) map out new materialism as a scholarly field and movement of ideas and theories. Central to new materialism is the attempt to break through oppositions and dualisms, in particular regarding the representationalism in scholarly traditions of positivism and essentialism on the one hand, and social constructivism on the other hand. To put it very simply: essentialism is reductive because it uncritically materializes and reifies general categories; social constructivism is reductive because it does not take into account the agency of matter and how social constructs are also materially informed.

New materialism, then, proposes theorizing and thinking through problems in a way that combines the productive aspects of both realist essentialism and social constructivism, but is careful when treading representationalism. For this thesis, I want to focus mainly on two important aspect of new materialist feminist thought, namely the centralisation of matter and the decentralisation of dualisms. For this, I will focus closely on the work by scholars in my analysis who have written extensively about these topics. Firstly I will discuss here Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto*, which

deals with the decentralisation of dualisms. After this, I will discuss the centralisation of matter in the work of Karen Barad and Jane Bennet.

The figuration of the cyborg

In her (in)famous text 'A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century', Donna Haraway (1991) proposes an 'an ironic political myth faithful to feminism, socialism, and materialism' (149) in the figure of the cyborg. The cyborg is a figuration in which social reality, material reality and discursive myth come together, and which blurs boundaries. Haraway opposes dichotomies in her politics, stating:

One of my premises is that most American socialists and feminists see deepened dualisms of mind and body, animal and machine, idealism and materialism in the social practices, symbolic formulations, and physical artefacts associated with 'high technology' and scientific culture. (154)

In the figure of the cyborg, Haraway cuts through these dualisms that she recognizes is 20th century American socialist and feminist discourse. She proposes the cyborg as a figure that transgresses boundaries between human and non-human, organism and machine, and physical and non-physical (152-3). So, as I understand it, Haraway fuses together social reality, the material world and the imagination and myth, and thus creates this figuration which helps us read and understand our reality in a different way. Here, we can recognize the 'twist' and metamorphosis that I have discussed in relation to new materialism more broadly earlier. The cyborg is a figure to theorize the useful and reductive elements of both realist essentialism, positivism and social constructivism, and this figure allows for material, non-dualistic ways of thinking through problems.

The cyborg is an excellent figure through which to read science fiction/fantasy such as *The Broken Earth Trilogy* by N.K. Jemisin. As briefly mentioned above, Haraway specifically relates the symbolic, mythology and fiction to the societal and material world. At the beginning of this manifesto, she states that 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.' (149) and she asserts: 'I

am making an argument for the cyborg as a *fiction mapping* our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings. (150, emphasis my own). She gives Foucault's notion of biopolitics as an example of such a coupling here, but later on in her manifesto she also reads such a relation in feminist science fiction, which she argues problematizes dichotomies and dualisms: 'The cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artefact, member of a race, individual entity, or body.' (178). Reading *The Broken Earth* trilogy through this cyborgian lense will allow me to read for the ways these novels problematize these statuses, in particular regarding the status of human/nonhuman and the *history* of how these statuses have come to exist. Furthermore, the centralisation of matter will further problematize these statuses and their histories. I will now discuss this centralisation of matter as proposed by Karen Barad and Jane Bennet.

The agency of matter

In her text 'Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter', Karen Barad (2003) argues for a centralisation of matter and its agency. She states:

In this article, I propose a specifically posthumanist notion of performativity—one that incorporates important material and discursive, social and scientific, human and nonhuman, and natural and cultural factors. A posthumanist account calls into question the givenness of the differential categories of "human" and "nonhuman," examining the practices through which these differential boundaries are stabilized and destabilized.' (807-8)

Here, I recognize the new materialist (or posthumanist) call for the blurring of boundaries, the breaking through dualisms. Whereas Haraway argues this through a mythical, symbolic cyborgian figure, Barad brings specifically performativity and matter to the forefront. She argues for this centralization of matter through bodily experience and physics, stating: 'It is difficult to imagine how psychic and sociohistorical forces alone could account for the production of matter.' (810).

So, instead of social constructivist or essentialist accounts, Barad proposes a account of 'agential realism' (810). She explains:

This account refuses the representationalist fixation on "words" and "things" and the problematic of their relationality, advocating instead a causal relationship between specific exclusionary practices embodied as specific material configurations of the world (i.e., discursive practices/(con)figurations rather than "words") and specific material phenomena (i.e., relations rather than "things"). This causal relationship between the apparatuses of bodily production and the phenomena produced is one of "agential intra-action." (814)

The first move Barad makes here is to shift the boundaries of "words" and "things" and instead understands them as respectively discursive *practices* or performative figurations that are materially informed, and the material phenomena or relations inform them. Then, Barad argues that this relationship is *causal* rather than representationalist, and she calls this relation 'agential intra-action'. She explains more specifically what she means by agential intra-action, stating

The notion of intra-action (in contrast to the usual "interaction," which presumes the prior existence of independent entities/relata) represents a profound conceptual shift. It is through specific agential intra-actions that the boundaries and properties of the "components" of phenomena become determinate and that particular embodied concepts become meaningful. (815)

As I understand this, Barad argues that agential intra-actions are interrelated actions or performances *within* (intra) - as no boundaries between entities or relata exist. These intra-actions are agential, and through their specific performances they determine the boundaries and properties of materiality, as well as the *meaning* that these materialities have. Meaning is thus always informed, intertwined, or rather *consisting of* matter. Barad states simply, and frankly quite beautifully: 'Matter is not a support, location, referent, or source of sustainability for discourse. Matter is not immutable or passive. It does not require the mark of an external force like culture or

history to complete it. Matter is always already an ongoing historicity.’ (821). Jane Bennet (2010) has a similar approach to matter, but focuses specifically on its place within the social world and its relation to colonialism and capitalism, stating:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption. (ix)

Thus, whereas Barad focuses primarily on the *meaning* of matter, Bennet focuses on the ecological and social aspects of the way we think about matter. Both approaches are useful for my analysis, as the meaning of matter is conceptualized in an interesting way in *The Broken Earth* trilogy, and I will analyse what this means for the ecological and social aspects of how the worlds of *The Broken Earth* deal with matter.

Methodology

My methodology will consist of a critical close reading practice, informed by the topics and themes that new materialist feminism is interested in, as I have discussed above. In my first chapter, I will employ a close reading that is primarily focused on the role of capitalism and colonialism in the plot and the themes of these novels. In the second chapter I will do a more conceptual, theoretical close reading of the conceptualizations of magic and the Earth through the theories on matter discussed above. My third and last chapter will consist of a close reading of two figures, orogenes and stone eaters, through a cyborgian lense, with a specific focus on historicity and how these novels view the past and the future. Here I will also explicitly

employ a more technical, formal close reading as found in feminist literary studies, such as Mieke Bal's *Narratology* (2017).

1.

Colonialism, Structural Racism and Technologically Advanced Capitalism in N.K. Jemisin's *The Stone Sky* (2017)

In this first chapter I will argue that the *Broken Earth* series shows the entanglement of technologically advanced capitalism and structural racism and colonialism. First, I will give an outline of the plot, themes and narratological structure of the novels so that my analysis will be clear and understandable. Then, focusing mainly on the third novel, *The Stone Sky* (2017) (from here on shortened as *TSK*), I will argue that the history and legacy of the Niess in the society of Syl Anagist show the structural entanglements of colonialism, racism and capitalism. I will first argue that Syl Anagist is a technologically advanced capitalist society, and then I will argue that its capitalism is entangled with colonialism and the dehumanization and exploitation of the Niess people. I will argue for a reading of the Niess and their descendants as a cyborgian group of people, who specifically operate on and transgress these boundaries of colonialism, racism and technologically advanced capitalism, which leads to their dehumanization and oppression.

1.1 The *Broken Earth*

In the first novel of the *Broken Earth* trilogy, *The Fifth Season* (2015) (hereafter shortened to TFS), we follow the story of Essun, a middle-aged woman with magic-like power, a special ability to feel, manipulate and control a sort of force and energy of matter around her, called *orogeny*. We also follow pivotal moments in the lives of a young girl, Damaya, and a young woman, Syenite, who have this same ability. I will return to Damaya's and Syenite's storylines in the third chapter of this analysis, so for now I will focus on Essun's story and the other characters that are involved in it.

The world in which these women live, the Stillness, is one big continent that is plagued by immense natural disaster and climate turmoil every few centuries, which the people of the Stillness call 'the fifth season', hence the title of the first book. *The Fifth Season* starts at the beginning of such a season.

Essun's story starts as she find her son, Uche of three years old and also an orogene, beaten to death by his father, Jija. He has taken their daughter, Nassun of ten, and has ran away. Essun is forced to fled their home as well, since the whole comm(unity) of Tirimo will soon know she and her children are *roggas* (the slur for orogenes). This all happens right at the start of the new fifth season, which starts with an immense earthquake that rips the continent in half, which its people call The Rift. Essun flees, determined to find Nassun, and on the road, she meets Hoa, a young boy who appears to feel, or 'sess' (how the feeling of orogeny is described) where Nassun is.

Starting from the second novel, *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), we also read chapters from Nassun's perspective, as Jija is taking her to the antartics of the Stillness, to a town called Jekity where a small community of Guardians, who are in charge of orogenes enslaved by the empirical organisation of the Fulcrum, have settled to train orogenes. They call themselves *Found Moon*. Here, Nassun learns to develop her powers and abilities. Again, I will continue the summary of Essun's and Nassun's stories in the second chapter of this analysis.

In this world there are also objects floating in the sky, made of stone and crystal, which the people call 'obelisks'. During their travels, Essun and Hoa meet Tonkee, a woman who is a geomest, or what we would call a scientist, who is

obsessed with the obelisks. The nature and possible uses of these obelisks is basically unknown to the people of the Stillness:

Memories are fragile as slate in the Stillness. In fact, these days no one really pays much attention to the things at all, though they are huge and beautiful and a little terrifying: massive crystalline shards that hover amid the clouds, rotating slowly and drifting along incomprehensible flight paths, blurring now and again as if they are not quite real - though this may only be a trick of the light. (It isn't). It's obvious that the obelisks are nothing natural. (TFS, 8)

As the complete story unravels throughout the three books, the reader learns that the obelisks are a man-made construct, extracted from the Earth by a technically advanced ancient civilization called Syl Anagist, and that they harness orogeny-like power, called magic, that orogenes can use to amplify their powers and work together. Through the character Hoa, who turns out to be a humanoid being called a 'stone-eater' and who has lived since the time of this ancient civilization, we learn that the stonelore is only a partial, very selective record of the history that came after this ancient civilization fell. Hoa and others like him were once humans with very powerful orogeny, and in the third book, *The Stone Sky* (2017), we learn through him a different history, of genocide, resource extraction, slavery, technological and ecological disaster, the exploitation of the consciousness of the natural world, and societal collapse.

In the next section of this chapter I will elaborate on this ancient civilization and its history, as I will argue that the *Niess*, of whom Hoa is a descendant, can be read as a cyborgian group of people, who specifically operate on and transgress these boundaries of colonialism, racism and technologically advanced capitalism. I will argue that this transgression which leads to their dehumanization, oppression and ultimately their annihilation in the society of Syl Anagist.

1.2 the Exploitative Hybris of Advanced Capitalism in Syl Anagist

In *The Stone Sky* (2017), there are three different types of chapters, from different narrators: Essun, Nassun, and the stone eater Hoa, who has followed Essun since the beginning of *The Fifth Season*, first in the form of a young boy, and later in *The Obelisk Gate* in his adult appearance. Starting at the very beginning of the novel, in the prologue, called 'me, when I was I', Hoa's narration is in first person and present tense, and it recalls the history from before the seasons in the Stillness started, when there were three continents instead of one (TSK 2017, 1). Hoa tells the reader about his memories, from when he was a human living in a society called 'Syl Anagist'. He describes Syl Anagist as follows:

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 toward the ground beneath their feet. And Syl Anagist, oh how it lives, in bustling streets and ceaseless commerce and buildings that your mind would struggle to define as such. (TSK, 3)

Syl Anagist is characterized here by Hoa as a city, but really, a society that has mastered a type of bio-technology, which means that it is very green and very much alive. It is advanced in its understanding of what we would call physics, biology and geology, and uses this to 'serve' humanity: there is a system of plants that clean dirty water, and buildings are constructed with living flora. It is repeated throughout Hoa's chapters that life itself is sacred in Syl Anagist. Sprinkled throughout Hoa's narration are hints that this society was once not so green, efficient and alive. Hoa states:

We have been told stories of how the world was different, long ago. Once, cities were not just dead themselves, stone and metal jungles that did not grow or change, but they were actually deadly, poisoning soil and making water undrinkable and even changing the weather by their very existence. (TSK, 144)

This description reads eerily similar to the world in which I am writing this, in 2020; especially the last part of this citation echoes the current climate crisis. A place like Syl Anagist might seem like a utopic future for our current world. Syl Anagist itself seems aware of its utopic imagining: Hoa has been told *stories* about how the world used to be, implying how it used to be *worse*, and how it is now *better*. In one of Hoa's memories of Syl Anagist, he is shown around a historical museum made of concrete (146) - and is thus implied to be from this time before. In the museum, this narrative is confirmed: 'a booming voice sounds over the building's audio system: "Welcome to the story of enervation!" (147) - implying that the history this museum shows is feeble and frail, whereas Syl Anagist is strong and innovative.

Another aspect of Syl Anagist that stands out here is its description as a capitalist society: there is 'ceaseless commerce' (3), and its people have employed life itself as a resource to build their world on. Syl Anagist's capitalist structure and its hegemonic discourse of innovation through advanced bio-technology are tied together: Hoa states that 'Life is sacred in Syl Anagist - sacred, and lucrative, and *useful*.' (314). Life is sacred *because* it is useful, because it is a resource, and resources are lucrative.

How, then, has Syl Anagist employed life as a resource? From Hoa's narration, the reader learns that Syl Anagist has a technological project to employ the so-called 'Plutonic Engine' with the help of Hoa and others like him. This Plutonic Engine consists of 256 obelisks. During this time, the obelisks did not yet float in the sky, but rather were situated at the center of 256 cities - all (like) Syl Anagist) - connected to or *in* the Earth at their base. The obelisks are made of crystal and generate and consists of what is called magic in the novels, or a kind of life force. Hoa explains:

All energy is the same, through its different states and names. Movement creates heat which is also light that waves like sound which tightens or loosens the atomic bonds of crystal as they hum with strong and weak forces. In mirroring resonance with all of this is magic, the radiant emission of life and death. (97)

The Plutonic Engine thus consists of the connection between all these obelisks generating, resonating with this magic. Hoa, and the six others like him, have the ability to use orogeny, the power to control and manipulate 'thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events' (410), and magic together to control this network of obelisks. Hoa describes it as follows:

This is our role: To weave together those disparate energies. To manipulate and mitigate and, through the prism of our awareness, produce a singular force that cannot be denied. To make of cacophony, symphony. The great machine called the Plutonic Engine is the instrument. We are its tuners. (97)

The aim of the Plutonic Engine is to use all this combined force to direct it towards the centre of the Earth - a hole has been drilled towards the Earth's core, which is incredibly full of this life force or magic - and then create a loop in which magic keeps being created. Life, or magic, is the resource on which Syl Anagist is built, and the obelisks, the Plutonic Engine, and Hoa and his kind are the means of production. Through this Plutonic Engine, Syl Anagist will get more and more magic to use in its technologies, and more profit. Hoa explains:

And this is the goal: Geoarcanity. Geoarcanity seeks to establish an energetic cycle of infinite efficiency. If we are successful, the world will never know want or strife again... or so we are told. The conductors explain little beyond what we must know to fulfill our roles. It is enough to know that we - small, unimportant we - will help to set humanity on a new path toward and unimaginably bright future. We may be tools, but we are fine ones, put to a magnificent purpose. It is easy to find pride in that. (TSK, 97-98)

This last part of this citation is very important: although Hoa is a living, breathing being with needs and desires, as are the others like him, they are not seen as human beings. They are tools: useful, and lucrative. In the next section I will discuss why and how this dehumanization of Hoa and his kind has taken place, and how it shows the entanglement of colonialism and technologically advanced capitalism.

1.3 Dehumanization and Exploitation of the Niess in Colonial Syl Anagist

Hoa, and the others like him, have incredible orogenic and magical powers, as described in the previous section in relation to their ability to work with the obelisk network called the Plutonic Engine. Their abilities were no coincidence, however. Hoa describes them as being made from a 'biomagestric mix' (TSK, 43), meaning they were biologically *made*. When Hoa and the others meet Kelenli, who has their same abilities but does not look like them, he remarks:

“How can you be a tuner like us?”

(...)

Kelenli smiles, with a wryness that acknowledges the lie. “Not quite like you, but close enough. You’re the finished artwork, I’m the model.” Threads of magic in the earth heat and reverberate and add other meanings. *Prototype*. A control to our experiment, made earlier to see how we should be done. She has only one difference, instead of the many that we possess. She has our carefully designed sessapinae.

(TSK, 48)

This passage makes it clear that Hoa and his kind were designed, made into what they were, by Syl Anagist’ advanced technological innovaters. They were carefully constructed to serve as a tool in this big machine, the Plutonic Engine, so that Syl Anagist might profit and have an abundance of resources to use and sell. This invites a reading of Hoa and his kind as mechanical cyborgs, who transgress the boundary between human and machine (Haraway 1991, 152-3). This brings about a tension in the reader between their perceived non-humanity by Syl Anagist ideologies, and narration from Hoa’s perspective and the realization of their peoplehood, which in turn problematizes the entanglement of the dehumanization of the Other and colonial, technologically advanced capitalism.

The ‘many differences’ that Hoa talks about, are related to the *Niess* people, who Hoa and his kind are modelled after. The Niess were a group of people, who were colonized and then annihilated by Syl Anagist. Hoa explains:

The Sylanagistines took their land. The Niess fought, but then responded like any living thing under threat - with diaspora, sending whatever was left of themselves flying forth to take root and perhaps survive where it could. The descendants of those Niess became part of *every* land, *every* people. blending in among the rest and adapting to local customs. (TSK, 209)

The Niess were believed to have a special, and according to Syl Anagist, dangerous, relationship to magic - because they had a different approach to it than the colonial, capitalist use of it by Syl Anagist. Hoa states that

Magic is everywhere in the world. Everyone sees it, feels it, flows with it. In Syl Anagist, magic is cultivated in every flower bed and tree line and grapevine-draped wall. Each household or business must produce its share, which is then funneled away in genengineered vines and pumps to become the power source for a global civilization. It is illegal to kill in Syl Anagist because life is a valuable resource.

The Niess did not believe this. Magic could not be owned, they insisted, any more than life could be - and thus they wasted both, by building (among many other things) plutonic engines that did nothing. They were just... pretty. Or thought-provoking, or crafted for the sheer joy of crafting. And yet this “art” ran more efficiently and powerfully than anything the Sylanagistine had ever managed. (TSK, 209-210)

Believing magic could not be owned, and thus not profited from in capitalist society like Syl Anagist, is of course a dialectically opposed belief to Syl Anagist ideology. In the historical museum, Kelenli shows Hoa and the others an artwork made by the Niess, which Hoa describes as *feeling* like the Plutonic Engine, but without a *purpose* that he, who is indoctrinated by Syl Anagist, could think of:

This engine's magics have no purpose that I can see, other than to look and sound and be beautiful. And somehow - I shiver, understanding instinctively but resisting because this contradicts everything I have learned from the laws of both physics and arcanity - *somehow* this structure is generating more energy than it consumes.

(...)

It has the same fundamental structure as other plutonic engines. Only its *purpose* is different - no, no. That's too simple an assessment. What's different here is... philosophical. Attitudinal. The Plutonic Engine is a tool. This thing? Is... art.

And then I understand. No one of Syl Anagist built this.' (TSK, 150-151)

Kelenli tells Hoa and the others what happened to the Niess. The way they looked, with white skin and white irises called 'ice-whites', often split tongues and kinky hair, became villainized; through their different approach to magic, their sessapinae, the organ with which orogeny and magic are perceived and used, located at the back of the neck, became to be perceived as perverse or dangerous, as fundamentally different. Hoa words it as follows:

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

Firstly, the discourse here about the Niess shows that they were believed to transgress the boundary of animal-human, with their sessapinae being fundamentally

different, which invites a cyborgian reading of the Niess as well. This paragraph, in context of the rest of the chapter, also echoes Sylvia Wynter's conceptualization of the history of colonialism in Europe. Shannon Winnubst (2018) explains:

The fifteenth-century contemporaneous movements of European colonialism and Renaissance humanism thereby mark the emergence of what Wynter names 'Man1', a complex conceptual apparatus that locks the figure of the human directly into the violence of colonialist racialization. 'Man2' then emerges as the nineteenth century 'biocentric' concept of post-Darwinian science, building on the late eighteenth-century racializing taxonomies of Linnaeus, that carries the binary violence of Man/Other endemic to the prior theological apparatus into the fully secularized discourses of science and their intertwining with bourgeois capitalism.' (99)

I recognize this emergence of this 'Man1' that Wynter conceptualized in Syl Anagist' exclusionary and Othering practices towards other peoples and cultures, especially here the Niess. This 'Man2', fuelled by discourses of science and capitalism, then emerges in the dehumanization and Othering of Hoa and his kind, who were constructed to look like the Niess, and be exaggerated versions of the Niess, in order to justify their dehumanization and status as merely 'tools', and their exploitation.

The process of dehumanization and the Othering of the Niess was finalized in the exploitation of the Niess, when Syl Anagist started to use them, to generate the magic necessary to start the magical engines of the obelisks, which in turn the Syl Anagists used for their profit. Hoa describes this as follows:

Nonliving, inorganic things like crystal are inert to magic. Therefore, in order to help the fragments initiate the generative cycle, raw magic must be used as a catalyst. Every engine needs a starter. Enter the sinklines: They look like vines, thick and gnarled, twisting and curling to form a lifelike thicket around the fragments's base. And ensnared in these vines -

We're going to see them, Kelenli told me, when I asked her where the Niess were.

They are still alive, I know at once. Though they sprawl motionless amid the thicket of vines (lying atop the vines, twisted among them, wrapped up in them, speared by them where the vines grow through flesh), 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. Some of them we can see breathing, though the motion is so very slow. 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. (TSK, 262)

Here, the Niess are forced to be part of this *machine* that will eventually become the Plutonic Engine, and reduced to being a tool, much like their descendants, Hoa and the others like him. As I argued before, the Niess already were perceived to transgress the Syl Anagistic boundaries of animal-human, but here they are made to transgress the human-machine boundary like Hoa and his kind. The obelisks are used to fuel the magic in every piece of architecture and engine in Syl Anagist, so Hoa's assertion that the Niess 'became part of every land, every people' (209) is true in more than just the diasporic sense. Their artful, balanced and thoughtful use of magic fuelled the obelisks, which in turn fuelled Syl Anagist technologies, which in turn was made into profit. Hoa says of this later:

The Niess were not the first people chewed up in its maw, just the latest and cruelest extermination of many. But for a society built on exploitation, there is no greater threat than having no one left to oppress. And now, if nothing else is done, Syl Anagist must again find a way to fission its people into subgroupings and create reasons for conflict among them. There's not enough magic to be had just from plants and genengineered fauna; someone must suffer, if the rest are to enjoy luxury. (TSK, 334)

Here, I read echoes of what Nancy Leong (2013) has called 'racial capitalism'. Racial capitalism is 'the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person', which 'relies upon and reinforces commodification of racial identity, thereby degrading that identity by reducing it to another thing to be bought and sold' (2152). As I have explained above, the Niess, once colonized, became grouped and racialized, and Syl Anagist derived social and economic value from exploiting their traditional use of magic. Furthermore, what we find out in the shocking scene above, Syl Anagist also literally reduced the Niess to the thing that they could commodify and sell, namely their production of magic. Here, we can clearly see the entanglement of racialization and colonialism and exploitative capitalism.

In this chapter I have argued that the history and legacy of the Niess in the society of Syl Anagist show the structural entanglements of colonialism, racism and capitalism. Firstly, I have shown that Syl Anagist is a technologically advanced capitalist society, and then I have argued that its capitalism is entangled with colonialism and the dehumanization and exploitation of the Niess people.

In the next chapter I will return to my discussion on Hoa and his kind, and their decision to rebel by using the Plutonic Engine to destroy Syl Anagist, which has disastrous consequences. I will relate this to my argument that the concept of magic and the conceptualization of the conscious Earth invite a reading that focuses on the agency of matter, which in turn shows the entanglement in the novels of exploitative capitalism and the dehumanization of the consciousness of nature, which is the central argument of the next chapter.

2.

Magic, Matter, and the Consciousness of the Earth as a Warning for Climate Change in *The Broken Earth Trilogy* (2015-2017)

In this chapter, I will argue that the concept of magic as portrayed in the *Broken Earth* trilogy and the conceptualization of the Earth as a live being invite a reading that focuses on the agency or vitality of matter, which in turn shows the entanglement in the novels of exploitative capitalism and in particular the dehumanization of the consciousness of nature. First, I will argue that Hoa and his kind's decision to rebel, based the history and legacy of the Niess in the society of Syl Anagist, and the Earth's reaction to this rebellion show the structural entanglements of colonialism, racism and capitalism, and the exploitation of nature. I will discuss the conceptualization and dehumanization of the Earth as a live being, and how this is portrayed in the novels, and read this through Karen Barad's notion of the agency of matter and related on the vitality of matter by Jane Bennet. I will show that this problematize the relationship between Syl Anagist's capitalism and its extraction of natural resources. Lastly, I will argue that in this reading of Syl Anagist and the Niess, there is a warning about our real world struggles with climate change.

2.1 Rebellions of the dehumanized

As I have explained in the first chapter, Hoa and the others like him have been constructed by Syl Anagist to look like the Niess, and to possess their orogenic and magical powers. They are enslaved and trained to use the so-called Plutonic Engine, a network of obelisks, which are man-made crystal shards extracted from the Earth that harness and amplify magic. With this network, or the Plutonic Engine, Syl Anagist is planning to create a loop of magic renewal, by concentrating its power to the centre of the Earth, where a lot of magic is placed. Syl Anagist has drilled a hole towards the Earth's core, on which the Plutonic Engine will be directed, to create a loop that will keep making new magic - for Syl Anagist to use. Hoa and his kind are the ones who operate the Plutonic Engine.

However, as I have previously explored, Hoa and the others learn that they are constructed descendants from a colonized and enslaved people called the Niess - and that they themselves are, just like the Niess, constructed to be perceived as non-human, as tools, parts of a great machine: not as people at all. They decide to rebel - for their own sake, and for the sake of their ancestors. They conduct a plan for the launch day of the Plutonic Engine, when they are supposed to start the Engine creating its infinite loop of magical resources. Instead, they plan to turn the Engine onto Syl Anagist, and destroy the city, and the society as a whole, with the Engine's force overflowing the city's magical systems, creating a short circuit of sorts. This also means suicide for Hoa and the others, as they will be part of the Engine as it creates the short circuit, and that much power, they cannot handle. Hoa states about the plan:

We need not be as cruel as they. We can instruct the fragments to come down away from the most inhabited areas. We are the monsters they created, and more, **but we will be the sort of monsters we wish to be, in death.** (TSK, 321, emphasis my own)

Thus, it is clear that he and his kind see a kind of agency in this chosen death. Unlike the Niess, who are kept alive just enough so that they create more magic for the

obelisks and are thus unable to die, Hoa and the others get to choose their death. Considering that life is considered sacred, and lucrative, in *Syl Anagist*, this is an ultimate rebellion. As Achilles Mbembe (2003) notes in his theory on necropolitics: 'Imagining politics as a form of war, we must ask: What place is given to life, death, and the human body (in particular the wounded or slain body)? How are they inscribed in the order of power?' (12). Those whose lives and bodies are deemed disposable, are dehumanized. In *Syl Anagist*, life is placed above death, and life is controlled to the point where those who are dehumanized and enslaved **cannot** die. Their human bodies, forced to live, are literally entwined with the order of power, in the form of the obelisks. By choosing to 'override' the system, and ultimately choosing death, Hoa and the others break with this inscription of power and their enforced dehumanization.

However, when the launch day of the Plutonic Engine comes, and they start to execute their plan something unforeseen happens. Hoa says, before this happens:

(Ignorance is an inaccurate term for what this was. True, no one thought of the Earth as alive in those days - but we *should* have guessed. Magic is the by-product of life. That there was magic in the Earth to take... We should all have guessed.) (TSK, 322)

This realization, that the Earth is in fact, conscious and alive, has disastrous consequences for Hoa and his kind, and *Syl Anagist* as a society. The Earth is angry that humanity has drilled a hole to its core, and it senses that humanity will exploit the magic in its core by using the Plutonic Engine. Humanity has never thought that this was possible, has never even considered the Earth as a being in its own right - and thus has dehumanized the Earth in similar ways it has dehumanized the Niess, and Hoa - to colonize and claim them, and exploit them.

2.2 Nature matters

As I have explained in the first chapter, Hoa and his kind possess the ability to manipulate a sort of life force, which they call *magic*. To reiterate what magic is exactly, I will quote the next passage again, in which Hoa says that

All energy is the same, through its different states and names. Movement creates heat which is also light that waves like sound which tightens or loosens the atomic bonds of crystal as they hum with strong and weak forces. In mirroring resonance with all of this is magic, the radiant emission of life and death. (97)

As I have argued in the first chapter, Syl Anagist has exploited this magic as a resource through their subjugation of the people of Niess and through the creation and enslavement of Hoa and his kind as constructed descendants of the Niess. I have not yet explained, however, how magic as a force or concept is tied to nature and the Earth, and the consequences this has for Syl Anagist, Hoa and his kind, and the story as a whole.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennet (2010) argues the following:

Why advocate the vitality of matter? Because my hunch is that the image of dead or thoroughly instrumentalized matter feeds human hubris and our earth-destroying fantasies of conquest and consumption. It does so by preventing us from detecting (seeing, hearing, smelling, tasting, feeling) a fuller range of the nonhuman powers circulating around and within human bodies. These material powers, which can aid or destroy, enrich or disable, ennoble or degrade us, in any case call for our attentiveness, or even “respect” (provided that the term be stretched beyond its Kantian sense). The figure of an intrinsically inanimate matter may be one of the impediments to the emergence

of more ecological and more materially sustainable modes of production and consumption. (ix)

Bennet's assertion here that the dehumanization of matter provides the basis for human hubris and leads to colonialist, exploitative capitalism, forms an excellent theorization of this intervention that Jemisin makes in *The Broken Earth*: by making the Earth a conscious, live being that has agency and can 'fight back' when it is exploited, Jemisin draws attention to this problem of the dehumanization of matter, and its consequences. It shows the entanglement of nature with colonialism and exploitative capitalism.

But what does the Earth do, then, when it realizes that humanity is trying to enslave it? Much like Hoa and the others' plan to turn the Plutonic Engine back on Syl Anagist, the Earth takes control of part of the Engine, and tries to use it onto its surface - so that humanity may be destroyed. In the process, it decides to punish the wielders of the Engine, Hoa and the others, in an explicit way. The Earth turns Hoa and the others into **stone eaters**. Hoa states:

I have said that it held us responsible for the attempt on its life, and it did - but somehow, perhaps through its years of study, it understood that we were tools of others, not actors of our own volition. Remember, too, that the Earth does not fully understand us. It looks upon human beings and sees short-lived, fragile creatures, puzzlingly detached in substance and awareness from the planet on which their lives depend, who do not understand the harm they tried to do - perhaps *because* they are so short-lived and fragile and detached. And so it chose for us what seemed, to it, a **punishment leavened with meaning: It made us part of it**. In my wire chair, I screamed as wave upon wave of alchemy worked over me, **changing my flesh into raw, living, solidified magic that looks like stone**. (TSK, 341, emphasis my own)

What is striking here is Hoa's phrasing, stating that the Earth made him 'part of it', and 'changing my flesh into raw, living, solidified magic that looks like stone', which is arguably a good description of the Earth itself - implying that the punishment was

meant to make Hoa and the others experience the same dehumanization of matter that the Earth has experienced from humanity.

I read this as an invitation to see this aspect of dehumanization in the whole story, as Karen Barad (2006) suggests in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, as enabling us 'the social and the natural together, to read our best understandings of social and natural phenomena through one another in a way that clarifies the relationship between them.' (25). The social, here, implies the history of the Niess, their colonization and exploitation, the creation of Hoa and the others and their enslavement, their rebellion, the exploitation of magic for profit by Syl Anagist, and so on. However, as I have argued already, this is explicitly linked to the natural, to the material: the Niess are colonized and exploited because of their use of magic, which is a force of *nature*, of the *vitality of matter*; their bodies and the magic they create are exploited for the sake of profit; the Earth, or nature, is exploited for the same reason. By turning Hoa and the others into stone eaters, by making them more 'of nature', more like the Earth, the Earth acts on its agency and forces them to - as Barad states - read these understandings of the social and the natural together, and form a new perspective. It asks the reader to understand this entanglement of nature and meaning, of the dehumanization of the natural world, and its entanglements with exploitative capitalism and colonialism.

2.3 The end of Syl Anagist as a Climate Change Metaphor

What happens, then, to the now-stone eaters like Hoa, and to Syl Anagist as a whole, after this rebellion from the Earth? While Hoa is still in control of the Plutonic Engine, and while he is being turned into a stone eater, he has to make a decision to direct to powered-up Engine somewhere: its energy has to go somewhere. Hoa and the others have been brought to the Moon, from where they could take control of the network of obelisks all over the Earth to create the Plutonic Engine. In the moment when Hoa realizes that the Earth itself is taking control of part of the Engine, he makes the decision to redirect the power he has control over to the Moon itself. In doing so, the Moon is pierced all the way through by the magical power, and swung out of orbit

with the Earth. This makes the Earth react in extreme anger, as the Moon is described as the Earth's 'child' - and thus it turns Hoa and the others into stone eaters, and lets the obelisks it had control over burn down, which caused immense destruction. Hoa says about this:

We could not stop the Earth's twenty-seven. We did, however, manage to insert a delay into their command lattices: one hundred years. What the tales get wrong is only the timing, you see? One hundred years after Father Earth's child was stolen from him, twenty-seven obelisks did burn down to the planet's core, leaving fiery wounds all over its skin. It was not the cleansing fire that the Earth sought, but it was still the first and worst Fifth Season - what you call the Shattering. Humankind survives because one hundred years is nothing to the Earth, or even to the expanse of human history, but to those who survived the fall of Syl Anagist, it was just time enough to prepare. (TSK, 342)

Here, I think the parallels to climate change in our real world become very clear. The survivors of Syl Anagist knew what was going to happen, and they had time to prepare; much like we do. And *they* did prepare, and humankind survived. However, humankind did not look critically at its past, at the exploitative, marginalizing powers at play in its society, and it inherited these powers over and over - so that they are still present in the Stillness, in the present timeline of the novels. This reads like a warning to me: yes, we have prepare to survive, but in doing so, we must also come to terms with our past, and reconcile how we have built society on racism and exploitation, otherwise we will make the same mistake and inherit a similar world as the people of the Stillness. Barad states that '[m]atter is always already an ongoing historicity' (821), and I argue that this is made very clear in this conceptualization of a conscious Earth and magic as a life force that constitutes matter, combined with the historicity of exploitative capitalism and colonialism in Syl Anagist and the inheritance of its remnants in the Stillness.

I will get back to this notion of historicity and the remnants of the entanglement of exploitative capitalism, colonialism and climate change in the Stillness in the next

chapter, where I will discuss the present timeline of the novels in greater detail. I will argue that the *Broken Earth* trilogy portrays the cyclical nature and the inheritance of oppression and dehumanization, through the entanglement of colonialism, exploitative capitalism and its relation to nature and climate change, which I have discussed in this chapter and the previous one. I will also argue that a cyborgian reading of the inheritance of this entanglement provides an argument for reconciliation with its historicity.

3.

The Cyborgian Inheritance of Oppression and the Importance of the Past in *The Broken Earth* Trilogy (2015-2017)

In this third and last chapter I will argue that the *Broken Earth* trilogy portrays the cyclic nature and the inheritance of oppression and dehumanization, through the entanglement of colonialism, exploitative capitalism and its relation to nature and climate change that I have discussed in the previous two chapters. I will argue that figures of the orogenes are cyborgian figures who have inherited the transgression of boundaries between human and nature, which leads to their dehumanization and marginalization in the society of the Stillness/Sanze Empire, which is built on the notion of survival and in opposition to nature and the Earth. Similarly, I will argue that the stone eaters are cyborgian figures, who nonetheless have a different relationship to time as they have to bear witness to this cycle of inheritance of oppression and dehumanization. Finally, I will argue that the trilogy as a whole then becomes an argument for the reconciliation with the past that is inherited by the dehumanized and oppressed, through both its thematic and narrative structure.

This is also the reason why I have decided to analyze the *history* of their inherited marginalization in the first two chapters of this thesis, and work ‘backwards’ through the novels, as it were. Before they are able to truly look towards a better future, Hoa and his kind, then the stone eaters, and the orogenes, all have to look towards the past and reconcile the inherited cycle of oppression that exists in these worlds - and so I needed to map out and analyze the entanglement of exploitative

capitalism, colonialism and the natural world and climate change before turning to the present timeline in these novels.

Firstly, however, I will explain briefly the plot of first novel, *The Fifth Season* (2015), and the second novel *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), so that my analysis later makes sense. *The Fifth Season* tells the story of three characters: Essun, who is in her early forties, Syenite, who is in her late twenties to mid thirties, and a ten year old girl, Damaya. These characters all are so-called 'orogenes', which means they have the power to control and manipulate 'thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events' (Jemisin 2015, 462). They live in a place called The Stillness, which is a giant continent, where natural disaster happens frequently all over the continent for a prolonged period. The people of The Stillness call these natural disasters 'the fifth season', or simply 'a season', as these disastrous events are as inevitable as the change of the seasons. They tend to happen once every couple of hundred years. *The Fifth Season* starts at the beginning of such a season.

Essun's story starts as she find her son, Uche of three years old and also an orogene, beaten to death by his father, Jija. He has taken their daughter, Nassun of ten, and has ran away. Essun is forced to fled their home as well, since the whole comm(unity) of Tirimo will soon know she and her children are *roggas* (the slur for orogenes). This all happens right at the start of the new fifth season, which starts with an immense earthquake that rips the continent in half, which its people call The Rift. Essun flees, determined to find Nassun, and on the road, she meets Hoa, a young boy who appears to feel, or 'sess' (how the feeling of orogeny is described) where Nassun is.

As mentioned above, orogenes are people who have the ability to manipulate 'thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events' (Jemisin 2015, 462). One might think that it would be useful to have people around who can work with earthly energies when such natural disasters occur, but the orogenes are not appreciated for their powers. In fact, they are seen as enemies of the people of the Stillness, as they believe orogenes are by-products of the evil Father Earth, which is what they call their planet, who makes the seasons happen. Orogenes are thus extremely marginalized. Throughout the story of this first novel, we learn about their

fates: babies who cannot hide their orogeny are killed or abandoned and older orogenes are exiled from their homes or lynched. Others are forced to join an organization called the Fulcrum, where they learn to control their powers and serve the Sanze Empire which rules The Stillness. Essentially, they are enslaved in the Fulcrum, unable to go outside its walls without a chaperone and assigned a Guardian, who can control and negate the orogenes' power whenever they see fit.

Really, orogenes are not seen as human beings at all: in the Fulcrum, they are seen as tools or weapons to serve a purpose, and outside, they are seen as monsters. The other women of this story are both connected to the Fulcrum, albeit in different ways. We meet Damaya, the young girl, as her community has discovered her orogeny, after which Damaya is taken by her new Guardian, Schaffa, to the Fulcrum. Through her eyes, we see how young orogenes, or 'grits', are trained and disciplined, indoctrinated to see themselves merely as weapons or tools, or as monsters, rather than human beings.

Syenite is an orogene who has lived and trained at the Fulcrum for some years, and who has earned four rings, a system of testimony to her control and abilities. She is sent on a mission with the only ten ringed orogene in the Fulcrum, Alabaster. She is also forced to have a baby with him, so that the Fulcrum may raise another powerful orogene child to use in its endeavours - orogeny is partly inherited, it seems. We follow her on this mission as she learns from Alabaster to see how the Fulcrum enslaves and mistreats orogenes in a way she did not consider before.

The Obelisk Gate (2016) follows Essun's story as she continues to learn more about the stone eaters, about magic, and about the obelisks, and as she learns about the past of the Stillness and how to change the world for good. It also follows her daughter's journey, Nassun, who is learning to hone her orogenic abilities and who is becoming very powerful. She also has ambitions to change the world and make it better. I will come back to this at the end of this chapter, when I talk about how the story concludes.

3.1 Orogenes

How, then, might we understand the figure of the orogene as a cyborg? As mentioned in theoretical framework, Donna Haraway specifically relates the symbolic, mythology and fiction to the societal and material world. At the beginning of this manifesto, she states that 'the boundary between science fiction and social reality is an optical illusion.' (149) and she asserts: 'I am making an argument for the cyborg as a **fiction mapping** our social and bodily reality and as an imaginative resource suggesting some very fruitful couplings. (150, emphasis my own). As I understand this, this means that cyborgs map out the social and bodily reality of our world, but in fiction, drawing parallels or transformations or mythologisations. This is very much the case for the orogenes that populate *The Fifth Season*. As Alastair Iles (2019) argues: 'Orogenes are subject to discrimination that echoes the racial oppression historically found in the US, Australia, South Africa, and many other places. Inspired in particular by African-American experience, orogenes could be any of numerous racial and ethnic groups that have been enslaved across human history.' (8). The orogenes are thus cyborgs that map in fiction the social and bodily realities of a long history of white supremacy, slavery and systematic oppression.

Haraway also argues that cyborgs in feminist¹ science fiction problematizes dichotomies and dualisms: 'The cyborgs populating feminist science fiction make very problematic the statuses of man or woman, human, artefact, member of a race, individual entity, or body.' (178). Cyborgs problematize these categories by blurring their boundaries and transforming their meanings. Haraway explains further, making three distinctions that the cyborg problematizes:

The cyborg appears in myth precisely where the boundary between human and animal is transgressed (...) The second leaky distinction is between animal-human (organism) and machine. (...) The third distinction is a subset of

¹ It is generally hard to determine what makes science fiction feminist, as feminism is a broad and elusive term. However, it might be helpful to note that science fiction in general is populated by male writers who write male characters, so the fact that *The Fifth Season* tells the story three women is relevant here.

the second: the boundary between physical and non-physical is very imprecise for us. (152-3)

Orogenes configure the cyborg's transgression of these three distinctions in several different ways. Firstly and simply, their abilities to manipulate nature shows the crossing of boundaries between what is human and what is natural. The people of the Stillness define themselves directly and structurally opposed to nature, to the evil Father Earth who haunts them with natural disaster, while the orogenes are more in connection to nature. In a society built on the evilness of nature, this of course marginalizes those who have an innate connection to the Earth and thus transgress the norms. The orogenes are a reminder that all people are part of the natural world, and thus they transgress the boundaries that the Stillness has inflicted upon itself to survive.

Another distinction that is contradictory and transgressive is the way orogeny works and feels. Damaya's perspective shows us that orogeny works on instincts and emotions: when she was scared and angry, she accidentally and involuntary used her powers. Once Schaffa, her Guardian, is taking her to the Fulcrum, Damaya is being indoctrinated with the idea that her instincts are wrong. Schaffa tells her:

“Every time the earth moves, you will hear its call. In every moment of danger you will reach, instinctively, for the nearest source of warmth and movement. The ability to do this is, to you, as fists are to a strong man. When a threat is imminent, of course you'll do what you must to protect yourself. And when you do, people will die.” (36-37)

Schaffa, and later the Fulcrum, teach Damaya to internalize this message: your feelings and instincts are inherently dangerous. The Fulcrum, however, teaches orogenes to become *aware* of these instincts, and to control them. The Fulcrum teaches orogeny as a scientific process, a thing of reason rather than of feelings and instinct. The Sanze empire as a society is also built on this notion of reason, for the logics of survival, which is maybe most prevalent in the strict use castes that divide the population based on the individuals' strengths that are most useful for survival.

Orogeny, then, a thing really more of instinct and feelings, is diametrically opposed to the hegemonic discourse and thus transgresses the norms of how to interact with the world.

Finally, the orogenes' place in the societal structure and the discourse about them are also cyborgian. They are perceived as both animalistic and monstrous; orogenes that are not trained by the Fulcrum are called 'feral', like animals. But they are also seen as tools and weapons, wielded by both the Evil Earth and the protective Sanze Empire. The Fulcrum makes the orogenes internalize the notion that they are weapons or tools, one might say machines, rather than human beings, even though their instincts are very much human. Essun shows how she has internalized these contradictory messages about her kind when she arrives at Castrima and realizes Nassun is not there:

You've always known better. How dare you expect anything else? You're just another **filthy, rusty-souled rogga**, just another **agent of the Evil Earth**, just another **mistake of sensible breeding practices**, just another **misaid tool**.
(271-72, emphasis my own)

This internalization about orogenes shows the cyborgian ways in which they transgress boundaries of animal/monster-machine/tool *within the same discourse*. Importantly, there are direct parallels to the discourse about orogenes and about the Niess people and Hoa and his kind (before they were turned into stone eaters), which I have discussed in the first chapter of this thesis. In the chapters about Syl Anagist in *The Stone Sky* (2017), Hoa often refers to himself as a 'tool' or a 'construct', a part of a 'great machine'. The discourse about the Niess focuses on their supposed 'animalistic' nature, and their too-natural relationship to magic. Seeing as the orogenes are direct descendants of Kelenli, who was constructed to be like the Niess people just like Hoa, what is shown here is an **inheritance** of these transgressions, and the marginalization that is the consequence. Haraway states that '[t]he main trouble with cyborgs, of course, is that they are the illegitimate offspring of militarism and patriarchal capitalism, not to mention state socialism. But illegitimate offspring are often exceedingly unfaithful to their origins.' (151). Hoa and Kelenli, and the others of

their kind, were in a way *literally* illegitimate (constructed, in their case) offspring of the Syl Anagist's colonialism and capitalism - and the orogenes in the Stillness are Kelenli's offspring, and since their position is so extremely marginalized, they are always perceived to be illegitimate. Hoa and the others' rebellion to seize the Plutonic Engine and destroy Syl Anagist, and Essun's and Nassun's attempts to use the Engine (they call it the Obelisk Gate) to change the world and make it a better place, are proof of their unfaithfulness to these colonial, capitalist, exploitative origins.

3.2 Stone eaters

The stone eaters are figures who appear like humanoid statues, made of not-quite stone. In the first novel, *The Fifth Season*, the reader meets a few of them, but they remain quite mysterious and unknowable. Later in the trilogy, the reader learns that stone eaters are really made of magic, but a solidified, stone-like perception of magic. This means that the stone eaters are immortal, and Hoa and the others have been alive since they were first turned into stone eaters by the Earth - which is, as of Essun's timeline in the narrative, some forty thousand years ago. It also means they can change shape; when the reader first meets Hoa, he takes the shape of a young boy as to appeal to Essun, but his 'natural' form is of an adult man. They can also travel through the Earth, not so much move through it, but rather becoming one with its particles, by dispersing the magic they are made of with the Earth's magic and thus becoming immaterialized, literally part of the Earth.

Stone eaters are not mythical creatures, even though they might appear to be at first glance. Rather, I argue that they are cyborgian figures too, who Syenite remarks about them in the first novel:

A stone eater is a thing that defies reason - like orogeny, or deadciv artifacts, or anything else that cannot be measured and predicted in a way that makes sense. But where orogeny can be understood (somewhat) and controlled (with effort), and where deadciv artifacts can at least be avoided until they rise from the rusting ocean right in front of you, stone eaters do as they please, go

where they will. Lorists' tales are generous with warnings regarding these creatures; no one tries to stop them. (TFS, 284)

Syenite remarks here echo the messages about orogeny she has internalized from the Fulcrum: the scientific, reasonable and measured conceptualization of orogeny. This internalization has cut her off from the natural, energetic and emotional aspects of orogeny, and in turn makes her unable to see stone eaters as anything else but mysterious creatures to be avoided.

Similarly, in the first novel, Essun is followed by Hoa, who disguised himself as a young boy so that Essun might take him in. She does, and when Essun arrives at Castrima, the new underground community that takes in orogenes (and is actually lead by one, a woman called Ykka), it turns out that stone eaters are drawn to this place, because there are many orogenes there. Why this is the case, is answered through Essun's interactions with Alabaster, who appears in the infirmary of Castrima together with Antimony. Alabaster is slowly dying, turning more and more into stone every time he uses his orogeny. Antimony *eats* his stone. This may sound very gruesome, but at the end of the novel it is revealed that this is the way new stone eaters are 'born': Alabaster ends up becoming a stone eater.

It is also through Alabaster that Essun learns to regard the stone eaters as people rather than mythological creatures. She has this conversation with Alabaster about the stone eaters:

Always lurking, planning, wanting something unknown.

"No. They're people too, Essun. Haven't you figured that out? They need things, want things, feel things, same way we do. And they've been fighting this war much, much longer than you or I. Some of them from the very beginning." (167)

Alabaster, who has spend more than ten years in the presence of stone eaters, has come to realize that they are persons just like he is a person - even though both of their kind are not regarded as people by the hegemonic discourse. What is striking is

how Essun still has trouble facing the stone eaters' personhood. After this conversation with Alabasters, she talks to Hoa:

"Ah, yes. Alabaster said all of you were human. Once, anyway."

There is a moment of silence. "Are you human?"

At this, you cannot help but laugh once. "Officially? No."

"Never mind what others think. What do you feel yourself to be?"

"Human."

"Then so am I."

He stands steaming between the halves of a giant rock from which he just hatched. "Uh, not anymore."

"Should I take your word for that? Or listen to what I feel myself to be?"

(281-82)

However, as Essun learns to perceive and use magic and reconnect with this part of herself, she is also getting closer to Hoa; she starts to see him as a person and starts to understand that stone eaters are a varied and vast people.

I want to argue, then, that stone eaters are cyborgs of a different site than orogenes. Because they appear so different from humans, and are more part of nature than even the orogenes, their dehumanization leads them to be perceived as mythical creatures, as something close to but other than animals, even though they are a people just like human beings. Because they are immortal, they have a different relationship to time than the orogenes do. Once they become stone eaters (because as we have seen, all stone eaters were once human), they have fully inherited the cyborgian transgressions of the orogenes, and then have to witness a **cycle** of marginalization and oppression. In the stone eaters, this cycle of inheritance of oppression becomes materialized in their dehumanization as something completely *other*.

3.3 The past and reconciliation

The transgressive relationship to origins that is prevalent throughout the novels, is precisely *why* I read the stone eaters and the orogenes as cyborgs. I propose that

they populate these worlds as cyborgs in a way that both seeks to understand the past and transgresses temporal boundaries with the aim of reconciling with the past. The past plays a central role in the plot of the novels, as well as in the narrative structure, and I argue that this is precisely *because* the stone eaters and orogenes have a cyborgian relationship with time, that transgresses the present and allows for an ultimately new, revolutionary perspective with which they might look towards the future.

The transgressive relationship with time in general and the past in particular is immediately present in the first novel, *The Fifth Season* (2015), specifically in the way it is narrated. *The Fifth Season* (2015) has three different narrators: Essun, Syenite and Damaya. After a context-providing prologue, the first chapter of the novel is narrated by Essun, and opens as follows: ‘You are she. She is you. You are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead.’ (15). The second-person narration here is striking. First and foremost because second-person narration is quite uncommon, as they are difficult to maintain and do not often make logical sense. Mieke Bal (2017) explains why second-person narrations are ‘difficult’:

The pronouns “I” and “you,” as opposed to “she,” “he,” “they,” and the like, are empty in themselves. They do not refer outside of the situation in which they are uttered. Each utterance is performed by an “I” and addressed to a “you.” This second person is crucial, for it is that subject that confirms the “I” as a speaker. Conversely, the “you” becomes an “I” as soon as the perspective shifts. It is only as (potential) “I” that the “you” him- or herself has the subjectivity to act, hence, to confirm the subjectivity of the previous “I.” (22).

To put it simply, the second-person narration only really works if we can easily imagine a first-person narrator with whom the second-person is in conversation, and we can easily imagine the switch in perspective of this conversation. Jemisin plays with these logistics here, by having this bold, direct opening sentence. On the one hand, she inserts a third-person (she, Essun) to make clear that this *you* really is a stand in for her. It is very clear that Essun is the narrator. On the other hand, it is as if the narration is conversed towards the reader: *you* are the reader, the reader is *you*.

These two threads, as it were, combine to form a narrator with whom the reader identifies in a very direct way: the reader is Essun.

The other narrators, Damaya and Syenite, are more traditional third-person narrators. What is striking is that all three narrators are written in the present tense and are character-bound, meaning that we feel as though we are inside their heads as they are part of the action or plot in the novel. This means that the distance between the reader and the narrators and the action is quite close, but the second-person narration of Essun's chapters bridges this distance more so than the other narrations.

This difference in distance from the narrator is important for the progression of the story. As the stories unfold, we find out that Damaya and Syenite are actually the same person as Essun, but in different stages of her life. Essun's narration shows that she chose to compartmentalize herself, because the memories of her older selves were too painful. She recognizes that this is unsustainable, at the end of the novel, as Syenite and Damaya catch up to her:

The words are out, snide tone and all, before you really catch yourself. And then - well, is it really surprising that you'd be feeling a bit acerbic at this point? You've been sniping at people since Tirimo, really. But then it occurs to you: That's not the way you were with Jija, or anyone else, before Uche's death. Back then you were always careful to be gentler, calmer. Never sarcastic. If you got angry, you didn't let it show. That's not who Essun was supposed to be.

Yeah, well, you're not quite Essun. Not *just* Essun. Not anymore. (397)

In a way, Essun has set boundaries that set her apart from her former selves, which turn out to be unsustainable. She has to come to terms with the fact that she is Essun, but she is also still Damaya and Syenite. This makes for a recontextualization of the narrators for the reader as well. Thus, the boundaries between these different cyborgian narrators and their stories are blurred and transformed, and Essun has to reconcile with her past to have any chance to move towards a better future.

However, in the second novel, *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), this perception the reader has of the narration shifts. More and more, chapters open with a first-person

narrator, before switching back to the second person for Essun's chapters, or the third person for her daughter Nassun's chapters. In a similar way, throughout the novels Essun and her daughter Nassun both come to learn more about the past of the world in which they live. The Stillness has a fraught relationship with the past: in the prologue of the first novel it is said that '[m]emories are fragile as slate in the Stillness' (8). As the reader learns more about this world's history, however, the first person narrator pops up more and more often - and it turns out that this is Hoa, the stone eater, the construct made after the likeness of the Niess, who is speaking.

This realization problematizes the reader's relationship to Essun's second person narration, because it feels more and more like Hoa is speaking to Essun, telling her her own story. Halfway through the second novel, Hoa starts to openly recognize this tension:

I want to keep telling this as I have: in your mind, in your voice, telling you what to think and know. Do you find this rude? It is, I admit. Selfish. When I speak as just myself, it's difficult to feel like part of you. It is lonelier. Please; let me continue a bit longer. (TOG, 280)

The end of the story reveals why Hoa is the one who is telling this story, through the other characters. Essun and Nassun both want to take control of the Obelisk Gate, and use it to change the world; Essun wants to catch the Moon, and in doing so create a truce with the Earth, hopefully ending the seasons; and Nassun wants to use its power to turn everyone on Earth into stone eaters, because that way, everyone is truly equal again. Like Alabaster, when Essun gets access to the Gate, she starts turning to stone. At the end of the story, in a confrontation between Essun and Nassun while they are both trying to use the Gate's power, Essun turns to stone completely, and dies. Throughout Nassun's chapters we have learned that she has a lot of trauma related to her mother, but in this moment, she realizes that her mother did want what was best for her, and that really the world was to blame, not her mother - another reconciliation with the past. Nassun then catches the Moon, in hopes that she might fulfill her mother's wishes. Hoa then takes Essun's stone body, eats her and turns her into a stone eater. We learn that the whole trilogy is Hoa's testament of

Essun's life, as she cannot remember. This, in and of itself, is another reconciliation with the past: Hoa has to recall Essun's life and interpret her feelings, who she loved, how she thought, and Essun has to reconcile the fact that she cannot remember, and that this person is telling her story from his own perspective.

Finally, then, the narrative structure serves as another argument for this cyborgian, transgressive inheritance of the past. The narrative structure blurs boundaries: between what seem to be three different characters in the first novel, and then between who is telling this story, whose story it is. The whole narration is a recalling of the past, of a variety of different pasts, in fact, but they all cumulate in this moment: there is a cyclic nature to this story telling, and to the forces at play in the story. The Niess were colonized and exploited, never able to die. Their constructed descendants, Hoa and the others, inherited this colonization, enslavement, and exploitation into dehumanization. *Their* descendants, who became the orogenes of the Stillness, keep inheriting this cycle of oppression, of exploitation, of dehumanization. Once turned into stone eaters, they are forced to bear witness to these cycles, forever trying to reconcile the past, and repairing the wound inflicted upon the Earth when its child, the Moon, was swung away.

In this chapter, I have argued that, through the entanglement of colonialism, exploitative capitalism and its relation to nature and climate change that I have discussed in the previous two chapters, the *Broken Earth* trilogy portrays the cyclic nature and the inheritance of oppression and dehumanization. I have argued that figures of the orogenes and the stone eaters are two distinct cyborgian figures who have inherited the transgression of boundaries between human and nature, which leads to their dehumanization and marginalization. I have argued that their cyborgian status intervenes in the way the past is viewed, as the orogenes inherit the oppression and dehumanization through their cyborgian status, and as the stone eaters have to bear witness to this cyclical process through their cyborgian relationship to time and mortality. Finally, I have argued that the trilogy as a whole then becomes an argument for the reconciliation with the past that is inherited by the dehumanized and oppressed, through both its thematic and narrative structure.

Conclusion

In this thesis, I have researched the relationship between capitalism, colonialism and oppression, and climate change and natural disaster in *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin (2015-2017). My research questions were the following:

- How and to what extent the fictionalized histories of the world in the novels and the concept of magic illustrate the entanglement of ecology, capitalism, dehumanization and oppression;
- How do the figures of the 'stone eater' and the 'orogene' challenge and transgress the boundaries of hegemonic discourses in the world of these novels and how does a cyborgian reading of these figures illustrate the inheritance of the history of this entanglement of ecology, capitalism, dehumanization and oppression;
- How and to what extent the use of formal aspects of the text such as narratological perspective amplify this transgression of boundaries and cyclical inheritance of the entanglement of ecological disaster, capitalism and oppression.

I discussed these questions through a close reading of the three novels that comprise *The Broken Earth* trilogy, that was informed by a new materialist theoretical framework.

In my first chapter, starting with the third novel in the series, *The Stone Sky* (2017), I have argued that the *Broken Earth* series shows the entanglement of technologically advanced capitalism and structural racism and colonialism. I have first explained the worldbuilding, characters, and storyline of the novels so that my analysis would be understandable and clear. Then I have argued that the history of the society Syl Anagist that is uncovered in Hoa's chapters shows this entanglement of colonialism, structural racism and advanced capitalism through the dehumanization, oppression and ultimately annihilation of the Niess people.

In the second chapter of this thesis, I have argued that the concept of magic as portrayed in the *Broken Earth* trilogy and the conceptualization of the Earth as a live

being invite a reading that focuses on the agency or vitality of matter, which in turn shows the entanglement in the novels of exploitative capitalism and in particular the dehumanization of the consciousness of nature. I have discussed the conceptualization and dehumanization of the Earth as a live being, and how this is portrayed in the novels, and read this through Karen Barad's notion of the agency of matter and related on the vitality of matter by Jane Bennet. I have shown that this problematize the relationship between Syl Anagist's capitalism and its extraction of natural resources. Lastly, I have argued that in this reading of Syl Anagist and the Niess, there is a warning about our real world struggles with climate change.

I have argued that, through the entanglement of colonialism, exploitative capitalism and its relation to nature and climate change that I have discussed in the previous two chapters, the *Broken Earth* trilogy portrays the cyclic nature and the inheritance of oppression and dehumanization. I have argued that figures of the orogenes and the stone eaters are two distinct cyborgian figures who have inherited the transgression of boundaries between human and nature, which leads to their dehumanization and marginalization. I have argued that their cyborgian status intervenes in the way the past is viewed, as the orogenes inherit the oppression and dehumanization through their cyborgian status, and as the stone eaters have to bear witness to this cyclical process through their cyborgian relationship to time and mortality. Finally, I have argued that the trilogy as a whole then becomes an argument for the reconciliation with the past that is inherited by the dehumanized and oppressed, through both its thematic and narrative structure.

Reflection

The Broken Earth trilogy is comprised of three novels, all at least 400 pages long. It features a large group of characters, of different kinds, groups, time periods, ages, races, sexualities and genders. It features multiple different societies, with different power structures and histories. I could have easily written an entirely different thesis on these novels. In this reflection I want to point out some aspects and characters that I choose not to write about, considering the time constraints and word limit of this thesis.

Firstly, I did not write extensively about the Guardians as a group of people. In the first novel, the reader learns mostly about them through Essun's (and Damaya's and Syenite's) perspective, which means as a group they are largely villainized. In the second and third novel, however, Nassun also encounters Guardians, mainly Schaffa, and she forms a different perspective on them. This means the reader gets to understand them better, and they are somewhat redeemed. This is, of course, an interesting dynamic when considering power structures and oppression, as I have done in this thesis. From a personal reading experience, I find the Guardians one of the most fascinating aspects of the story, but for the discussions in this thesis, extensive discussion on them proved not too necessary. I mainly wanted to focus more on the characters who do not benefit of the powers that exists in these different worlds, and although the Guardians also somewhat suffer under these powers, they do largely hold the power in this story.

Secondly, I have not really discussed how the society of the Stillness, the Sanze Empire, is structured beyond its treatment of the orogenes. In the novels, it is described that there are very set use-castes and there are many, many references to racial identities and hierarchies that prevail the ideology and discourse in the Stillness. There are also multiple characters who we would identify as queer in these novels, both in terms of gender identity and sexuality. From my perspective the Stillness does not seem to be a patriarchal society - but of course I did not specifically read for gender in my analysis, so it is possible that there are aspects and connotations to the story that would provide an interesting gender analysis. Especially the first novel would provide fruitful ground to explore these aspects of the worldbuilding and how they intersect, and also what this means regarding the broader trends and representations in science fiction/fantasy as a genre.

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