

Sensory Materialism and N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

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Abstract

This paper reframes theories of vital materialism and connectivity through African American perspectives, establishing an approach of “sensory materialism” based on the African American call-and-response tradition and Fred Moten’s ideas of “bone-deep” listening and “the ensemble of senses” (67). It then uses this approach to analyze N. K. Jemisin’s novel *The Fifth Season*, focusing on close readings of the systems of oppression in the world of the novel, the plurality of the narrative structure, the vitality of the novel’s earthly bodies, and the possibilities it presents for transformative, positive African American eco-relations. The paper concludes by advocating for more culturally diverse approaches to the agency and life of matter.

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You are not censors, but sensors, not aesthetes but kinaesthetes.

--Kodwo Eshun¹

Introduction

From the beginning of N. K. Jemisin's novel *The Fifth Season* (2015), the narrative subtly draws attention to the agency of the earth. The narrator states that the land "moves a lot," initially suggesting the ability of the land to act on its own, and then describes this movement through comparison with a human body: "Like an old man lying restlessly abed it heaves and sighs, puckers and farts, yawns and swallows" (Jemisin 2). These aspects of the earth permeate the novel, inspiring questions about the role of earth and its connections to human and nonhuman bodies. My paper uses ideas about the agency and vitality of matter from theorists such as Jane Bennett (2004 and 2010), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), and David Macauley (2010) and adapts them for the African American context of Jemisin's novel, specifically including the history and legacy of slavery. I build on Kimberly N. Ruffin's ecocritical analyses of African American literature and Fred Moten's work in sound studies, connecting agency and ecologies to an "ensemble of senses" (Moten 67) and thus laying the groundwork for a sensory materialism. By applying this theoretical expansion to the novel through close readings, this paper exemplifies Uri McMillan's argument that "theories of 'object life' are at their most fecund, productive, and expansive when considered *with*, rather than *instead of*, black cultural studies" (225; original emphasis) and highlights the novel's position as an African American ecocritical text. *The Fifth Season* asserts the life and agency of earth in connection with other bodies through what I will call sensory materialism, an expression of vital materialism that recognizes the importance of the senses in the complications and reclamations of African American eco-relations.

***The Fifth Season* and Its Popular Reception**

The Fifth Season is narrated from three different perspectives, which are eventually revealed to belong to the same character but at different points in her life. The first thread is in the second person, placing the reader in the position of Essun, a middle-aged woman whose husband has left town with their daughter and killed their son for being an orogene, someone who, as an appendix to the novel explains, are able to "manipulate [the] thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy" in the earth (Jemisin 462). At the same time, a massive earthquake has placed the world in a post-apocalyptic state, and she must journey through this dangerous

¹ "Operating System for the Redesign of Sonic Reality" 453.

landscape in search of her daughter. She is accompanied by a strange boy named Hoa, who she later learns is a stone eater, a mysterious, “sentient humanoid species whose flesh, hair, etc., resembles stone” (465).²

Another thread follows Damaya, a young girl who discovers that she is an orogene and meets her Guardian; these Guardians have skills and abilities that are meant to control and protect the world against orogenes. She is taken away from her family to the headquarters of the Fulcrum military order, where she and other young orogenes are trained to control their abilities to serve their new masters in a system of slavery that echoes America’s enslavement of African Americans. The derogative term for orogenes, *rogga*, further ties this system of slavery to African American realities, as the double “g” links the term to the word “n*gg**.”³

The third thread follows Syenite, a young woman who is paired with a powerful orogene named Alabaster to clear a coral reef and conceive a child for the Fulcrum. As she travels with Alabaster, she becomes more aware of how the Fulcrum has dehumanized and oppressed orogenes, eventually joining him on an island outside the Fulcrum and giving birth to their son, Coru. Guardian agents from the Fulcrum disrupt this new life, however, forcing Syenite to use her orogeny to protect herself and her baby from slavery, an act that results in Coru’s death. The novel eventually reveals that Damaya, Syenite, and Essun are three voices from one body, and that Alabaster is responsible for “split[ting] the continent” (448). It then concludes with a question—“have you ever heard of something called a *moon*?” (449; original emphasis)—hinting at the two sequels, *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017), that complete the *Broken Earth* trilogy.

Although *The Fifth Season* has not yet received scholarly attention, the novel and its sequels have been very well received by both reviewers and general readers, indicating the cultural significance of Jemisin’s texts. For example, Aja Romano of *Vox* calls the *Broken Earth* trilogy “groundbreaking” and notes that it has “won critical acclaim...and received numerous accolades from the sci-fi and fantasy community” (para. 2). One of these “numerous accolades” is the Hugo Award for Best Novel, which Jemisin won in 2016, 2017, and 2018; as Romano points out, “Jemisin became the first author in the Hugos’ 65-year history to win back-to-back

² Hoa interjects as a narrator at certain key points, adding another dimension to the plurality of the novel’s narration.

³ I am personally not comfortable with using this word uncensored in my work. My censorship is strategic to emphasize my argument about the connection between the two offensive terms.

awards for every book in a trilogy” (para. 2). Lila Shapiro contextualizes the enormity of these wins further by noting that George R. R. Martin of *Game of Thrones* fame “has been nominated in that category four times, but has never won” (para. 4). Jemisin’s success as an African American woman is particularly notable in the face of racism and sexism from some readers in the science fiction and fantasy communities, readers who insist that texts like Jemisin’s are not worthy of awards and are only recognized due to “identity politics” (Romano para. 3). Jemisin’s novels challenge such readers by resisting the colonial narratives of white/human/heroic self versus non-white/alien/monstrous other that feature too often in speculative fiction. As Naomi Novik argues in her review of *The Fifth Season*, “[w]hen escape comes in [Jemisin’s] novels, it is not a merely personal victory, or the restoration of a sketchy and soft-lit status quo. Her heroes achieve escape velocity, smashing through oppressive systems and leaving them behind like shed skins” (para. 1). Similarly, Shapiro aptly states that “Jemisin’s phenomenal success has been something like an earthquake through the traditional order of fantasy itself” (para. 4). *The Fifth Season* is not simply a well-written work of speculative fiction; it refuses to submit to the racist narratives surrounding speculative fiction and challenges the systemized racism that is still present in contemporary American society. By linking this context with the assertion of earth’s agency, *The Fifth Season* also engages with ecocritical ideas, placing important and timely issues at the center of a popular text.

Vital Materialism and Connectivity

Established theories of vital materialism and connectivity provide an understanding of the agency of both organic and inorganic bodies. For earth in particular, the discourse surrounding its identity and vitality is quite complex. As John Sallis points out, the term “earth” can function in different ways: it can describe “the individual (Earth),” or “the universal and only secondarily...the individual (the earth),” or the “elemental (earth)” (141). Similarly, Macauley explains that earth as a concept is full of multiplicities: “Earth is confoundingly complex...because it is encountered and conceived in a vast variety of ways [such] as dirt, humus, soil, compost, stone, land, silt, mud, clay, loam, dust, sand, mineral, and excrement, among others. At the same time, we subsume these distinctions when we speak not only of earth as ground but as planetary whole—the Earth” (15). Earth is both dust and planet, individual and universal, an identity with several scales and facets. A full relationship with earth must then be as complex as earth itself, one that does not ignore its smaller particles nor forget its larger

planetary self. Additionally, as Macauley argues, the diversity of earth is embodied not just on the planet's surface, but also below it:

earth [is] more than monolithic. It is extremely differentiated across an ever-proliferating surface in the form of continents, bioregions, valley basins, alpine ranges, deserts, dells, fields, and forests. It is distinguished vertically as sedimented tiers ranging from the bountiful and cultivatable epidermal 'skin' of the topsoil to the darker subsoil to the deep and deader realms of the interior and ultimately molten center. (15)

By referring to the Earth's surface as a "skin" that surrounds a "molten center," Macauley highlights the bodily nature of earth, a description that, as Nigel Clark notes, mirrors the way in which "all organisms establish a boundary between self and world—a skin, shell, or husk that enfolds its metabolic system" (16). Although this body metaphor is most applicable to Earth as planet, the idea of skins as "boundar[ies] between self and world," as well as the complexity of earth, expands and diversifies the definitions of bodies beyond including just organic "organisms."

The imposed separation between organic, "alive" matter and inorganic, "dead" matter is further undermined by Bennett's theories of vital materialism. As Bennett explains, "[b]y 'vitality' [she] mean[s] the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own" (*Vibrant Matter* viii). Rather than understanding earthly materials such as "metals" as passive objects that can only be acted on, Bennett asserts the unique life energy of these materials, an assertion that recognizes earth as an active "quasi agent" with its own impulses. She complicates her argument by questioning the ways in which agency is defined:

No one really knows what human agency is, or what humans are doing when they are said to perform as agents. In the face of every analysis, human agency remains something of a mystery. If we do not know just how it is that human agency operates, how can we be so sure that the processes through which nonhumans make their mark are qualitatively different? (*Vibrant Matter* 34)

While an anthropocentric lens might assume that agency is a uniquely human quality, or that observing agency in nonhuman bodies can only be the result of human projection, Bennett argues that the complexity of agency as a force gives it a broader, more-than-human potential. In

this sense, simply understanding that earth has agency is more important than debating the nature of its agency in relation to human experience. For her, “materiality...is *itself* heterogeneous, itself a differential of intensities, itself *a* life. In this strange, *vital* materialism, there is no point of pure stillness, no indivisible atom that is not itself aquiver with virtual force” (*Vibrant Matter* 57; original emphasis). Her emphasis on the “heterogenous” nature of materiality undermines the simplistic binary of organic/inorganic, suggesting a multiplicity of energy that echoes both the philosophical understandings of earth discussed above as well as the plurality of Damaya/Syenite/Essun’s identity. The ways in which Bennett’s framework insists that “there is no point of pure stillness” are thus essential for interpreting the constantly active, moving land of *The Fifth Season*, as it reveals the life and force within the earthly bodies of Jemisin’s novel.

The vitality of materials also involves configurations of connectivity. An anthropocentric lens defines humans as superior to nonhumans, a perspective that separates bodies into two groups and results in limited, hierarchical connections between humans and nonhumans. By contrast, Deleuze and Guattari value “lines” over isolated “points” when discussing connectivity: “There are no points or positions in a rhizome, such as those found in a structure, tree, or root. There are only lines” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 8). In his discussion of this theory, Édouard Glissant argues that “the rhizome [is] an enmeshed root system, a network spreading either in the ground or in the air, with no predatory rootstock taking over permanently” (11). In other words, a rhizomatic network places bodies level and in connection with each other rather than enforcing a hierarchy that isolates “superior” bodies from “inferior” ones and allows certain bodies to “[take] over” others. This imagery of connectivity is also found in Bennett’s work, as she argues that “humans are always in composition with nonhumanity, never outside of a sticky web of connections” (“The Force of Things” 365). By understanding connections between bodies as a rhizome or web, these theorists subvert the hierarchies and separations between humans and nonhumans, instead arguing that all bodies are interconnected. As Donna Haraway asserts, “[t]he order is reknitted” through such a perspective: “human beings are with and of the earth, and the biotic and abiotic powers of this earth are the main story” (55). Her idea that “human beings are with and of the earth” adds to the “heterogeneous” nature of vital materialism. Bodies are not just wholes, but “assemblages,” a term that Bennett borrows from Deleuze and Guattari to explain that “agency always depends on the collaboration, cooperation, or interactive interference of many bodies and forces” (*Vibrant Matter* 21). The agency of a human body is not

just dependent on itself as a whole, but also the muscles, organs, bones, and cells that it is composed of, and some of these parts—such as the iron in blood—connect the human body directly to earth. Through vital materialism, as Bennett describes, “[e]ach member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of assemblage” (*Vibrant Matter* 24; original emphasis). In this way, both the human body and the iron within it have agency, and the two are linked by a connectivity that defines humans as “with and of the earth.”

Bennett expands these ideas further in her discussions of bone and metal. In particular, she points to Manuel De Landa’s *A Thousand Years of Nonlinear History*, in which he describes bone not merely as an aspect within the human body, but as something that asserts the agency of minerals. De Landa states that

soft tissue (gels and aerosols, muscle and nerve) reigned supreme until 500 million years ago. At that point, some of the conglomerations of fleshy matter-energy that made up life underwent a sudden mineralization, and a new material for constructing living creatures emerged: bone. It is almost as if the mineral world that had served as a substratum for the emergence of biological creatures was reasserting itself, confirming that geology, far from having been left behind as a primitive stage of the earth’s evolution, fully coexisted with the soft, gelatinous newcomers. (26)

His imagery of “the mineral world...reasserting itself” within the “soft tissue” that once “reigned supreme” is a reminder of the importance of bone, and thus minerals, to the structure of the human body. As Bennett points out, “De Landa cites bone as an example of our interior inorganicism; bone reveals one way in which we are not only animal and vegetable, but also mineral” (“The Force of Things” 360). The significance of this “inorganicism” is exaggerated through the stone eaters in *The Fifth Season*, as they are fully composed of the minerals that support human bodies. Despite this significance, however, minerals, and especially their metallic forms, are typically associated with “passivity or a dead thingness” (Bennett, *Vibrant Matter* 35). Bennett challenges this notion through Deleuze and Guattari, arguing that they recognize metal as “the symbol of vitality” (*Vibrant Matter* 55). Indeed, like Bennett, Deleuze and Guattari state that “what metal and metallurgy bring to light is a life proper to matter, a vital state of matter as such, a material vitalism that doubtless exists everywhere” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 411).

Sensory Materialism

In her discussion of Bennett's work, Chelsea M. Frazier aptly points out that "[g]iven the extensive colonial and Middle Passage histories of the violent instrumentalization of black subjects who have struggled for centuries to be recognized as 'human,' a restructuring of ecological ethics that retains the readied potential for *further* objectification is worrying at best and preposterous at worst" (45; original emphasis). For Frazier, the danger lies in the "instrumentalization" and "objectification" of human beings losing all their immorality; if objects have agency, then being treated as an object—through slavery, for example—is not inherently negative. Bennett foresees critiques like this in her work, counter-arguing that "[i]f matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects" (*Vibrant Matter* 13). Although this counter-argument is compelling, it oversimplifies the diverse lived experiences of racialized and gendered bodies in a world of colonial and patriarchal systems. There is a clear difference in meaning between stating that a white male body and an inorganic body have "become more than mere objects" and stating the same of black bodies and female bodies. Diana Leong thus notes that "reduction and disavowal of race...is something of a structural necessity for the new materialisms" (6), a necessity that makes it too easy to overlook important, culturally specific, and intersectional theories of life and agency. To that end, this paper will not limit itself to vital materialism in its analysis of *The Fifth Season*; rather, it will weave vital materialism *with* black thought, creating an expression of materialism that refuses to avoid race.

To frame this expansion, I draw on Kimberly N. Ruffin's adoption of "the call-and-response tradition in African American expressive culture" in her book *Black on Earth: African American Ecoliterary Traditions* (21). She asserts that "[c]all-and-response...encourages a participatory relationship between speaker and audience" (21), a relationship that, for her, positions her work as a series of both calls and responses within a larger African American ecological discourse. Because the relationship is "participatory," it implies that each call "deserv[es] a response" (Ruffin 21), and that both sides of the relationship have at least enough agency to communicate to each other. When paired with vital materialism, this idea suggests that the vitality of matter is not merely something that is recognizable, but something that can become part of a call-and-response relationship. As Ruffin notes, however, the call-and-response

relationship between African Americans and ecology is impacted by the history of slavery: “many African Americans have been denied kinship with and ownership of the land” (28). Her phrasing here does not undermine the potential of the relationship between African Americans and ecology—kinship has “been denied” by others, not rejected by African Americans or the land—yet it emphasizes a significant factor that can effectively silence such a relationship. This relational block is compounded by the historical dehumanization of African American slaves, which, as Ruffin argues, places them “into an unwelcome proximity with nonhuman nature” and becomes “a direct impediment to developing a healthy sense of ecological citizenship” (33). By trying to force slaves into the nonhuman category, slave owners and the larger system of slavery not only hinder the call-and-response relationships between African Americans and nonhuman entities, but also the call-and-response relationships between African Americans and other human subjects. Reframing vital materialism through a call-and-response model thus highlights the silencing of voices within racial hierarchies.

Additionally, a call-and-response model draws attention to the roles of sound and listening within eco-relations. Just as the call-and-response tradition is central to African American culture, sound, and music in particular, plays a key role in African American expression. W. E. B. Du Bois, for example, asserts that African American folk songs are “the singular spiritual heritage of the nation and the greatest gift of the Negro people” (251). This “singular spiritual heritage” of music is directly connected to slavery; Mark M. Smith argues that “slaves used sound, especially music, to create spaces unavailable to whites” (33). In systems of slavery and their legacies in which white oppressors obstruct African American call-and-response relationships, sound thus allows African American communities to circumvent the imposition of racist narratives onto African American relationships with nonhuman entities, excluding white understanding from these relational sound spaces.

The pairing of sound and spatiality then points to the multiplicity that Fred Moten discusses in relation to listening: “really listening, when it goes bone-deep into the sunken ark of bones, is something other than itself. It doesn’t alternate with but *is* seeing; it’s the sense that it excludes; it’s the ensemble of senses” (67; original emphasis). While vital materialism describes the agency of bones within the multiplicity of the human body, here Moten connects bones to a multiplicity of listening as well, a “bone-deep” listening that is “something other than itself,” an “ensemble of senses.” To call and respond in this sense therefore does not limit relationality to

human speech; “bone-deep” listening does include hearing sound and interpreting language, but it also encompasses other senses, creating a network of connectivity that allows for multiple forms of calls and responses, and by extension multiple forms of agency and life. Because of this sensory multiplicity, I have chosen to use the descriptor “sensory materialism.” Sensory materialism does not simply point out the life and agency of matter; it emphasizes, through an African American lens, the necessity for an active and multi-sensory relationality with matter, and it recognizes that such listening can be and has been impacted by specific cultural and racial histories.

Sensory Materialism in *The Fifth Season*

In *The Fifth Season*, orogeny is described through the senses of hearing, sight, and touch, highlighting the “ensemble of senses” involved in orogenes’ relationship with the earth. Orogeny is specifically tied to the body through the sessapinae, which, as the novel explains, are “paired organs located at the base of the brain stem” (Jemisin 343). By positioning these fictional organs “at the base of the brain stem,” the narrative illustrates the instinctual nature of orogeny, emphasizing it further through how difficult it is for Alabaster, a particularly powerful orogene, to explain his abilities: “‘When I’m in the earth—’ He grimaces. That’s the real problem: not his inability to say it, but the fact that words are inadequate to the task. ... Maybe someday someone will create a language for orogenes to use” (161). Alabaster and Syenite both recognize that “words” and “language” are “inadequate” for describing orogeny, and the rest of the novel suggests that the experience is relational and sensory rather than linguistic. Syenite interprets orogeny as “her own connection to the earth, her own orogenic awareness” (127), pointing to a connectivity between her and earth that requires “awareness.” Earlier in the novel, she thinks of “listening to the earth” (87), which suggests a more active form of the same “awareness.” At the same time, this “listening” is not necessarily a typical form of listening, since the form of sight that Syenite has access to through orogeny is very different from typical human sight: “she *sees*, though sessapinae are not eyes and the ‘sight’ is all in her imagination” (263; original emphasis). This description echoes Moten’s idea of “bone-deep” listening as “something other than itself” (67), suggesting that Syenite’s connectivity to earth utilizes a complex “ensemble of senses,” to continue borrowing Moten’s phrase. Additionally, when a Guardian uses his own mysterious powers to force Syenite to lose her connection with earth, her depiction of the experience is centered in the sense of touch: “she’s as numb to the earth as the most rust-brained elder. Is this

what it's like for stills? Is this all they feel?" (Jemisin 260). By stating that she is "numb to the earth," and by wondering if this numbness is all that those without orogeny can "feel," Syenite emphasizes the importance of touch along with her experiences of "listening to the earth" and "*see[ing]*" through it. Syenite adds that "[s]he has envied [the stills'] normalcy her whole life, until now" (260), indicating that the disruption of this sensory connectivity is harmful enough for her to no longer desire a "normal" body. By depicting the silencing of her call-and-response relationship with the earth, the novel not only highlights the significance of this relationship, but also draws attention to the ways in which systems of oppressive power restrict and control eco-relations.

The cruelty inflicted on orogene bodies centers the history and legacy of slavery within the novel's ecocritical discourse. This cruelty is hidden from society, particularly in the case of the node maintainers, orogenes who are stationed at specific outposts and "whose sole task is to keep the local area stable" from seismic activity (Jemisin 119). When a larger earth "shake" occurs "out of nowhere" while Syenite and Alabaster are travelling, Alabaster knows that the node maintainer was responsible, insisting that the two of them must go to the node and investigate (133). When they arrive, Syenite, who previously imagined node maintainers as "poor fools assigned to [a] tedious duty" (119), is forced to encounter the horrifying reality:

The body in the node maintainer's chair is small, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things—tubes and pipes and *things*, she has no words for them—going into the stick-arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There's a flexible bag on the corpse's belly, *attached to* its belly somehow, and it's full of—ugh. The bag needs to be changed. (139; original emphasis)

The node maintainers are clearly not bored orogenes; their bodies are stripped of all agency, with even the most basic actions of eating and releasing bodily waste controlled by "tubes and pipes and *things*." The "flexible bag" that is somehow "*attached to*" the node maintainer's belly further emphasizes this lack of agency, as it bypasses the action of waste expulsion by removing waste directly from the stomach. Although Syenite's use of the pronoun "it" might indicate that she is dehumanizing this body, the added detail of the node maintainer's nudity indicates a lack of discernable autonomous identity despite a visibly sexed body; the Fulcrum has so aggressively reduced the node maintainer to a mechanical object that their humanity is difficult for even a sympathetic observer to recognize. Alabaster further explains this reduction when he informs

Syenite that “[i]t’s a simple matter to apply a lesion here and there that severs the rogora’s self-control completely, while still allowing its *instinctive* use” (141; original emphasis). Not only is the Fulcrum removing basic bodily autonomy from node maintainers’ bodies, but it is also surgically manipulating their bodies to force them to become “nothing *but* that instinct, nothing *but* the ability to quell shakes” (141; original emphasis). In this way, the call-and-response relationship between a node maintainer and the earth is obstructed, restricting it to the node maintainer working the earth, just as an African American slave’s relationship with the land is often restricted to working it for their master.

The exploitation of orogenes’ relationship with the earth is not limited to the node maintainers, but systematically applied to all orogenes. When Damaya is taken from her family by a Guardian named Schaffa, he tells her a story that is meant to teach her that orogenes are inherently threats to society who must be controlled. Damaya’s response, and Schaffa’s reply to her response, exemplifies the ways in which the Fulcrum’s definition of orogenes limits them to a slave existence:

“I don’t want to be a threat,” she says in a small voice. Then, greatly daring, she adds, “But I don’t want to be...controlled...either. I want to be—” She gropes for the words, then remembers something her brother once told her about what it meant to grow up. “*Responsible*. For myself.”

“An admirable wish,” Schaffa says. “But the plain fact of the matter, Damaya, is that you *cannot* control yourself. It isn’t your nature.” (Jemisin 95; original ellipses and emphasis)

While Damaya hopes for the ability to have agency over herself and her body, Schaffa insists that orogenes “*cannot* control” themselves, separating orogenes from other humans by stating that self-control “isn’t in [their] nature.” He further supports this biased narrative by stating that this supposedly inherent lack of self-control is “the plain fact of the matter,” fabricating an “objective truth” to convince Damaya that she does not deserve independence. Schaffa then reveals the cruelty underlining the role of Guardians when Damaya tries to resist him: “*Never say no to me ... Orogenes have no right to say no. I am your Guardian. I will break every bone in your hand, every bone in your body, if I deem it necessary to make the world safe from you*” (99; original emphasis). Through this oppressive narrative, the Fulcrum defines the relationship between orogenes and the earth as inevitably dangerous, and thus always in need of supervision.

This oppression impacts the relationship itself as well. Because Damaya has “no right to say no,” no right to bodily safety, and no right to responsibility over her own actions because of her connection to the earth, she is forced to understand her relationship with the earth as one of control, rather than as one of calls and responses. Despite this imposed narrative, the plurality of Damaya/Syenite/Essun’s identity, along with the agency of earth, reveals possibilities of resistance.

The narrative structure of *The Fifth Season* reflects the complexity of the issues it engages with. The multiple threads of narration create an ensemble of voices that mirrors “the ensemble of senses” (Moten 67) involved in orogeny, an ensemble that requires active listening to engage with. Although the novel does not reveal that the three perspectives are from the same person until its final third, there are hints dropped earlier for the most astute readers. For example, when Syenite discusses a strange anomaly under the coral she has been tasked with clearing, her narration briefly slips into the second person, which was previously limited to Essun’s chapters: “‘That’s a very bad idea,’ she says preemptively ... ‘It could be a massive gas or oil pocket that will poison your harbor waters for years.’ It’s not. You know this because no oil or gas pocket is as perfectly straight and dense as this thing is, and because you can *sess* oil and gas. ... She tries again” (Jemisin 223; original emphasis).⁴ The pronoun shifts from she, to you, and back to she again without drawing attention to the change, rewarding readers who are engaging in “bone-deep” listening (Moten 67) rather than making the plurality of the protagonist’s identity immediately obvious to all readers. When the hints become more direct, they reveal the complexity of her plural identity. When she chooses her new name, one that will overwrite the name her parents gave her, she uses the opportunity to redefine herself: “she fights off the tears, and makes her decision. Crying is weakness. Crying was a thing Damaya did. Syenite will be stronger” (Jemisin 331). Although she tries to shed her Damaya identity entirely, by defining Syenite in relation to Damaya, she indicates that both identities are part of her, allowing her to have two selves. By the end of the novel, her attempts to erase her other selves are undermined, as the Syenite and Essun perspectives briefly share narrative space once again: “Then he returns his attention to you. (To her, Syenite.) To *you*, Essun. Rust it, you’ll be glad when you finally figure out who you really are” (446; original emphasis). Placing the Syenite self in parentheses illustrates her desire to separate her selves from each other, and yet Syenite’s

⁴ I would like to thank Corianne Bracewell for pointing out this example in a discussion of the novel.

moment of assertion in Essun's chapter emphasizes the importance and agency of each aspect of her plural identity. Just as her relationship with the earth involves multiplicity, so too does her relationship with herself, and the use of this multiplicity to create a plural narrative highlights the complexity of connectivity.

The earth, both outside and within human bodies, asserts its vitality and agency despite being manipulated by orogenes. When Damaya is taught how to use her orogeny more deliberately, her description of this educational experience places earth's ability to act alongside her own: "she learns how to visualize and breathe, and to extend her awareness of the earth at will and not merely in reaction to its movements or her own agitation" (Jemisin 197). Earth's movements have a strength that can cause her to react, an influence that is just as powerful as "her own agitation" and highlights the earth as a caller to whom Damaya responds. This call-and-response relationship between Damaya and earth also emphasizes the intertwined nature of their connectivity, as the independent actions of earth ripple through the lines that connect them and impact Damaya's reactions. Although her training at the Fulcrum helps her "extend her awareness of the earth at will," her connection to earth is not a result of this training; it merely allows her to develop their relationship to new levels, a development that continues through her own shifting identity. Syenite thus expands on this development after Alabaster manages to force poison out of his body purely through orogeny: "Any infant can move a mountain; that's instinct. Only a trained Fulcrum orogene can deliberately, specifically, move a boulder. And only a ten-ringer, apparently, can move the infinitesimal substances floating and darting in the interstices of his blood and nerves" (Jemisin 166). By noting that "[a]ny infant can move a mountain," Syenite reveals that the connectivity between orogenes and earth begins at birth while also reiterating the instinctual nature of orogeny. She then states that "[o]nly a trained Fulcrum orogene can deliberately, specifically, move a boulder," suggesting not only that the calls and responses of orogeny are easier with larger forms of earth, but also that the manipulation of earth, despite being instinctual, requires some level of effort. Earth in this sense is not passively waiting for orogenes to move it; the two must communicate "deliberately" and "specifically." By then admiring Alabaster's powerful ability to "move the infinitesimal substances" in the "interstices" of his body, Syenite draws attention to the earth within bodies, earth that requires even more effort to manipulate. The agency of this earth is particularly visible, as it acts by "floating and darting" and can only be controlled if the connection is strong enough. Earth's calls are just as

strong, at one point forcing both Alabaster and Syenite to respond: “But she doesn’t know what he’s reacting to—and then she senses it. Evil Earth, it’s a big one!” (126). By noting that Alabaster is “reacting” to the earth’s shaking—and then reacting to it herself through an exclamation—Syenite highlights their roles as responders, further reiterating earth’s agency in its relationship with orogenes. Earth in *The Fifth Season* demands respect for its vitality, resisting passivity by actively engaging in calls and responses rather than simply being acted upon.

Along with depicting the agency of earth as part of a call-and-response relationship with orogenes, *The Fifth Season* also asserts the vitality of earth through the stone eater species. The first description of a stone eater emphasizes their nonhuman identities: “Her emulation of human gender is only superficial, a courtesy. Likewise the loose drapelike dress that she wears is not cloth. She has simply shaped a portion of her stiff substance to suit the preferences of the fragile, mortal creatures among whom she currently moves” (Jemisin 5). Although this stone eater, later revealed to be named Antimony, appears like a human female, this appearance “is only superficial,” indicating that her humanoid form is very different from her true body. The narrative’s note of her humanoid appearance as a “courtesy” meant to “suit the preferences of...fragile, mortal creatures” suggests a common anthropocentric lens that can only understand life and agency in human terms, forcing her to “shape” herself in ways that fit this limited perspective. An epigraph at the end of one of the novel’s chapters from an in-universe document called “A Treatise on Sentient Non-Humans” further emphasizes the anthropomorphism of stone eaters in this world: “Obviously they possess some sort of kinship with humanity, which they choose to acknowledge in the statue-like shape we most often see, but it follows that they can take other shapes” (83). The narrative’s earlier insight implies that stone eaters take humanoid shapes to ease the mind of a “fragile” humanity, yet the human perspective insists that their actions indicate “some sort of kinship with humanity.” Antimony’s agency, however, is clearly acted out by a stone body, highlighted by the novel’s pointed portrayal of her skin: “her skin is white porcelain; that is not a metaphor” (5). By specifying that the white porcelain “is not a metaphor,” the novel emphasizes that the stone of Antimony’s body is not meant to describe something other than itself, and thus is not meant to be understood as anthropomorphic. Her identity is decidedly earthly and nonhuman, and her ability to shape and move herself as such an identity asserts the life and agency of nonhuman entities.

The stone eaters' consumption of the same materials that they are composed of further affirms that their vitality is not reducible to their being a humanoid presence in the novel. The focus on the act of feeding and on their teeth within the novel accentuates the significance of the active nature of consumption. As Bennett argues, "[e]ating appears as a series of mutual transformations in which the border between inside and outside becomes blurry" (*Vibrant Matter* 49). This undermining of borders highlights a connectivity between larger bodies and the various smaller components of a body assemblage. Eating also recalls the sense of taste, a reminder of Moten's "ensemble of senses" (67) and their role within the call-and-response framework of sensory materialism. When Hoa, a stone eater that chooses to shape himself as a young boy, eats at the beginning of the novel, the emphasis on action and sound reiterates these ideas: "With a sudden, sharp movement he breaks off the tip of a red crystal. . . . The boy—for that is what he resembles—puts this in his mouth and chews. The noise of this is loud, too: a grind and rattle that echoes around the clearing. After a few moments of this, he swallows" (Jemisin 13). He actively "breaks off" a piece of crystal and "chews" and "swallows" it, drawing attention to his agency and vitality. The loud sound of his chewing, which "echoes around the clearing," then asserts his presence as a body within the space while also pointing to a sonic connectivity between him and the crystal. Additionally, the depiction of the sound as "a grind and a rattle" highlights his nonhuman identity, an identity that is further emphasized when Essun compares his teeth with those of another stone eater: "you see his teeth clearly for the first time. He never eats in front of you, after all. He never shows them when he smiles. They're colored in where hers are transparent, enamel-white as a kind of camouflage—but not so different from the red-haired woman's in shape. Not squared but *faceted*. Diamondine" (269-270; original emphasis). Despite the humanoid shape of his outer body, Hoa's teeth mark him as nonhuman, reiterating his active ability to eat as the agency of a nonhuman body. The stone that he eats is not devoid of its own agency, however, as Hoa asserts after Essun witnesses him eating: "It's the first time you've ever seen him eat. 'Food,' you say. 'Me.' He extends a hand and lays it over the pile of rocks with curious delicacy" (Jemisin 395). While Essun perceives the rocks as "[f]ood," Hoa understands their vitality, recognizing that his stone body is the same as the bodies of the rocks. He emphasizes these connections by touching them "with curious delicacy," a deliberate and considerate act of contact that adds another sensory element to his call-and-response relationship with other earth entities.

While the stone eaters present positive eco-relations, for orogenes such eco-relations are not always easy, as I have discussed earlier in this paper. For Alabaster in particular, though, his call-and-response relationship with earth is not only complicated by his experiences as a slave, but also by his decision to create an apocalyptic climate change and by his related physical transformation into stone at the end of the novel. Just as Damaya's relationship with earth is defined negatively through Schaffa and the Fulcrum, one of Alabaster's descriptions of orogeny likens it to a hereditary disease, one that is forced upon orogenes by a personified earth: "The orogeny might skip a generation, maybe two or three, but it always comes back. Father Earth never forgets the debt we owe" (Jemisin 146). Having lived as someone whose calls and responses to earth are defined in oppressive ways, Alabaster's relationship with earth is understandably antagonistic, reflecting the denial of ecological kinship imposed on African American slaves. At the same time, however, his connection to earth is strong enough to allow him to manipulate the earth actively "floating and darting in the interstices of his blood and nerves" (166), suggesting that despite his perception of orogeny as a curse, he recognizes the unique agency and vitality of earth on some level. This recognition allows him to decide to work with the earth rather than against it in his plan to destroy the system of slavery that has been imposed on orogenes like him:

And then he reaches forth with all the fine control that the world has brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized out of him, and all the sensitivity that his masters have bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection. His fingers spread and twitch as he feels several reverberating points on the map of his awareness: his fellow slaves. (6)

Although Alabaster is skilled enough to have "fine control" over earth, this control has been taught through a system that has "brainwashed and backstabbed and brutalized" him, a harsh, alliterative list that emphasizes the cruelty of slavery. This cruelty is further emphasized by Alabaster's description of "sensitivity...bred into him through generations of rape and coercion and highly unnatural selection"; as Rickie Solinger argues, slave owners often "devised 'breeding schemes'" to "maximize slave reproduction" (5), a practice that imposes domestic animality onto African American people and thus complicates African American eco-relations

(Ruffin 33).⁵ Alabaster resists this oppression and specifically feels for “his fellow slaves” in his orogenic awareness, linking them to the earth through “reverberating points” and asserting a bodily and sensory connectivity.

When Alabaster uses his connection with the earth to split the continent, he recognizes earth’s agency more positively, allowing himself to have a positive call-and-response relationship with earth that resists the oppressive narratives of control taught by the Fulcrum. His destructive act contains a multitude of calls and responses, highlighting the multiplicities of sensory communication: “He takes all that, the strata and the magma and the people and the power, in his imaginary hands. Everything. He holds it. He is not alone. The earth is with him. Then *he breaks it*” (7; original emphasis). He reaches out to “the strata and the magma and the people,” bringing the earth and humans together in his orogenic exploration. By imagining that he is “hold[ing]” these entities, he evokes the sense of touch, a sense that is connected to sound through the earlier description of “reverberating points.” The earth then responds to his calls, asserting its vitality and allowing Alabaster to feel “[t]he earth...with him.” Although he “*breaks*” the earth immediately after this positive relationship is established, this action is not one of violence against the earth, but one that engages with Frantz Fanon’s argument that “decolonization is *always* a violent phenomenon” (35; emphasis added). In Fanon’s view, “[d]ecolonization is the meeting of two forces, opposed to each other by their very nature” (36), an opposition that must inevitably result in violence when one force resists the other. Similarly, Alabaster sees no hope in resisting the Fulcrum’s power without violence, stating that “[h]e cannot free them [his fellow slaves], not in the practical sense. He’s tried before and failed. He can, however, make their suffering serve a cause greater than one city’s hubris, and one empire’s fear” (Jemisin 6-7). For him, violently breaking the earth is a necessary step towards decolonization supported by the failure of his other attempts. Although he focuses on making the suffering of orogenes mean something in his statement here, his deep connection to the earth suggests that the suffering of earth is also “serv[ing]” this “greater” purpose.

Alabaster’s bodily transformation emphasizes the possibilities of new and shifting eco-relations for African American people. His human body is racialized as black, and this blackness

⁵ The phrase “highly unnatural selection” also highlights the ways in which slavery and racism have impacted African American relationships with both human and nonhuman entities, as it points to the harmful ways in which “natural selection” and Social Darwinism are used to justify racist ideologies.

is ideologically linked with inferiority: “he’s obviously not well-bred...that hair, and skin so black it’s almost blue” (Jemisin 71). Although his abilities as an orogene are what enslave him in the world of the novel, by drawing attention to his dark skin in this way, *The Fifth Season* deliberately connects him with African American experiences, adding complexity to his later transformation. His body begins to reconstruct itself into earth as a result of him splitting the earth, a change that Essun encounters near the end of the novel: “Stone. His arm has become *stone*. Most of it’s gone, though, and the stump—tooth marks. Those are tooth marks. You glance up at Antimony again, and think of a diamond smile” (446; original emphasis). Not only has his arm “become *stone*,” but in doing so, it has also become part of the same vitality that Hoa sees in the rocks he eats. Alabaster’s body is not losing life entirely, but instead shifting from human life into earthly life, a life that Antimony can consume into herself. This connection between Alabaster’s stone arm and Hoa’s rocks is emphasized by Essun focusing on the “tooth marks” and remembering “a diamond smile,” echoing her description of Hoa’s teeth earlier in the novel and evoking the sense of taste. Alabaster’s hybrid form of blackness and earth then embodies the possibility of African American eco-relations that resist the colonial denial of African American kinship with earth (Ruffin 28). Through this form, Alabaster and the earth are not only with each other, but also with Antimony, creating a complex relationship full of vitality and multiplicity.

At the same time, however, Essun’s horrified reaction to Alabaster’s situation, as well as Alabaster’s bedridden condition, draws attention to the complicated nature of reclaiming African American eco-relations. Blackness has often been associated with nature and sensuality in racist ways, namely by positioning African Americans as “primitive” in relation to “advanced” and “civilized” white society, and by defining African Americans as inherently lustful and hypersexual. Through this lens, Alabaster’s hybrid form becomes a terrible punishment for his violent resistance to systems of slavery, a punishment that forces him to become a form of “primitive” otherness and sensual bodily consumption. These concerns are, of course, entirely valid, and by giving voice to them through Essun’s perspective, Jemisin’s text recognizes the challenges involved in reclaiming the sensory relationalities that racist narratives have attempted to redefine. Yet the novel addresses the complexity of this African American context by immediately following Essun’s questions about Alabaster’s hybrid form with Alabaster’s clear lack of regret: “How much longer can he—should he—live like this? ‘I don’t want you to fix it,’

Alabaster says. ... ‘No, what I want you to do, my Damaya, my Syenite, my Essun, is make it worse’” (449). For him, his transformation is intertwined with his act of resistance, reiterating the ultimately positive potential that he embodies. By then using all three of her names, Alabaster’s call to the protagonist to continue the resistance is one that recognizes the plurality of her identity. He knows that he needs to speak to every part of her, and in doing so emphasizes a multiplicity of perspectives and experiences that he hopes to bring together for his cause. Although Alabaster’s transformation can appear horrific, his vocal desire to not be fixed indicates its subversive power, undermining colonial understandings of African American eco-relations and asserting the importance of resisting oppressive systems.

Conclusion

The Fifth Season exemplifies a sensory materialism that, rather than ignoring the specific realities of different cultures and racialized groups to assert the vitality of matter, instead deliberately uses African American histories and traditions to engage with ecocritical ideas. Although vital materialism can, as Bennett argues, lead to “greener forms of human culture” (*Vibrant Matter* x), the ways in which these theories sideline or even erase race from their discussions overlooks the complex and diverse realities that different racialized groups experience, not only in their relationships within human society but also in their relationships with nonhuman entities. By expanding vital materialism through an African American lens, sensory materialism creates a specific framework for eco-relations that includes African American perspectives rather than diminishing them. New materialisms need to continue expanding through specific frameworks like these, engaging with different cultures to validate their unique experiences with ecology rather than relying on a version of the theory that generalizes these experiences. Specific materialisms, such as sensory materialism, can then better engage with ecocritical texts without imposing Western understandings of lively matter onto them. In other words, by deliberately considering a text’s complex cultural and historical specificities, and by using ideas from relevant non-white thinkers, new materialisms can continue expanding to avoid Westernizing and essentializing understandings of eco-relations.

Sensory materialism as an African American expression of vital materialism is thus a more nuanced approach to the analysis of a text like Jemisin’s *The Fifth Season*. The “ensemble of senses” (Moten 67) involved in orogeny highlights a complex call-and-response relationship between orogenes and earth that incorporates African American ideas. This incorporation is

further emphasized by the crucial role of slavery in the novel, a role that refuses to ignore the ways in which systematic cruelty has harmfully impacted oppressed peoples' relationships with earth. The plurality of the novel's narration adds another layer to the novel's ensemble of calls and responses, asserting the importance of active, "bone-deep" listening (Moten 67). The agency of earth as part of such active call-and-response relationships then affirms the lively nature of matter without reducing the role of African American understandings. The stone eaters also challenge the idea of earth as passive or only active through anthropomorphism, particularly when Hoa situates himself as equivalent to the rocks he consumes. Alabaster's shifting relationship with earth and his gradual, physical transformation into stone then illustrates the complexities of African American eco-relations, recognizing the harmful effects of racist narratives while also suggesting decolonial possibilities. His transformation also demonstrates that earthly life is not inherently inferior to human life, asserting the vitality of both the human and the nonhuman while recognizing the inequalities that exist within human societies. *The Fifth Season* portrays human and nonhuman relationships in both complex and specifically African American ways, validating these experiences and understandings to push for reparations between humans and other humans, and between humans and ecology, that are absolutely vital.

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