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Black Girl Magic: History, Identity, and Spirituality in Contemporary Fantasy and Science-Fiction

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BLACK GIRL MAGIC: HISTORY, IDENTITY, AND SPIRITUALITY IN CONTEMPORARY FANTASY AND SCIENCE-FICTION

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Abstract

In 2013, activist and social media influencer CaShawn Thompson composed a Tweet claiming, “Black Girls Are Magic,” which shortened to the hashtag “#BlackGirlMagic.” As the hashtag began to circulate social media, the phrase birthed a digital movement that celebrated the beauty, accomplishments, and mere presence of Black women and girls. This project argues that Black Girl Magic, operating as a social and literary framework, combats the injustice, inequality, and lack of respect and representation that Black women and girls faced in the past and continue to face today. In Black Girl Magic literature, Black women characters perform literal and figurative forms of magic, which they use to reclaim their own power and resist oppression. The origins of this contemporary literature can be traced to the Black Women Renaissance of the 1980s, which is arguably the most productive era for Black women’s writing. Black Women Renaissance literature employs elements of folk culture—such as conjure magic and oral storytelling—that offers a unique spiritual knowledge unique to Black women. By invoking these elements of spirituality, contemporary Black Girl Magic texts demonstrate the endurance and persistence of Black womanhood in the face of oppression.

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Introduction: "The Origins of Black Girl Magic in Literary and Social Spaces"

My project explores the presence of Black women in literature and the literal and figurative magic that they perform, analyzing symbols, artifacts, and bodies that contain magic. I argue that Black Girl Magic is a frame of thinking that acts as a direct response to the systematic lack of representation that Black women face. The concept is not only unique, but necessary. Because she is both Black and a woman, she belongs to two inferior groups of people, making her "the most disrespected… unprotected… [and] neglected person in America" (Malcolm X, 1962). This disrespect, lack of protection, and neglect is the result of an ongoing history of abuse and exploitation directed toward Black women on U.S. soil. As a framework, BGM forces us to confront historical images of Black women—such as the Mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire caricatures—that have not only perpetuated racist ideologies, but have also damaged Black women's sense of self and self-worth. As a direct response to these ideologies and the damage they have inflicted, the framework allows Black women and girls to claim and articulate a sense of identity that they create and control, rather than adhering to one that is defined by a white-supremacist, patriarchal society that abuses, exploits, and ignores them. As bell hooks suggests, by acknowledging and recovering our Black Girl Magic, Black women transition from "manipulatable objects to self-empowered subjects" (hooks x). We resist the identities forced upon us and design our own instead.

Julee Wilson defines Black Girl Magic as "a term used to illustrate the universal awesomeness of black women. It's about celebrating anything we deem particularly dope, inspiring, or mind-blowing about ourselves" (*HuffPost*). The phrase "Black Girl Magic" first

appeared as a social media hashtag, “Black Girls Are Magic,” in a tweet published by influencer and activist CaShawn Thompson. According to her official website, Thompson “believes in the phenomenal power and skill that all Black women and girls possess… Black girls and their magic deserve to be revered, celebrated, exalted and protected” (“CaShawn Thompson”). In a 2015 interview with the *Los Angeles Times*, Thompson explains that she uses the word “magic” to represent a lack of understanding about Black womanhood. She says, “Sometimes our accomplishments might seem to come out of thin air, because a lot of times, the only people supporting us are other black women.” As it began to circulate social media, the hashtag began a movement to bring Black women’s voices out of the shadows and celebrate them in public view.

In *Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag* (2019), Julia Jordan-Zachery and Duchess Harris ask why “Black femmes, girls, and women feel the need to consider themselves magic” and what we are “haunted by that is soliciting a response that asserts Black girls and women are magical” (3). As I argue, the concept of Black Girl Magic is a way of thinking, an essential component to the endurance and persistence of Black womanhood. It is a mindset that acts as a powerful form of resistance to the social and political inequality and invisibility that Black women have faced in the past and continue to face in the present. According to Black feminist critic Barbara Christian, “The enslaved African woman began the basis for the definition of our society’s *Other*… viewed as an object to be manipulated and controlled” (qtd. in Collins 1990, 70). The process of othering Black women established societal subordination in order to justify and naturalize enslavement. Historically, white patriarchal social systems have crafted images of Black women that would sustain their own power—such as the mammy, Jezebel, and Sapphire figures. In doing so, Black women were denied the opportunity to define their own identities. But the Black Girl Magic framework functions as what Jordan-Zachery (2018) calls a narrative of

resistance and redemption, a method of self-articulation that Black femmes, women, and girls use to express "an imagination of themselves that is free of oppressive structures" ("Resistance and Redemption Narratives" 5).

Although the hashtag "Black Girl Magic" has only recently come into popularity, the sentiments behind it are not new. I am interested in its roots in Black feminism and Black Women's Renaissance literature. Black feminism first emerged in the 19th century when Black women began to challenge and reject negative images and ideologies and instead create their own definitions of Black womanhood. Maria Stewart, for example, became one of the first activists to argue that "race, gender, and class oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty" (Collins, *Black Feminist Thought* 1). Another 19th century Black woman who advocated for women's rights and education was Anna Julia Cooper. According to Collins, Black women's shared experiences—such as segregation in employment and education—"construct a collective body of wisdom" (24) that empower Black women to resist oppressive practices and engage in activism. Collins explains, "As members of an oppressed group, U.S. Black women have generated alternative practices and knowledges that have been designed to foster U.S. Black women's group empowerment" (30). Therefore, in the Black feminist framework, the process of self-definition was essential to Black women's survival to combat the constricting injustices that white patriarchal structures forced upon them.

In addition to resisting caricatures of Black women, the Black Girl Magic framework also acknowledges the presence of magic in Black American religious and spiritual systems—which plays an essential role in shaping Black American consciousness during and after enslavement. Specifically, enslaved Black people often practiced conjure, a hybridized spiritual system that developed on plantations. Even as they were forced to embrace Christianity, enslaved Africans

and their descendants continued to practice their own West African spiritual beliefs. As a result, these beliefs "provided the philosophical basis by which new beliefs could be assimilated" (Chireau 54) and established a unique Black *American* worldview.

Further, BGM resists the negative connotations surrounding African spirituality and the demonization of these practices in the New World. In the New World, "Black Codes" forbade enslaved Africans from practicing outside of Catholic, Apostolic, and Roman religious practices and every enslaved person was baptized into these religions ("The Code Noir" 1685). Labeled as "black magic," Europeans associated African spirituality with devil worship and heathenism. The term also mirrors the white supremacist ideology that perceived Black people themselves as innately sinful and "whose dark skin was a mark against the Christian God" (Martin 20).

In this vein, the Black Girl Magic framework celebrates the power in conjure magic and acknowledges conjure figures as folk heroes, specifically in the oral literary tradition. Denied access to traditional Western education, Black people have used alternate forms of literacy—such as artifactual literacy and oral storytelling—to combat the unreliability of written history and Western institutional literacy. Enslaved Africans in the New World preserved connections to their various homelands by "relying on their memories of folk traditions in their various homelands" and diasporic Black writers have "sought to assert their place in the New World's cultural production through conscious engagement with and tribute to their continental African heritage, a heritage largely defined by oral verbal arts and folklore" (Akoma 1-2). As a type of folk magic whose memory is most often communicated through folklore, conjuring became a form of remembrance of the homeland, a symbol of cultural heritage that bridged the gap between past and present, invoking African ideologies to create a worldview informed by the supernatural. Folk magic also ensured a sense of power and control for Black Americans that

white Americans could not interfere with simply because they did not understand it. By engaging in this practice, Black people "had adopted a conceptual framework to which [white Americans] had no access" (Chireau 18). Protective charms, amulets, surface reading, and herbs provided self-defense, allowing the enslaved to maintain control over their lives and challenge the authority of white patriarchal oppression, establishing "a position of spiritual leadership that survived the transition from the western coast of Africa to the New World" (Martin 2).

The texts I analyze in my project are extensions of a tradition within the field of Black feminist literature—the Black Women's Renaissance, also called the Second Renaissance, which gained momentum post-Civil Rights era during the 1970s and 1980s. The literature produced during this Second Renaissance "aimed to reconsider and re-articulate the experience of Black women" (Penier 76). The movement aimed to challenge, correct, and, in some ways, expand on the mainstream white feminism movement and male-dominated Civil Rights Movement, both of which had consistently ignored, devalued, and discredited Black women's issues and contributions to the struggle for both racial and gender equality. In this way, authors "[gave] imaginative voice to a previously invisible segment of the American population" (Beaulieu xv). My understanding of contemporary Black Girl Magic literature is rooted in this tradition because these decades were arguably the most productive for Black women's writing, especially the 1980s.

In *Culture Bearing Women: The Black Women Renaissance and Cultural Nationalism* (2019), Izabella Penier identifies distinguishing literary features from each decade. In the 1970s, texts—such as Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970) and *Sula* (1973)—generally "embraced feminist radicalism and advocated a revolt against black communities' patriarchal values and conservative mindsets" (18). Moving toward the 1980s, however, authors shift their focus onto

Black women's "mental and spiritual healing" (19). These texts highlight the importance of Black heritage, specifically for Black women characters, who find power and healing in the "ancestral matriarchal past" (Williams qtd. in Penier 19). Authors approach Black history—especially slavery—through a maternal lens, focusing on how historical events contribute to the process by which Black women construct their identities, individually and collectively. In these novels, Black women characters contain a unique worldview, which they acquire from their mothers and maternal ancestors and pass onto their female descendants in order to preserve Black culture. Penier argues that "historical and heritage narratives, which focused on the issues of cultural resistance and survival, reiterated and rearticulated some of the most fundamental concerns of black cultural nationalism" (19). These texts—including Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Octavia Butler's *Kindred* (1979), Morrison's *Beloved* (1987), and Gayl Jones' *Corregidora* (1975)—lay the foundation for the Black Girl Magic framework, by which Black women design a space—online and offline—that acknowledges, encourages, and empowers their unique knowledge and experiences.

Indeed, my project builds on the foundations of the aforementioned texts, by focusing on two fantasy novels, both of which center Black women characters that perform different forms of magic. In Chapter 1, I analyze N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015), in which the protagonist pays homage to the historical legacy of the conjure woman figure, whose magic was "vital for slaves to survive on plantations… they were a source of empowerment against white masters and they enabled slaves to evade punishment, seek vengeance, and attain justice" (Saber 377). The protagonist's spiritual power is reinforced using elements of the folklore tradition, both of which are prominent in Black Women's Renaissance literature. In Chapter 2, I focus on Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018). In this novel, the protagonist draws power from

her Black maternal ancestors and the divine magic in her bloodline. The connection to her ancestors is bound in a set of spiritual artifacts, which the protagonist uses as a form of communal literacy and knowledge-making. Like other Black women's 1980's literary texts, Adeyemi's novel highlights Black women as cultivators of spiritual and ancestral knowledge, arguing that "African Americans are born from a legacy of black mystic women that is traceable and knowable if we only know where to seek it" (Martin 25). In the literal sense, the protagonists that I analyze, demonstrate abilities such as healing, raising the dead, and manipulating the elements. In turn, their abilities are used as signifiers of difference that mark them as "others" who "threaten the moral and social order" (Collins, "Black Feminist Thinking" 70). However, I suggest that the characters engage in various processes of identity formation. Whereas these abilities are initially used to control the bodies who possess them, the Black women characters in Jemisin's and Adeyemi's texts use magic in the figurative sense to move from cycles of oppression to power.

Chapter 1: "Conjuring Magic in N.K. Jemisin's The Fifth Season"

In *The Fifth Season* (2015), N.K. Jemisin's definition of Black Girl Magic is two-fold. First, the novel invokes elements of folklore and the oral storytelling tradition. Both are central to the Black intellectual tradition and Black women's literature published in the 1980's, the movement in which I ground my analysis. Second, these storytelling practices summon images of the conjure woman, who—through folklore and oral storytelling—developed into a powerful and heroic cultural and literary figure. In this chapter, I argue that the characters in Jemisin's novel invoke the conjure woman as a literary and cultural folk hero whose presence reimagines and reaffirms the power of Black women. As a continuation of Black Women's Renaissance literature and a text representing the Black Girl Magic perspective, I argue that Jemisin's characters in *The Fifth Season* are modern invocations of the conjure woman's image as a folk hero whose magic allows them to reimagine, reaffirm, and redefine their identities, fulfilling the principles of the Black Girl Magic framework. While they perform literal magic that grounds them within a tradition of Black women conjurers, they also reveal the complexities of Black womanhood. Black women have struggled to form secure identities under oppressive systems that silence, exploit, and abuse them, but Jemisin's characters, like other conjure women figures, highlight how conjuring can be used to resist subsequent oppression. Merging the past with the present, her characters join other Black women figures that showcase Black women's strength and resilience.

The Fifth Season focuses on a group of people called orogenes, who can manipulate the elements by sensing and controlling the energy and temperature in the Earth. Jemisin's novel

takes place in the Stillness, a supercontinent that experiences a severe climatic shift every few centuries called a "Fifth Season," defined as "an extended winter… triggered by seismic activity or other large-scale environmental alteration" (460). Each Season causes specific climatic effects on the continent, such as atmospheric acid and fungus or widespread madness and famine. The Fifth Season in any given year may be the result of natural causes—including tectonic shifts or volcanic eruption—or even human error, like the mining accident that caused a Breathless Season (452). The novel's prologue, however, begins with the start of a Season triggered intentionally by an orogene using his power to cause a massive tectonic break to destroy the capital city. He attempts to free "his fellow slaves" from the "suffering" they have endured (6-7). The orogene—who remains unidentified at this point—causes the Season to destroy the empire that brutalizes and enslaves orogenes, using his power against his oppressor. With no political or social power, orogenes face one of two fates: they are either killed by lynch mobs or turned over to the Fulcrum, a government entity, to work as slaves. Fulcrum orogenes are trained to use their orogeny for a single purpose: to address seismic events in an attempt to maintain the Earth's unstable climate. The orogenes' condition is a direct parallel to the historical condition of Black people in the United States and in many ways, they are stand-ins for Black people[1].

Subsequently, the novel asks questions surrounding the social constructions of identity, exploring Black womanhood as a socially constructed identity by manipulating existing racial and gender relations and reimagining them in a fictional setting. First, the novel contains its own folk tradition. The Stillness is governed according to "stonelore," a set of wisdoms that are passed down to help ensure survival between and during Seasons. In *African American Folk Healing* (2007), Stephanie Mitchem writes, "The stories and folk sayings that inform the

[1] Orogenes are referred to as "roggas," a derogatory slur that mirrors the term used to describe Black people.

concepts of folk healing are methods of defining [Black people's] existence" (2). Stonelore has a similar purpose. It contains the history of the Sanzed empire—which controls the Stillness—and describes the laws that govern it, including those that brutalize and enslave orogenes. Each chapter is followed by an interlude of stonelore from three available stonelore tablets—labeled "On Survival," "The Incomplete Truth," and "Structures," respectively—so that the lore not only informs the characters' understandings of the world around them, but it also informs the reader's understanding of the novel as well. For example,

> Tell them they can be great someday, like us. Tell them they belong to us, no matter how we treat them. Tell them they must earn the respect which everyone else receives by default. Tell them there is a standard for acceptance; that standard is simply perfection. Kill those who scoff at these contradictions, and tell the rest that the dead deserved annihilation for their weakness and doubt. Then they'll break themselves trying for what they'll never achieve. (76)

> [obscured] those who would take the earth too closely unto themselves. They are not masters of themselves; allow them no mastery of others (331).

The first passage is the transcription of a recording of a previous emperor, who made the comment "shortly before the founding of the Fulcrum" (76). The second passage is a verse from Tablet Two, "The Incomplete Truth." In these examples, the current empire establishes its power in relation to the orogenes' disempowerment and perceived inferiority, which is written as legal doctrine. These sentiments resemble laws in the United States that justified enslavement and later injustice against Black Americans. In the novel, these pieces of lore govern the empire and become ideologies that establish its identity. The empire reinforces these ideologies and uses

them as what Patricia Hill Collins (1990) calls "controlling images." As mentioned in my introduction chapter, Black Girl Magic promotes self-definition and self-valuation in order to actively combat controlling images against Black women specifically.

Conjuring magic is an important tool of resistance against oppressive forces, including controlling images. As a folk hero, the conjure woman is "a symbol of African American resistance to white culture" (Anderson 20). *The Fifth Season*'s protagonist is a Black woman and a member of the orogene culture who, like the conjure woman figure, performs natural magic. As an orogene, the protagonist has an innate connection to the Earth that allows her to manipulate her environment. Like conjuring, the process of orogenesis allows individuals to "control invisible forces" in the natural world (Saber 376). In this way, orogeny is essentially a form of spirit work that is manifested through the elements to produce a physical result. The most common source is "earth-power," but an orogene can also borrow heat, force, and motion from any living or nonliving moving object around them (Jemisin 90). As the novel explains, the "nature" of orogeny is "kinetic transference [and] sesunal catalysis" (90). Orogenes manipulate natural elements using "sesuna," which Jemisin defines in the novel's appendix as an "awareness of the movement of the earth," controlled by an organ in the brainstem called "sessapinae" (465). Like conjurers, orogenes find power in the natural world by "listening" to the earth (87), reminiscent of the spirit magic in other 1980's Black Women's Renaissance novels, such as *Mama Day* (1988) and *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo* (1982). In *Mama Day*, the title character, Mama Day, "[gets] under, around, and beside nature to give it a slight push" (235), and in *Sassafrass, Cypress & Indigo*, the youngest character, Indigo, becomes a healer who has "earth blood" (12) and "[feels] the moon in her mouth, singing" (19). According to the novel, "If there is a moon falling from [a woman's] mouth, she is a woman who knows her magic… A woman

with a moon falling from her mouth, roses between her legs and tiaras of Spanish moss, this woman is a consort of the spirits" (12).

The Fifth Season follows the protagonist, Essun, through different stages of her life which correspond to her different names—Essun, Syenite, and Damaya.[2] Each character is developed independently before it is revealed that they are all one character at different points in life from childhood to adulthood. Damaya is her name at birth, until she renames herself Syenite as a young adult, and then adopts Essun as a third identity in her forties. In the prologue, the narrator foreshadows the connection between the three characters and reveals, "The world has already within [Essun], and neither ending is for the first time" (1). Essun has changed her name and identity as a response to and an attempt to heal from trauma, which causes her to dissociate from painful memories in her past. The narration shifts between past and present tense and from third- to second-person point of view as the plot moves between the protagonist's separate, nonlinear narratives. Further, the independent narratives represent various stages in the process by which the character develops her identity as a conjure woman and folk hero. In the first stage, Damaya's identity is limited by controlling images in the lore and she is conditioned to believe in the orogenes' inferiority and self-define as an "other."[3] In the second stage, Syenite questions the lore and begins to embrace her identity. In the third stage, Essun reaches full liberation as she uses her magic to define her own sense of self, fulfilling the tenants of the Black Girl Magic framework.

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[2] Essun's name is a reference to Oshun, a river goddess in the Yoruba religion who represents fertility, purity, sensuality, and love. Oshun is considered one of the most powerful deities and "in most Yoruba stories, Oshun is generally depicted as the protector, savior, or nurturer of all humanity" (Bayyinah).

[3] The *Encyclopedia of Critical Psychology* defines the act of "othering" as a "process whereby an individual or groups of people attribute negative characteristics to other individuals or groups of people that set them apart as representing that which is opposite to them" (Rohleder). Black women are treated as the "other" in order to justify racial oppression and white patriarchal dominance.

When Damaya's parents discover her powers and report her to local authorities, a Guardian—a type of law enforcement—from the Fulcrum arrives to take Damaya to a school called a "creche" in the capital city of Yemenes. There, she will be trained to control her orogeny and when her training is complete, she will belong to the Fulcrum. Damaya receives her first lesson from the Fulcrum on the journey to the capital when her Guardian, Schaffa—a white man—tells her a folk story of an orogene named Misalem (88). Misalem attempts to assassinate the emperor and, in the process, kills thousands of people in Yemenes. He also threatens to destroy the capital city unless its citizens turn over their emperor. The emperor agrees and arrives to meet Misalem with his bodyguard, a woman named Shemshena. She stops Misalem's campaign by evacuating the city and eliminating sources of kinetic energy—people, livestock, buildings, and crops—to block his orogeny, which weakens Misalem enough for Shemshena to kill him. Schaffa labels Misalem as a villainous "monster" and Shemshena as a hero who successfully eliminated the empire's "greatest threat" (92). As a piece of folklore, Schaffa's story is "inspired by… communal philosophy, ethos, and beliefs" (Akoma 4) that reflects and reinforces negative ideologies about orogenes. Initially, Damaya is drawn to Shemshena as a folk hero and imagines herself in a similar empowered position. But Schaffa tells her that she is supposed to think of herself "like Misalem: a potential threat, without a Shemshena to control [her]" (95). Schaffa uses the story to his social position—as a white man and a legal authority figure—and manipulate Damaya's perception of orogenes, which in turn alters her perception of herself and solidifies his white patriarchal domination over Black womanhood. He conditions her to believe that because of her abilities, she cannot be trusted to control herself—without his interference, that is. The story of Misalem and Shemshena is intended to condition Damaya to

think of herself as an object to be controlled or destroyed, not the subject whose actions drive the story and save the day.

Folk culture reflects and shapes the values and ideologies of a specific group, creating a sense of cultural identity and according to Chiji Akoma in *Folklore in New World Black Fiction* (2007): "The core of African American literature is located in the folkloric tradition" (16). As a Black Girl Magic text, Jemisin's novel extends from Black feminist theory and Black Women's Renaissance literature, both of which emphasize the importance of Black women's experiences in the development of Black folk culture. *The Fifth Season* links these concepts together, presenting self-definition as a feature of the character's odyssey to discover her own Black Girl Magic and using folk elements as a means to self-definition. However, if each character represents a different stage of self-actualization and identity development, then Damaya is in the first stage, as a figure who does not have Black Girl Magic. Her sense of self is not defined by her own thoughts, experiences, and desires, but instead is dependent on ideologies crafted by other people. The story causes Damaya to think of herself as an object whose "reality is defined by others [and] created by others," and whose "history [is] named only in ways that define one's relationship to those who are subject" (hooks cited in Collins 71). Damaya's narrative is essential to the novel as a Black Girl Magic text because it emphasizes the importance of self-definition in the first place, by demonstrating the detrimental effects to Black women's sense of self-worth. Further, it is also important to return to the fact that Damaya is initially drawn to Shemshena for her power and imagines herself in a similar light, until she is corrected by an external force—Schaffa and his white patriarchal domination. Since the internal power and self-love that Black Girl Magic embodies is not a new construction, it is important to continue to view it as a force that has always existed within Black women. Therefore, the socially constructed ideas, negative

stereotypes and controlling images are directly in contradiction to Black women's own self-definitions, as demonstrated by Damaya, who automatically envisions herself as a subject in a position of power, until she is conditioned to believe otherwise. That being said, the novel also uses the remaining narratives to argue that because the internal power of Black Girl Magic has always existed as a part of Black womanhood, it cannot be erased, and therefore can be fully restored.

When Damaya completes her training and becomes a Fulcrum orogene, she adopts the name Syenite. In her first chapter she is assigned a mentor—a senior orogene named Alabaster. Together, the pair will complete an assignment to clear coral from a harbor. However, Syenite also faces an unspoken obligation to produce a child with Alabaster and supply another source of labor for the Fulcrum. At this stage, Syenite is completely conditioned as a Fulcrum orogene, accepting their teachings and submitting to the Guardians' control. Syenite does "what her betters say she should, for the ostensible good of all," adapting to the Fulcrum's image of "what it means to be civilized," in order to ensure her own survival (75). However, when Syenite leaves with Alabaster to complete their mission, traveling outside of the Fulcrum causes her to question the lore she learned during creche that justifies the orogenes' enslavement.

For example, when contemplating the folklore, Syenite recalls that according to the novel's lore, the Earth has not always hated humans and at one point "did everything he could to facilitate" life on the planet (379). A lorist recitation states,

> There was an age before the Seasons, when life and Earth, its father, thrived alike… Earth our father knew He would need clever life, so He used the Seasons to shape us out of animals: clever hands for making things and clever minds for solving problems and clever tongues for working together and clever sessapinae to warn us of danger. The

> people became what Father Earth needed, and then more than He needed. Then we turned on Him, and He has burned with hatred for us ever since. Remember, remember, what I tell (115).

Stonelore claims that Earth grew angry when humans began to destroy the environment and ancient orogenes "did something that even Earth could not forgive: They destroyed his only child" (125)—the moon—which "[shattered] the planet's crust" (380), destabilized its climate, and caused the first Season. The Fulcrum teaches children according to the written word as it is documented on the Three Tablets. Even though it governs the way of life in the Stillness, the novel argues that the wisdom on the Tablets is an unstable power structure because it relies on written word, which is easily manipulated. The word "stonelore" is a direct reference to folklore, but it also plays on the idiom "set in stone," which refers to something that is unchanging. Jemisin uses stonelore to argue directly against the perceived permanence of written history and the authority it is given by Western cultures. In doing so, she reinforces the value of the Black folk tradition, derived from the African folk tradition, which values oral storytelling over the written word.

To illustrate, Alabaster explains to Syenite on their journey that the Fulcrum kills and enslaves orogenes because "they've got stonelore telling them at every turn that [orogenes are] born evil… monsters that barely qualify as human" (124) because of their "great sin" (380) and the destruction it caused[4]. He implies that the ideologies written in stonelore are the only reason for their oppression, to which Syenite replies, "Yes, but you can't change stonelore" (124). Here,

[4] Historically, witches faced similar punishments as orogenes and were also labeled as sinners and heretics. *The Malleus Maleficarum* (1486) declares, "Witches, more than any criminals in the world, deserve very severe punishment" because they perform acts of treachery "carried out by means of an explicit pact with the Enemy of the faith, of reason, and of salvation" (Maxwell-Stuart 101-102). Likewise, orogenes are labeled as "agents of Father Earth" (124), an enemy of the Stillness.

she mimics the Fulcrum's teachings, accepting the assumption that stonelore is permanent and that the Fulcrum's treatment toward orogenes is justified, simply because the lore is "as old as intelligence. It's all that's allowed humankind to survive through Fifth Season after Fifth Season" (124-125). But Alabaster challenges this, saying that "stonelore changes all the time… Every civilization adds to it; parts that don't matter to the people of the time are forgotten." Alabaster reveals that the lore written on ancient tablets, for example, is "different, drastically so" than the lore taught in schools (124-125), confirming that the written word is susceptible to manipulation to fit the ideologies of groups in power. In this case, the Fulcrum uses the written word to push its own agenda, similar to literary history in the United States, which has silenced Black women's voices for generations.

Yet, as Syenite engages in this process of self-definition that challenges the authority of the written word, the narrative once again emphasizes the importance of the conjure woman figure, whose literary presence presents an alternative image of Black womanhood and whose magic acts as an alternative form of social and political power. As stated, the empire teaches from three identified stonelore Tablets in schools: "On Survival," "The Incomplete Truth," and "Structures." Alabaster then quotes a verse that Syenite does not recognize, "[Orogenes] are the gods in chains. The tamers of the wild earth, themselves to be bridled and muzzled." When she points out that the verse is not written on any of the Three Tablets, he replies, "Tablet Five" (167). This particular verse is notable because it is an example of an alternative truth outside of the Fulcrum's teachings, but one that exists, nonetheless. As a conjure woman figure, Syenite is reminded of her own power as a "god in chains," despite versions of history that say otherwise.

Similarly, the memory of conjure women reminds Black women of their power, despite attempts throughout history to suppress it[5].

Essentially, the verse from Tablet Five is important because although it is initially unfamiliar, Syenite repeats it later when she and Alabaster fight off a Guardian[6] who tracks them down early in their journey. She reflects on the lessons she received during her training in the Fulcrum as a child, remembering that "it's her duty to obey" the Guardians without question (261). But watching the Guardian torture Alabaster, Syenite becomes "*angry*. Furious. Duty be damned. What this Guardian is doing, what all Guardians do, is not right… We are the gods in chains and this is not right" (262). When Alabaster quotes from Tablet Five—an unknown Tablet—Syenite learns that there is "more to orogeny than what the Fulcrum teaches" (380) and more to the orogenes' own history than what the written word has captured. She learns that orogenes are not "monsters" (6, 92, 124), as stonelore claims, but "gods who act as tamers" of the Earth (167). This suggests that the fear of orogenesis is not because of the danger it poses, as the Fulcrum teaches, but because of the power it awards to those who practice it. The only danger that the orogenes pose is to the system that enslaves them because they possess the power to overturn it. It is because orogenes have the power to change their oppression that they are controlled, "bridled and muzzled" (167). In this moment, Syenite engages in a liberative act of self-definition, repeating a piece of wisdom she gained from folklore, a "moral truth" that had

[5] Published accounts of conjurers were prevalent throughout the 19th century and both Black and white Southerners were aware of their presence (Anderson). After the Reconstruction era, academic and literary interest shifted away from Black folk magic, but "has generally followed a wavelike pattern of increasing and decreasing interest" (Anderson 3). Conjurers appeared frequently in writings during the mid-1880s until 1900. Then, the image reappeared during the 1920s up until the 1940s, disappearing again until the 1970s.

[6] In the novel, Guardians are a type of law enforcement that maintains control over the Fulcrum's orogenes. According to Schaffa, Damaya's Guardian, they "learn how orogenic power works, and… make certain [that orogenes] remain helpful, never harmful" (93).

been excluded from the Fulcrum's version of historical truth. By repeating the verse, she fights back against the controlling images the Fulcrum creates to control her, that turns them into "monsters" in their own eyes and "slaves" (6) in body and mind. This knowledge confirms to Syenite that there is more to herself than what she has been told, as an orogene and as a Black woman. It is this image of herself, as a "[god] in chains" and a "[tamer] of the wild earth," that empowers her to save herself and Alabaster. As a transition stage to recovering Black Girl Magic, she abandons the controlling images she received as a child and begins to embrace her orogenesis as a source of power, rather than a curse.

Then, Syenite flees to a new town to start a new life and family, renaming herself Essun, who lives as a fugitive passing as a "still," a term for a non-orogene. When Essun is first introduced, she has just discovered the body of her deceased two-year-old son, Uche. Essun's husband, Jija, murders their child after discovering he is an orogene, assuming the boy was responsible for the earthquake that started the current Season. Jija has fled their village with their daughter, Nassun. After this discovery, the narrative follows Essun's grief after the death of her son, her desperate search for her missing daughter, and her desire for revenge against her husband. At the same time, she grapples with the traumas in her past—as Damaya and Syenite—that have disrupted her sense of self in the present.

To relay the complexities of Black womanhood, *The Fifth Season* uses oral narration techniques, another element highlighted by the Black folk tradition and revisited in 1980's Black women's literature, along with the conjure woman figure. The novel develops the characters' identities using different verb tenses and narrative perspectives. To establish her as the main protagonist, Essun's chapters use the present tense and second-person narration from an initially unnamed speaker who uses the "you" address to guide Essun through her history and describe

the events of her past lives as Damaya and Syenite. Because Syenite and Damaya are past versions of Essun, their chapters are written in the past tense, representing the traumatic memories that she does not want to remember. Instead, she represses these memories and "chooses" who she wants to be, carefully creating each persona to survive her oppressive circumstances (44).

The novel opens with a prologue, in which the narrator introduces readers to Essun, first using third-person perspective, "The woman's name is Essun. She is forty-two years old… The boy was her son. His name was Uche" (10). Then, the narrator refers back to this description to clarify that the woman is Essun, using second-person to reintroduce Essun to herself, "*You* are she. She is *you*. *You* are Essun. Remember? The woman whose son is dead. You're an orogene" (15) (emphasis added). This narration mirrors oral storytelling in the folk tradition, and the unidentified narrator acts as an orator describing a story and relaying knowledge orally to an audience. But in this case, the audience—Essun—receives knowledge that she already has, but cannot remember. To heal her disrupted memory and fractured identity, she relearns her past as an oral narrative in an attempt to piece together memories that have been lost. As a Black Girl Magic text, Jemisin uses this narration technique to emphasize the importance of history and memory to the perspective and its tenets. Drawing on the folk tradition and invoking the conjure woman's image allows Jemisin to "reclaim and redefine the relationship between the present and the past… and [open] up realms to re-present," redefine, and reaffirm Black womanhood (Saber 379).

At the end of the novel, the unnamed second-person narrator finally reveals the purpose for the character's shift from Syenite to Essun and fills in the missing information from Essun's fragmented past. Syenite and Alabaster find freedom and settle on an island before Syenite gives

birth to a son, as part of her duty to the Fulcrum. But when the Fulcrum ultimately tracks them down once again, she kills the child to save him from a life of enslavement.[7] Confronted by her guardian, she avoids capture by drawing on "nature" (440), using orogeny to destroy the island on which she seeks refuge. She creates a "convulsion" in the ocean to cause "spikes, wet and knifelike [to] burst up from the waves and utterly shatter the ships that float near the island's shores" (442). Syenite "opens herself to all the power of the ancient unknown and tears the world apart," (442). Like conjuring magic, orogeny is a form of natural magic and spirit work that saves her son's life from the horrors of enslavement and injustice, "[tearing] the world apart" (442). Here, Syenite's magic is akin to conjuring magic, a spiritual force that protects and empowers Syenite, reminiscent of that of the African-derived conjure woman who used her magic to secure her own societal mobility and liberation. It directly connects the act of performing physical magic to the process of developing a secure sense of Black womanhood that is no longer controlled by external oppressive forces.

Further, although Syenite is the character who kills her son, not Essun, the scene uses second-person, breaking the narrative structure to join Syenite's and Essun's narrative and restore Essun's suppressed memories so that she can fully embrace her identity as a conjure woman and an embodiment of Black Girl Magic. The second-person narrator interjects, "You understand these moments, I think, instinctively. It is our nature. We are born of such pressures, and sometimes, when things are unbearable, sometimes, even we crack" (441). They continue, "When all the death is done… only a handful of people are still alive, in the ocean below. One of

[7] This scene is a reference to the tradition of enslaved Black mothers who took the lives of their children to save them from enslavement. For example, Margaret Garner was an enslaved woman who fled bondage with her four children in 1856. When they were eventually caught by slave catchers, Garner killed one of her daughters and attempted to kill her three other children. Garner was tried for destruction of property and returned to the South. Garner's story inspired several artistic works, including Toni Morrison's *Beloved* (1987) and an opera entitled *Margaret Garner* (2005).

them, a woman, floats unconscious amid the debris of her shattered ship… Her presence sang across the world: a promise, a demand, an invitation too enticing to resist… She is—was—special. *You* were, are, special" (443). Speaking to Essun directly, the orator uses the "you" address to pull the memory from Essun's mind. This element of folk storytelling converges the past with the present, fully connecting Essun's past and present selves. By addressing her directly, Essun is included as a participant in the memory and is forced to acknowledge her past as a source of power rather than pain. During this passage, she uses literal magic to create #BlackGirlMagic, conjuring an image of Black women who are unwilling to surrender to injustice. This moment, at the end of the novel, represents the third stage, as Essun fully embraces her identity, including the memories she doesn't want to remember. Here, she is not an oppressed and obedient orogene of the Fulcrum dictated by controlling images, but a conjure woman with the power to shape her own sense of self.

All in all, the orogenes and their surrounding folklore invoke the conjure woman as a folk hero in the Black imagination, extending the image into the present as an act of Black Girl Magic. In the metaphorical sense, the novel actively resists cultural, political, and social exclusion of Black women's experiences by invoking the conjure woman tradition, while its fantasy aspects allow the characters to demonstrate Black Girl Magic in the literal sense as well. As stated, Jemisin attributes the protagonists' power to "the ancient unknown" (442). In doing so, she acknowledges the extensive history of conjure magic that "[belongs] to the Black woman alone" (Pryse and Spillers 5) and "is as ancient as [the] woman herself" (Brooks et al. 454). By utilizing Black women's magic, Jemisin's characters find power in the essence of their Black womanhood to fight back against injustice.

Chapter 2: "Ancestral Artifacts and Maternal Inheritance in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone*"

Like *The Fifth Season*, the Black women characters in Tomi Adeyemi's *Children of Blood and Bone* (2018) also pay homage to the conjure woman in the modern literary imagination, using the Black Girl Magic framework. However, Adeyemi's novel uses conjure magic to demonstrate another aspect of the Black Girl Magic perspective. Drawing on 1980's literature, which "started to glorify ancestral mothers and picture communal mothering as the main and multivalent practice of Black female resistance" (Penier 81), Adeyemi's characters are Black women who inherit power from other Black maternal figures. Adeyemi defines Black Girl Magic as a type of ancestral knowledge, highlighting the unique connection between Black women and their maternal ancestors. Further, this connection is preserved in a set of spiritual artifacts that represent ancestral knowledge and cultivate the tradition of Black women's magic.

Children of Blood and Bone takes place in Orïsha,[8] a fictional nation inhabited by two groups: kosidán, the ruling class, and maji, the lower class who possess magical abilities gifted to them by the gods. Their magic is "a spiritual connection between [the gods] and mankind" (Adeyemi 83). Orïshans once celebrated the maji as sacred beings, individually chosen by the gods to receive the divine gift of magic, who are marked with white hair as a "sign of the gods'

[8] The *Encyclopedia of African Religion* uses the word "orisha" to refer to a group of indigenous Yoruba deities. However, as the reference entry states, "Defining *orisha* simply as deities does not do justice to the concept. Viewed in symbolic terms, an orisha may be said to arise from the convergence of a divine power to command and make things happen, with a natural force, a deified ancestor, and an object that witnesses and supports that convergence and alignment. An orisha, therefore, is a complex multidimensional unity linking people, objects, and powers" (Asante and Mazama).

touch" (14). The maji rose to power and became the first royal bloodline. They maintained peace throughout the kingdom until the royal maji began to abuse their power. The gods punished the royal family by revoking their gift and stripping their magic. Then, the kosidán began to hate and fear the magic they had once praised and admired, creating division and disharmony between the two groups, and maji are persecuted and reduced to second-class citizens.

The novel begins eleven years after a group of maji start an uprising against the monarchy, the casualties of which included Orïsha's queen and young prince. Seeking revenge for the deaths of his wife and son, King Saran orders a massive attack—which characters refer to as "the Raid"—against all maji in Orïsha, who he claims are "drunk with power, always plotting to overthrow [his] line" (81). To secure the monarchy's power, the King's army massacres all adult maji, which severs the connection between humans and the gods. However, because maji powers do not manifest until age thirteen, the only people spared are the maji's children, called divîners, or "ibawi," meaning "the divine" (15). Divîners have white hair and are predestined to become full maji, but without the adult maji to preserve the gods' magic and maintain the divine connection, the children never develop their powers. Therefore, in Saran's eyes, they are not a threat. Consequently, when magic disappears during the Raid, the maji's descendants are physically and politically defenseless against the monarchy, and King Saran's rule is secure. At six years old, the protagonist, Zélie, witnesses her village being invaded during the Raid. Saran's soldiers brutally assault her father—who is kosidán—and murder her mother—who was a Reaper. Reapers are maji of life and death. Now seventeen, the gods choose Zélie to bring magic back by finding a set of sacred artifacts—a scroll, a sunstone, and a bone dagger—that revive a divîner's latent abilities. After Zélie finds all three artifacts, she must travel to a sacred island on

the centennial solstice and perform an ancient ritual that will reconnect the maji to the gods and restore their lost magic.

Black Girl Magic Beyond the Hashtag (2017) includes a transcribed interview with the author, Julia Jordan-Zachery and her daughter, Makeen. In the interview, Makeen identifies ancestral and familial relationships as the "base for #BlackGirlMagic" (183). Similarly, Adeyemi's novel highlights the importance of ancestral connection for Black people, especially Black female ancestors. She draws on twentieth century Black women's fiction, in which ancestor figures are "timeless people whose relationships are benevolent, instructive, and protective, and they provide a certain kind of wisdom" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 21). For example, in Phyllis Alesia Perry's *Stigmata* (1975), the protagonist, Lizzie, inherits a quilt from her recently deceased grandmother, Grace. The quilt tells the story of Lizzie's great-great grandmother Ayo, who was kidnapped from Africa as a teenager and brought to the United States as a slave. When she was alive, Grace experienced visions from Ayo's memories, and when Lizzie touches the quilt that Grace knitted, Lizzie inherits the memories of both her ancestors and then completes her own quilt that preserves Grace's story "until the next storyteller comes along" (Perry 63). In this way, Lizzie's ancestors, although no longer living, become "a long line of forever people… [who] live in a circle… back and gone and back again" (17). When she joins the circle, Lizzie's spirit merges with those of her foremothers, which begins to repair the disconnect between generations of Black women in Lizzie's family who are "lost" without "conscious historical connection" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 22). Similarly, in the beginning of her narrative, Zélie lacks "conscious historical connection" and is "far removed from the presence of her ancestors" (Morrison, "Rootedness" 22).

To illustrate, the novel opens as Zélie prepares to graduate from a training program led by Mama Agba[9], an elderly seamstress who secretly trains young divîner girls in self-defense combat, so that they can protect themselves against the harassment and brutality they often face from the kings' soldiers. The match is interrupted when two soldiers enter the shop to taunt the girls and demand "maggot"[10] taxes from Mama Agba, using a slur that refers to divîners and maji. When one of the soldiers attacks Zélie, "his touch erases everything [she is], everything [she's] fought so hard to become" and she feels like a "little girl again, helpless as the soldier drags [her] mother away" (12). She reflects, "It doesn't matter that we'll never become the maji we were meant to be. In their eyes we're still maggots. That's all they'll ever see" (10). Then, she claims that "the gods died with [the maji's] magic. They're never coming back" (15).

This sentiment demonstrates the disconnect between Zélie and her maji heritage, and how "far removed" she is from the power she was meant to have, as a maji. Further, as a Black woman, she is removed from the presence of her Black female ancestors specifically. During the Raid, Zélie only loses her mother, who is a maji, while her father and brother remain alive because they are both kosidán. As the novel describes, the clan from which a maji descends and the type of magic that they can perform is most often passed down through maternal bloodlines. In other words, even if Zélie's father had been maji, Zélie would have still become a Reaper because her mother was a Reaper (Adeyemi 78), similar to the way the one-drop rule functioned. The one-drop rule, a social and legal principle during the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, asserted that any person with one Black ancestor is considered Black, which ensured that

[9] Mama Agba is an "othermother," which Patricia Hill Collins (1987) defines as a woman "who assists biological mothers by maternal responsibilities" ("The Meaning of Motherhood" 5). By nurturing and caring for nonbiological children that causes Black women to "feel accountable to all the Black community community's children" (5), othermothering creates a foundation for Black women's social activism.

[10] The derogatory term "maggot" is also a reference to the racial slur used for Black people.

transgenerational trauma persisted. In the text, the magic in the novel is part of a tradition of Black women's power that is passed down matrilineally, just as Ayo's memories are only passed to her female descendants, and the social conditioning of the mother was passed down to her children. Though Zélie's mother gave birth to two children—a daughter *and* a son—the novel explains that "divîners are selected by the gods at birth" (113) and only her daughter was chosen. Therefore, in this nuclear family, magic "belongs to the Black woman alone" (Pryse and Spillers 5). By focusing on a woman protagonist, Adeyemi uses the relationship between a Black mother and daughter to establish a system of maternal inheritance and define Black Girl Magic as a way "of knowing that Black women have inherited from their mothers, 'othermothers,' and foremothers before them" (Brooks et al. 453). Not only does Zélie inherit her magic from her mother, but she also inherits cultural knowledge about her maji heritage. For example, her mother taught her Yoruba as a child—the maji language that was "outlawed after the Raid" that Zélie no longer remembers (Adeyemi 12)[11]—and recited old stories about the ten maji clans, including the Reapers, with whom they share their powers. But Zélie's mother's death disrupts this ancestral connection and the flow of knowledge along the matrilineal bloodline. After the Raid, she is not only left without a mother to teach her about her heritage and guide her into womanhood, but also without a connection to her ancestors, the gods. Separated from the past where maji were praised for their power, Zélie has been conditioned to live in fear under a monarchy "whose rules are rooted in hate" (27) and draws power from the maji's labor, exploitation, and oppression. Therefore, in order for Zélie to overcome oppression and reclaim her power, she must reconnect to the ancestor and rediscover their magical knowledge.

[11] The maji were "forced to speak Orïshan" (90), which parallels enslaved Africans being forced to learn English on plantations and losing their native languages over generations.

Initially, Mama Agba is Zélie's only source of ancestral knowledge. In addition to providing practical guidance to help ensure the girls' survival, Mama Agba also acts as a spiritual guide for the divîners' quest to bring magic back. For example, she is a Seer, a maji who can "peer through time" (14). Before the Raid begins, Mama Agba has a vision of herself visiting a maji healer—called a Cancer—who "used the magic of disease" (89) to remove all of Mama Agba's hair. Without white hair to identify her as a maji, she is able to escape the Raid and live as a kosidán, although without her magic.

Zélie discovers the scroll, which is the first artifact, when she meets Amari, the Princess of Orïsha born to Saran's second wife, who steals it from her father and flees the palace. Zélie helps Amari escape the royal army and they bring the scroll to Mama Agba. Unlike Zélie, who has forgotten the maji language, Mama Agba is able to read the scroll and determines that it is "a ritual… with an ancient origin, a way to connect with the gods" (92). Further, she has a vision of Zélie making a pilgrimage to the ancient temple of Chândomblé that holds the answers to bringing magic back. Discovering that Mama Agba is a maji provides Zélie with an alternate maternal connection to her magic ancestry and supplies her with the knowledge that can begin to repair the connection she had previously lost. In this way, Mama Agba is a literal figure who possesses Black women's magic and also helps Zélie connect to her own.

Further, Mama Agba represents the authority that Black women hold in Afrocentric spiritual epistemologies, as Kokahvah Zauditu-Selassie argues in "Women Who Know Things." Zauditu-Selassie describes Black women literary figures as "soul workers" who "employ symbolic, temporal and cultural codes reflective to African traditional religions and indigenous values" (38). This ancestral figure that is especially prevalent in Black Women's Renaissance literature. For example, in Toni Cade Bambara's *The Salt Eaters* (1980), Minnie Ransom is "the

fabled healer of the district" (3) tasked with healing Velma Henry, who experiences a psychiatric break after rejecting her own gifts as a healer. Minnie has her own spirit guide named Old Wife. Described as "all knowing" and a "teller of strange tales," Old Wife gives Minnie the "message… about [her] gift unfolding (Bambara 49-53). Similarly, although Zélie had initially believed that Mama Agba was kosidán, she concludes that she "should have known" because "Mama Agba's always had a sage sense about her, the wisdom of a person who's seen beyond her years" (89). Mama Agba embodies the "ageless women" that, according to Zauditu-Selassie, act as "repositories of indigenous knowledge" (43). As the only surviving adult maji, Mama Agba becomes a physical symbol of remembrance for the maji culture and also a symbol of liberation as she helps Zélie reclaim her maji powers.

Although Mama Agba has ancestral knowledge, she is living, not an ancestor. Therefore, her spiritual knowledge is limited, reinforcing the need for Zélie to reconnect with her true ancestors. But because they can no longer interact with the maji directly, the gods make connection using material artifacts—the scroll, sunstone, and bone dagger—and lead Zélie to find them[12]. Following Mama Agba's instructions, Zélie travels to Chândomblé. The temple is home to the sêntaros, "the protectors of magic and spiritual order" (93) who were slaughtered by Saran's army during the Raid. Sky Mother created sêntaros to connect the maji to her spirit. Every century, the sêntaros are led by a figure called the mamaláwo, who carries the three artifacts to a sacred island. There, the mamaláwo performs a binding ritual that secures the connection between maji and Sky Mother's spirit (162). The novel establishes a system of Black Maternal Inheritance, an epistemology that Kinitra Brooks defines as "the result of a

[12] Before the Raid, King Saran throws the artifacts in the sea. But at the novel's start, they resurface in a small coastal village and have not been destroyed, as Saran initially assumed. This demonstrates the idea that the gods' magic cannot be erased, despite attempts by oppressive structures, just as aspects of Black culture resist erasure politics.

communication process that occurs between a young female novice and at least two foremothers who are endowed with supernatural powers" (18). Similar to the quilt in *Stigmata* that connects Lizzie to her ancestors, the artifacts in *Children of Blood and Bone* establish communication between Zélie and her ancestors, specifically her maternal lineage, including her biological mother; Oya, the goddess of life and death and sister deity to the Reaper clan; and Sky Mother, who created humans and the gods.

The communication process characterizing the Black Maternal Inheritance framework begins the first time Zélie touches the scroll. She feels "an unnatural shock… foreign yet familiar at the same time. It rumbles in [her] core, warming [her] from the inside out. It beats like a second heartbeat" (77). The scroll activates the source of a maji's powers, called ashê[13], and when a divîner begins to feel ashê, they become a maji and develop their powers. Ashê is present in the blood—literally, as part of the body, and also figuratively, because the power is passed down through the bloodline. This explains the feeling of familiarity that Zélie describes, because the power is part of who she is. More specifically, as stated, a maji's power is traced through the maternal bloodline, meaning that Zélie, a Black girl, receives her magic from other Black women—Sky Mother, Oya, and her biological mother. In this way, magic is an ancestral bond between Zélie and these three Black women, represented by the presence of ashê in the blood. Although Zélie does not have access to magic in the beginning of the novel, her ashê is still present in her body because it is still present in her lineage. When she feels ashê for the first time, she describes it as an "awakening" (458) that begins to fill "a gaping hole inside [her] that [she] didn't even know still existed" (77). This power lies dormant in Zélie's body, drawn out by

[13] In Yoruba traditional cosmology, "ashê" "refers to the heavenly and godly force… used to bring about the universe" and was "the first spiritual power that existed" (Asante and Mazama). The *Encyclopedia of African Religion* also claims that the concept spread throughout the African diaspora during the 18th and 19th centuries, as a direct result of enslavement.

the artifacts. When she begins to collect them, she is able to reconnect the pieces of her culture that the monarchy had stolen. More importantly, she embraces her identity, beginning to perceive herself as the powerful maji that she was "meant to become" (13). As Zélie describes, when she holds the objects, "the wrath of Oya lit every cell of [her] being on fire. [She] felt like a goddess" from whom she descends (455).

After she leaves Mama Agba's hut, Zélie travels to Chândomblé, where she acquires the second artifact, the bone dagger, from Lekan, the last living sêntaro[14]. Lekan guides them through the temple and tells them the story of how the world began and shows them a mural painted on the stone wall illustrating the creation story. Although she has heard the story from Mama Agba, "it's never felt as real as it does now. It transcends the realm of fables and myths into actual history" (159). On Earth, Sky Mother created humans, "her children of blood and bone" and "in the heavens she gave birth to the gods and goddesses," both "created in her image" (158-159). Sky Mother shared pieces of her soul, each one a type of magic that the gods shared with humans on earth "and the first maji were born" (159). There are ten deities, each of whom take a piece of Sky Mother to create each of the ten maji clans. The last goddess is Oya[15], who "didn't take from Sky Mother like her siblings. Instead, she asks Sky Mother to give" and because of "Oya's patience and wisdom, Sky Mother rewarded her with mastery over life" (160). The maji who received Oya's gifts became Reaper maji, bearing the power to sense and command death (109). Like her mother, Zélie is a Reaper and claims Oya as her sister deity.

[14] In the novel, sêntaros are "spiritual guardians" (161), tasked with maintaining the spiritual connection between maji and the gods by using the artifacts in the binding ritual. They also act as high priests or religious officials that preserve the cultural memory of the gods and their stories.

[15] As one of the seven orisha, Oya, as the "guardian of the gates of death… stands at the gates of the cemetery, yet she does not represent death. She is only the keeper and guardian of the gates, allowing souls to enter" (Wright). In the novel, not only can Zélie control the dead, but she can also sense their spirits and feel the pain of their deaths in her own body. Traditionally, one of the Reapers' "sacred duties" (Adeyemi 203) was to guide lost spirits on their journey from to find peace in the afterlife.

In the temple, Zélie continues the process of communication with her maternal ancestors, Oya and Sky Mother. Here, the novel demonstrates a matrifocal worldview that "embraces femininity, beauty, power, serenity, inner harmony, and a complex matrix of power. It demonstrates that power and femininity are intertwined rather than antithetical" (Bádéjọ 94). In this worldview, Black womanhood is the source of not only Zélie's magic, but of all magic, and even life itself, positioning divine femininity at the center of the social order, as creators of life. Now, Zélie has inherited a similar responsibility, as the next mamaláwo, to repair the social order and reconnect the maji with Sky Mother's spirit. Further, this responsibility, according to Lekan, falls onto women alone. He explains, "Only a woman can become our mamaláwo… Your connection to the gods is cemented in your blood. That connection to Sky Mother is what's needed to complete the ritual" (165).

After Lekan gives her the bone dagger, he gives her instructions to find the last artifact, the sunstone, in the city of Ibeji. There, village laborers—mostly divîners—are forced to work in the stocks, a form of enslavement. In exchange for their freedom, the laborers are forced to compete in an arena competition during which they will fight to the death to win riches for their stockers. Zélie discovers that the sunstone is the victors' prize and enters the competition. In doing so, she not only retrieves the last artifact, but also uses her maji power for the first time. Using a Reaper scroll that Lekan gave her in Chândomblé, Zélie learns to recite an incantation that reanimates the dead and uses the animations to form an army that will help her win the fight. Specifically, her army is made up of divîners who lost their lives building the arena as enslaved laborers, their souls reincarnating in "a swirl of vengeance" (243) for the suffering they endured. While Zélie has always had Reaper blood, she has only just learned to perform Reaper magic. In

doing so, she has become "a true sister of Oya" (243) and fully reclaims her magic, not only for herself, but to honor her mother's spirit and "make every fallen Reaper proud" (243).

In *Cultural Memory: Resistance, Faith and Identity* (2007), Jeanette Rodríguez and Ted Fortier define remembrance as "a key to survival" (4), especially for marginalized cultures whose history is marked by oppression. The artifacts in *Children of Blood and Bone* are symbols of remembrance that ensure the maji's survival, both literally and figuratively. In addition to reviving maji powers, the scroll documents the binding ritual that connects the maji to Sky Mother. The sunstone is "a living fragment of Sky Mother's soul" (161) and, like the scroll, also awakens magic. The bone dagger is "a sacred relic carved from the skeleton of the first sêntaro… Whoever wields it draws strength from the life force of all those who have wielded it before" (161). It also represents the maji who were slain by Saran's army. Like the artifacts in *Stigmata*, which ensure that Ayo's descendants "don't forget who [she is] and what [she means] to this world" (Perry 7), the three sacred artifacts are symbols of remembrance, as the only remaining connection between maji and their gods. Additionally, they are literate texts that only members of the maji community can interpret. Therefore, Saran sets out to destroy them, in a last attempt to eliminate magic and the maji culture forever.

When Saran learns that Zélie has found all the artifacts, the royal army captures and holds her prisoner in the palace. As Saran interrogates her about the artifacts, his lieutenants torture and brand her, carving the word "maggot" into her back[16]. After the torture, even with the

[16] Intended to permanently remind Zélie of her supposed inferiority, this act is a historical reference to white slaveholders who often branded slaves to classify them during sale, and also mark them as property. Further, the "application of brands was… a permanent means of othering the enslaved" (Keefer 665). The brand's placement on Zélie's back is also a reference to slaves being whipped, usually on their backs. Further, some of the most powerful images of enslavement are photos of the scarred backs of slaves, as "visual proof of the brutality of slavery" (Blakemore). For example, the photo "Whipped Peter" (1863) became "one of the most widely circulated images of slavery of its time" (Blakemore).

artifacts, Zélie can no longer feel her magic, because Saran has "cut [it] out of [her] back" (455). Discovering that her magic has, once again, been stolen as a result of Saran's hatred, Zélie describes, "The realization reopens a gaping hole inside of me, a pit I haven't felt since the Raid… The ache that cuts through me is sharper than the blade that cut through my back. It's like losing Mama all over again" (456). Even more than her inability to perform magic, Zélie's sense of self regresses. Like the beginning of the novel, before she'd discovered the artifacts, she finds herself once again living in fear and oppression under a hateful monarchy. She no longer feels like the goddess from which she descends. Instead, with the word "maggot" carved into her body, she is dehumanized and physically branded as a non-human "other." Now, Zélie "hardly feels alive" (455), cut off again from her ancestors and her sense of self.

Despite the ancestral disconnect, Zélie continues with her mission and leads a small army of divîners to the sacred island on the centennial solstice, where she will perform the ritual. Although she no longer has her magic, Zélie, still armed with the artifacts, holds onto the fact that the gods had chosen her to bring magic back. Relying on faith, she reminds herself that the gods "don't make mistakes" (486). When they arrive on the island, they meet Saran's army, and the scroll is destroyed in battle. Without it, Zélie cannot remember the incantation to perform the ritual and cannot restore the previous connection to Sky Mother. Instead, she realizes she can "draw on the connection with [her] ancestors through [their] blood" and "reach back, forging a new connection to Sky Mother and her gifts" (517). Zélie realizes that, just as her mother's blood "surges through [her] veins" (517), she shares the spirit of other ancestors as well. Zélie has the power to reach Sky Mother directly, without the previous ritual, because she shares the blood of Sky Mother's children, the gods, and also the gods' children, both maji and kosidán. She then calls on her ancestors out loud, asking them for help, and "like an erupting volcano, the power of

[her] ancestors flows through [her], maji and kosidán alike" (517). She "digs through [her] lineage, clawing all the way back to those who first received Sky Mother's gifts" (517).

This scene is another example of the Black Maternal Inheritance epistemology. As Brooks writes, the ancestors

> Share more than their knowledge of the past and the key to a higher understanding of the self. They literally share themselves… A recurring goal of the communication process is the entrance into a communal 'I.' The female novice's self-discovery and self-acceptance centers itself on the joining of that self with the spiritual personages of her ancestors… A trinity is formed in which the women become both distinctive, yet the same. [They] are contained within the body and psyche of the novice. (18)

When she performs the ritual, not only does Zélie finally connect to her ancestors, but she also becomes one with them. As she describes, "Each [ancestor] grips onto *our* connection, onto the very heart of *our* blood. Their spirits twirl with mine… *We* pour ourselves forward, our souls fighting into the stone" (517) [emphasis added]. Further, Zélie becomes a vessel for her ancestors, as she begins to recite an incantation that Zélie does not naturally know. This moment resembles the beginning of the novel, as Mama Agba translates the scroll and Zélie begins to remember the maji language. But here, instead of receiving the knowledge and learning it for her own use, she allows them to work through her, surrendering to the power of her ancestors. Though she does not know what the incantation will do, she knows that their spirits "belong to [her]… It's like they've always been there, trying to make [her] hear them" (Perry 138). When she hears them, Zélie is "unstoppable" (Adeyemi 518).

As I argue, Tomi Adeyemi defines Black Girl Magic as a type of ancestral knowledge that Black women inherit from their maternal ancestors. Extending from Black women's 1980's literature, the Black Girl Magic perspective glorifies Black women by highlighting the importance of the ancestor figure and especially ancestral mothers, who provide spiritual knowledge that their female descendants use to resist oppression. Further, the novel adopts the Black Maternal Inheritance epistemology, using sacred artifacts as conduits for connection between ancestral mothers and daughters. Adeyemi's protagonist recovers ancestral knowledge that lies within her, pulling from "the magic in [her] blood" (516) that, by way of inheritance, has always been hers to find.

Conclusion: "Black Girl Magic for Healing, Preserving, and Nurturing the Self"

In the summer before my last year of undergraduate studies, I visited the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture at the New York City Public Library. I spent what felt like hours in the Black Power exhibit, looking at the black-and-white photographs of the Black Panthers, fists in the air, marching through the streets of Oakland, California, my hometown. I remember being in awe as I tried to read the notes in the margins of Richard Wright's and James Baldwin's manuscripts through a sheet of glass, picking out titles I recognized from the class syllabi. At the end of the day, I left the gift shop with a copy of Toni Morrison's *Playing in the Dark* (1992), a t-shirt with a line drawing of James Baldwin, and a pin that read "Black Girl Magic" in bold letters.

When I returned home, I put the pin on my backpack, where it lived amongst a number of others with logos, pictures, and phrases from bands, movies, and TV shows. My—mostly white—classmates often commented on the ones that they recognized. But the Black Girl Magic pin almost always went unacknowledged, as if they didn't see it. When I bought the pin in New York, I had been so proud and inspired by all the Black excellence and history I had experienced. But back at home, I worried whether I appeared *too* proud or show-offish, whether my pride would be mistaken for arrogance. I worried whether my classmates were uncomfortable being confronted by my Blackness out in the open and making itself known. I often stared at the pin when I zoned out during class. It was impossible to miss—twice the size of the other ones, black with large white letters, and a bold statement. I thought about removing it. Maybe that pin just didn't fit with the other ones. Maybe it was too big, too loud, drew too much attention. Or maybe

it was me; maybe I was the wrong fit. Maybe I didn't even have any Black Girl Magic to begin with. That had to be it. I just needed to remove it. Problem solved.

But what would that say about me? What would it mean if I rejected and discarded this symbol now, when at one point it had brought me so much pride? Why did I feel so uncomfortable wearing it on my back every day? And why did it matter so much when my white classmates seemingly pretended it wasn't there? Why was I the only one who couldn't stop thinking about it, if they were able to move on without a second thought?

Second guessing the decision to have my pin—my Blackness—displayed on the front of my backpack was an automatic reflex to the systemic actions of a white supremacist, patriarchal society that treats Black women as disposable objects or commodities. It forces us to the bottom of the social order, and tells us that we belong there, similar to what the Fulcrum tells orogenes and the Orïshan monarchy tells maji. A position at the bottom of society does not allow for proud displays of Black womanhood. But that does not mean that we remain in that space. When I considered removing the pin from my backpack, I inadvertently told myself that I did not belong in a space in which I could celebrate my Blackness, and denied myself the option to have such a space at all.

My time as a graduate student has forced me to confront the complexities of my position as a Black woman scholar in a majority white academic setting. Throughout my academic journey, I have struggled to find my place in it. But now, at the end of this chapter in my life, I realize that there isn't one—at least not in the way I expected. But by completing this project, I carved out my own way. When I completed undergrad, I got rid of my old backpack because I wanted to cleanse myself of the experience and get a fresh start. I put all the pins in a little basket on my bookshelf. Now, as a graduate student, I no longer wear the BGM pin on my bag, but I

find myself thinking about it often and about my own internal conflict surrounding its presence, and mine. There are days where I can still feel its weight, as if I am still carrying it around on my back from classroom to classroom. And I never removed it, even though sometimes I wanted to. I imagine that if I had taken it off, maybe it would have just reappeared on the front pocket of my backpack again, that it would not allow me to ignore or forget about its magic, or mine.

In all, Black Girl Magic acts as an agent for healing, preserving, and nurturing the self. With BGM, Black women are able to heal from historical wounds, preserve the legacies of our ancestors, and nurture possibilities for the future. Focusing on the self is essential for Black women to navigate a society in which we are constantly devalued and unprotected. As bell hooks writes in *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), "Black female self-recovery… is an expression of a liberatory political practice" (7). BGM, then, is a process by which Black girls and women define and articulate their own narratives, which is an act of resistance to controlling images, stereotypes, and the demonization of various components of Black womanhood.

As illustrated by the novels I have discussed in my project, Black Girl Magic is not a process of self-*discovery* for Black women, but a process of self-*recovery*. The power in Black womanhood is not a force to be *discovered*, as something new and coveted. Instead, it is a force to be *recovered*, as something that has been forgotten—because oppressive structures have attempted to take it—but it still waits patiently to be remembered. When Essun accesses suppressed memories from her past and Zélie accesses the knowledge of her ancestors, the characters recover pieces of themselves that have always belonged to them, though they did not always realize it. Overwhelmingly, these novels demonstrate the processes by which Black women are able to reclaim and articulate their own narratives and identities. They are, as bell hooks writes in *Sisters of the Yam* (1993), "[maps] charting a journey that can lead us back to

that place dark and deep within us, where we were first known and loved, where the arms that held us hold us still" (9).

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