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Due to the limits of Euro-American conceptions of gender, bodies are seen as static representations of a person's interiority. Attempts to change one's physical form, as in the case of gender-affirming medical care, have been met with increasing resistance in the political structures of the United States and the United Kingdom. Even the most common pro-trans narrative, of someone "born in the wrong body" perpetuates notions of interiority and exteriority that must sometimes be made to match but are otherwise fixed. Speculative creative works such as the *Broken Earth* trilogy, *The Sandman*, and *The Witcher*, however, present realities in which interiority and exteriority are fluid and dynamic, and mutable bodies are naturalized (whether or not those mutations occur through 'natural' means). Using a trans analytic, this project interrogates the racialized and (dis)abled dynamics of trans mutable embodiment to explore the limitations of medicalized and social transition and the possibilities of other kinds of being-in-the-world that rely on intersubjectivity rather than individuation.

CONSTRUCTING GENDER WITH A BAG OF SAND, TWO SWORDS,

AND SOME ROCKS: TRANS MUTABLE EMBODIMENT IN

THE SANDMAN, *THE WITCHER*, AND *BROKEN EARTH*

by

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Approved by

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Dr. Mark Rifkin
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DEDICATION

I feel deep gratitude to all those in my life who supported me during the last two and a half years. Without you, neither my degree nor my thesis would have been possible. To my parents and Meg Oslund, for so many late-night, last-minute draft readings. To Kay Zeiss and Sophia Cory, whose wisdom and empathy kept me balanced. And to Mae Boyer, for your patience, support, and unconditional love.

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CHAPTER I: INTRODUCTION

I was in class for the first time since my top surgery. My newly flat chest was still bound and bandaged under my button-up shirt. At break, I trailed behind my fellow classmates as we headed to the restrooms. As the signs loomed closer, I stopped short. Male or female? I had struggled with this internal debate before. Usually, I erred on the side of caution, choosing the latter. Even when binding, I rarely looked particularly masculine. But now with my short hair, masked face, and loose shirt, I was unsure how I looked to others. I pulled my classmates aside to ask for their advice. "Whichever you're more comfortable with," they said immediately, as if worried about offending me. As they hurried off, I realized they misunderstood my question. What I meant was: *where will I make others the least uncomfortable? Where am I the most safe?* My own comfort never even crossed my mind. I had long since given up the idea that I might identify with either of the ubiquitous bathroom stick figures. Most bathrooms simply did not account for me and now with my gender-incongruent body, this omission was even more apparent. I had 'finished' my transition. But my body was less at home in the world than it was before.

Only a few weeks after my surgery, the media was inundated with news of anti-transgender (trans) legislation. Spurred on by claims that gender-affirming care for minors equated to child abuse, it seemed as if states were tripping over themselves to pass increasingly aggressive bans.[1] Before 2023, only three states– Arkansas, Arizona, and Alabama– had enacted

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[1] On February 18, 2022, Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton released a non-binding opinion that grossly mis-characterized medically necessary, best-practice healthcare for transgender youths as pseudo-eugenics and child abuse. See Paxton, Ken. "Opinion No. KP-0401." Letter to Honorable Matt Krause, Austin, TX, 2022.

legislation prohibiting transgender youths from receiving gender-affirming care.[2] By the end of August 2023, 19 more states had enacted various legislation to ensure that transgender youths could no longer receive medically-necessary medical and/or surgical treatment.[3] Five states made it a felony for physicians to provide gender-affirming medical care to minors, and four made it criminal to engage in "conduct that aids or abets" youth access to transition-related medical care.[4] Additional provisions vary by state, though they aim to restrict access to all gender-affirming healthcare. For example, four states (Montana, Florida, Mississippi, Missouri) banned the use of state funds or property for providing gender-affirming care, and seven states (West Virginia, Tennessee, Ohio, Nebraska, Missouri, Florida, Arkansas) introduced burdensome requirements for trans people to access gender-affirming medicine.[5] A particularly insidious clause in Alabama's legislation requires that all school staff mandatorily report to parents if a child expresses thoughts that they might be transgender.[6] In response, several cities and states have enacted legal protections of gender-affirming care, and temporary blocks have delayed several bans as they are challenged in court. 15 states and the District of Columbia have these so-called "shield" laws.[7] Arkansas, Florida, Idaho, and Montana's legislation have been temporarily

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[2]Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."

[3]As of this writing, Ohio and Wyoming have also passed state bans on gender-affirming care for youths in 2024. Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."

[4]These states are Alabama, Florida, Idaho, North Dakota, and Oklahoma and Indiana, Iowa, Mississippi, and Ohio, respectively. Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."

[5]Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."

[6]Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."

[7]Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."; Reed, Erin. "Maine Signs Trans and Abortion Sanctuary Bill into Law, despite Violent Threats."

blocked in part or in full, though several more states are facing lawsuits.[8] Though advocacy groups have quickly risen to address these new concerns, there is a palpable communal fear that comes from experiencing such a flagrant nationwide attack on trans existence.

Like many, I turned to the trans community for support and advice in both surgical and legal matters. While I found both in spades, I often felt disappointed, even saddened by the repetition of one particular narrative. Time and again, I saw surgery figured as the pinnacle of the trans experience. The time before surgery was one of misery and pain, whereas afterwards there was only joy. Not only did I personally not identify with this narrative, it also concerned me within the larger contexts of current gender non-conforming (GNC) experiences in the United States. Moreover, I was concerned about the continued association of the present with suffering. I could understand bemoaning gender dysphoria, or the complicated process of finding medical care. Happiness, however, seemed consistently relegated to an undefined 'later': *after* a few years on hormones, *after* moving out, *after* surgery. Statistics certainly corroborate this: transgender and non-binary youth are more than twice as likely to attempt suicide than their cisgender queer peers.[9] These are children who cannot bear the present, much less imagine a positive future for themselves. The national trend of transphobic vitriol and the systematic destruction of resources for trans young people only serves to continue the work of extinguishing their lives. If the old adage "children are the future" is true, then the attack on gender-affirming medical care is a clear stance: trans futures are not wanted. These bans work to root out trans futures at their source, that is, the present. If transition offers the promise of a better future, what happens when the present denies that future before it can begin?

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[8] Movement Advancement Project. "Equality Maps: Bans on Best Practice Medical Care for Transgender Youth."
[9] Price-Feeney, et al. "Understanding the mental health of transgender and nonbinary youth."

Yet, I also noticed a phenomenon few of my peers had put words to: many of us were living our futures in the present. That is, in preparing for our futures, we were making them happen. I spoke to people who were exercising daily to bulk up even before they started testosterone, who were slowly coming out to their families and friends, who were advocating for themselves to their healthcare providers, who were saving up for their own surgeries. We swapped stories and advice and resources, and in doing so, secured a kind of future for ourselves and each other. My own transition, it seemed to me, was a type of futurity. I would not step (or wheel, as the case was) out of the operating room, a perfectly sculpted representation of my internal self. Even after healing, I knew my expression, my embodiment, would remain a continuous and indefinite process. The givenness of "now," of the present body, becomes moldable clay in the face of transness. My experience piqued my curiosity about transition: who is it for? What does it mean? What does it imply? Why is transness so consistently figured along the lines of binary and finite transition?

Perhaps unsurprisingly, I have long been enraptured with stories of transformation, of bodies that can reshape themselves and their worlds. In creative speculative work, the possibilities for bodily forms seem almost limitless– and nothing we think we know about physicality is taken for granted. I found solace in these works, but more than that, I found the potential to re-examine assumptions about trans embodiment. Binary transition is only one aspect of the malleability experienced by the gender non-conforming population. Speculative creative work offers potential realities that, when theoretically engaged, create new understandings of the body as mutable that envision trans lives beyond binaristic assumptions. This project interrogates three works of speculative creation: *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman, *The Witcher* by Andrzej Sapkowski, and *Broken Earth*, a trilogy by N. K. Jemisin. These works

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engage with the malleability of bodies in myriad ways, and when placed alongside each other, pose questions and reflections on what embodiment means for racialized, (dis)abled, and transgender individuals.

This thesis seeks to understand not only the cultural conversations the three texts present about mutable embodiment, but what they offer for generating alternative embodiments, capacities, and realities. What might it mean to understand trans embodiment as inherently linked to mutability? While trans studies has engaged with malleability, the common locution "trans and gender non-conforming folks" reveals a rhetorical slippage that suggests that these two embodiments remain somehow distinct.[10] This phrase seems to imply that trans persons largely abide by the gender binary save for the relatively short (and thus, perhaps, forgivable) duration of the transition process. GNC people, on the other hand, are unruly in their refusal of finite and binary transition. Mutability (and its associated questions: what kind? for how long? into what?), then, is the 'trouble' of transness: ostensibly setting apart the cisgender (cis) from the transgender from the gender non-conforming.[11]

Transition, as it is popularly understood, makes mutability more palatable under cisnormativity by limiting it to specific directions (female to male, and vice versa) and specific

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[10]This comment is not intended to critique the phrase as a 'catch-all,' nor to critique those that use either term (or both) as identity labels. Nor is it my intention to assert that differentiating between "trans" and "gender non-conforming" is inherently harmful or not useful for intellectual or identitarian work. While many people use one or the other for identitarian means, the communities, experiences, and scholarly conversations overlap. This project uses "trans" and "gender non-conforming" interchangeably and often in conjunction. Doing so is, in many ways, another method of "refusing fixity" (Green, Kai 66). These truths and intentions do not, however, contradict the phrase's usefulness for indicating the ways that such distinctions often act to reaffirm mutability's exclusion from the normative.

[11]Though I rely on the term "*trans* mutable embodiment" and refer most frequently to transgender persons and their fates, this work sees the type of embodiment developed herein as useful not only to self- identifying gender non-conforming persons, but also to all those whose embodiment cannot be seen as wholly normative. Thus, while I recognize that the reliance on "trans" as terminology often figures "cisness" as its opposite, I do not see cisgender people as unable to engage in the types of processes herein described as "trans mutable embodiment."

timelines (3 months to 5 years).[12] But this conception elides the lived experiences of many (cis, trans, and GNC alike) and forecloses the possibilities offered by alternative embodiments. The prevalence and popularity of the story of binary transition seems to indicate a need for more intellectual engagement with mutability beyond this framework. This project interrogates what malleability means and the methods by which a body becomes malleable, through the lens of the texts. What might it mean to embody mutability? What might a notion of mutable trans embodiment offer? Rather than establishing new delineations or 'types' of transness, this work envisions a transness rife with the capacity for generating new types of relations, futurities, and embodiments.

Ontologies of Trans(ition)

Conceptions of transgender identities center notions of one's inevitable transition: to be trans, one must always be seeking, undergoing, or have undergone this change. Additionally, transition is defined as a structured, binary process with a clearly delineated end point. In this logic, a trans person must use medical and administrative processes to go from one binary sex to the other, and is then fixed in this new gendered location. Once the person can pass among the general population (i.e., cisgender people), their transition is complete. This story conflicts with the experiences of transition by gender non-conforming people. Trans understandings of gender are seated in an individual's self-concept or body image. The materiality of bodies affects gender non-conforming lives, but physical form is only one aspect among many considered as part of gender identity. Trans notions of gender operate on a complex matrix understood as fluid and ever-evolving. Gender identity, presentation, expression, and even sex might all shift throughout

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[12]Coleman, et al, "Standards of Care for the Health of Transgender and Gender Diverse People, Version 8."

the course of a person's life, or even on the day-to-day. For many, transition is not necessary for their identity or well-being. Those that do undergo some form of transition do not always limit themselves to the bounds of a binary gender. Nor is their transition seen as having a finite end; rather, transition is a continuous process of performance.[13] Much scholarship on these ideas resembles, but does not entirely reaffirm, feminist notions of gender constructionism.

In gender constructionism, posits gender as a discursively constructed positionality shaped by a variety of cultural factors. In other words, a person's performance of cultural norms and relationships is what shapes their gender, rather than their sex characteristics. While this framework has been ground-breaking for the development of gender theory, some interpretations of constructionism go so far as to seemingly remove the physical body from consideration entirely, asserting that there are no limits to the physical effects of malleability. Abstractly, this theory opens a variety of generative possibilities, but when considering the lived experiences of gender non-conforming people, completely ignoring bodies misses a critical dimension needed to challenge systemic oppression. Gendered forms are constructed (at least partially) through embodiment: "the role of the body in controlling one's identity" cannot be underestimated.[14] The construction of gender occurs not only through language but also through "gendered body practices that serve to discipline and incorporate bodies" into certain cultural expectations of embodiment.[15] Whether a body is seen as female will drive conclusions about that person's etiquette, dress, hygiene, and so on. These cultural performances create a physical bodily reality

[13]See cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*; cárdenas, *The Transreal*; Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema*; Gill- Peterson, *Histories of the Transgender Child*; Hausman, "Virtual Sex, Real Gender"; Heaney, *The New Woman*; Pacteau; "The Impossible Referent"; Pearce et al., *The Emergence of Trans*; Prosser, *Second Skins*; Salamon, *Assuming the Body*; Serano, *Whipping Girl*, Shuster & Lamont, "Sticks and Stones May Break Our Bones, and Words are Damaging"; Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*.

[14]Melzer, *Alien Constructions*, 166.

[15]Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 200.

of gender formation—a reality that becomes a living sensory memory in the body.[16] For example, a young person continually taught to sit in a certain pose because it is 'lady-like' will begin to intuitively assume that seated position. As a body continues to perform gender, the practices develop to more fully embody normative structures. This practice allows people to perfect their gender expression and avoid social stigma.

Though it exists as physical memory, gendered embodiment remains performative, revealing its potential for mutability and multiplicity. In other words, other types of performance are available to be embodied. While the mutability of gender performance allows for entirely changed embodiment practices, for many, the body's performative history remains a component of identity to varying degrees. Bodily mutation is "transformation, rather than rupture," a shift in one's embodiment does not erase a past formation.[17] It is possible to locate one's embodiment through a narrative of interconnected metamorphoses and generating an infinite number of different gendered positions. Gendered mutability allows for incorporation of the different stages of a body's history into a sense of self, thereby acknowledging complexity and multiplicity without negating identification as a political strategy. Transgender embodiment, then, is both the layers of bodily memory accumulated over the course of (potentially) multiple gender presentations as well as mutability itself. Understanding trans embodiment as mutability resists attempts to fix a static, dimorphic existence or particular bodily form on gender non-conforming persons. Offering up this fantastical diversity of embodiment challenges the very understandings of 'reality' and 'truth' that are so often used to police trans bodies. Gender performance sets mutability and materiality in tension, each modifying the other in continuous dialectical

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[16]Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 199.
[17]cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 89.

processes. Malleability can challenge the bounds of what is taken as *the real*, illustrating the way discourses of and assumptions about materiality should not be confused with the material as such (even as such discourse and assumptions help shape the dynamics of what's possible).

Why Speculative Creative Work?

Now, more than ever, we need to understand what power transition holds over trans futurity. As the accessibility of gender-affirming care becomes ever more uncertain, so too do any futures that rely on such practices. If trans futures rely on medical transition, and medical transition is criminalized, then there is no such thing as a trans future. Put differently, allowing conceptions of trans life to be pared down to a simple "before and after transition" story does more than erase present trans existence, it precludes any possibility of living a futurity outside the bounds of gender and bodily categorization. Trans readings of speculative fiction turn towards the complexities of mutability and materiality as a part of the work of nurturing trans existence in the "now" and "then." This work takes speculative trans analysis to be a vital part of present- and future-making work needed for trans survival.

Speculation describes horror, fantasy, and science fiction that present alternate realities that reflect on existing structures and engage the audience in that reflection.[18] Scholars of speculation have lauded the genre as a space of discussion, where both texts and audiences can interrogate social and political issues. Patricia Melzer notes in her work on the important role of science fiction in feminist theory that it is necessary to read speculative texts "as contributions to feminist debates as well as reflections of them."[19] Speculative work defamiliarizes social norms that go unquestioningly accepted as objective reality, revealing the contrived nature of

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[18]Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*, 17.
[19]Melzer, *Alien Constructions*, 9.

oppressive systems. Since speculation is not obligated to submit to notions of reality, it can help

audiences generate alternative modes of being. Realism can perform the important work of

witnessing, but must capitulate to conventional factuality.[20] By suspending a claim to the real,

speculative creative works can reveal the processes through which possibilities for being-in-the-

world are continually (re)materialized according to certain norms.[21] Aimee Bahng's *Migrant*

Futures contrasts speculative finance against speculative fiction in order to imagine alternative

visions of the future unreachable by capital. She develops a notion of "radical unfurling," or, the

opening of doors previously closed by systemic oppression, the development of new modes of

being and, simultaneously, the expansion of imaginable futures.[22] She describes speculation as

"compelled to explore different accounts of history," saying that it "calls for a disruption of the

teleological ordering of the past, present, and future and foregrounds the processes of narrating

the past (history) and the future (science)."[23] In other words, speculation involves a re-imagining

of the now in order to generate alternative futurities.

       This move to the future is crucial to understanding how speculative creative work

represents alternative ways of being-in-the-world that are already being imagined. These works

can offer trans-led contributions to conversations around gendered and sexed bodies. Radical

unfurling understands speculative generation as multitudinous; speculation presents variable

framings that can exist as equally true yet nonidentical. This multiplicity ensures that audiences

with diverse positionalities can interface with the creative work and each other. Fashioning

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[20]Interestingly, Sami Schalk argues that speculation can do the work of witnessing as well: "Speculative fiction can help fulfill the desire for more facts and representations of marginalized groups while also offering a distinctly different way of challenging ableism, racism, and sexism because the author sets the new rules of their fictional worlds" (*Bodyminds Reimagined*, 23).

[21]Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*, 67.

[22]Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 7.

[23]Bahng, *Migrant Futures*, 8.

innumerable valid possibilities can ally subjects through an understanding of difference, creating

solidarity that resists collapsing complex systems into simple universalization. The texts

analyzed in this work are very different from one another, but each has been notable in the public

eye the last few years. Their particular futurities and alternative embodiments are readily in the

public consciousness, thus demonstrating how other ways of thinking about being-in-the-world

have already been in circulation. By continually questioning assumptions of what is 'real' or

'true,' speculative fiction engages in conversations about other kinds of worlds, other kinds of

futures.[24] Through the window of these works, we might begin to dream about transformative

structural change.

While this project's focus is on trans embodiment, none of the works in question were

created with the intention of being 'trans stories.' The inclusion of explicitly trans characters

varies across the pieces, and gestures towards transness are largely accidental or peripheral.

Despite the lack of a purposeful invocation of trans politics, these narratives use mutability to

offer the not-yet-real, blurring the line between what is and what could be, and thus generating

new realities that empower trans lives and queer conceptions of the body.[25] While trans

representation provides an important service, naming individual gender non-conforming

characters is limited by the identities and experiences of those characters.[26] However, this project

seeks out not trans representation, but rather a trans analytic. Drawing on Kai Green's "trans*

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[24]A note on language: Given that this work is specifically troubling what constitutes realness through the lens of speculative creative work, wording can get rather messy. The words "real(ity)" and "true" might interchangeably be referring to the fictional world of the presented texts, the colloquially understood "real world" in which this thesis exists, an individual or group's sense of genuineness, and so on. In lieu of repeatedly defining such terms (a process that seems to oppose the very work of this project), context and scare quotes have been applied liberally.
[25]Not intentionally invoking transness does not necessarily imply that these texts were not influenced by cultural conversations about the gender non-conforming community.
[26]How important representation actually is (despite being accepted as an inherent good) is up for debate, and this idea will be further explored in chapter three.

analytic" and Wendy Gay Pearson's notion of a "queer reading," this work attempts to investigate the texts not for trans subjectivity, but for trans-enabling possibilities.[27] That is, trans readings seek to find not merely transness that explicitly exists within these texts, but moments in which gendered and/or bodily excess might gesture to alternative embodiments.

Pearson describes "queer reading" as "a reading against the grain" fraught with meaning-making that seeks to trace "the very kinds of queer kinships among and within sf texts that work to undo the discursive and material conditions that make it hard to find livable worlds, even in the imagination."[28] A trans analytic helps extend this method of genealogy tracing. According to Green, a trans method "requires that we be more attuned to difference rather than sameness" and encourages a "move to those uncomfortable places of contradiction and conflict."[29] Together, these notions understand a type of genealogy or kinship among a myriad of mutable embodiments, regardless of whether they look, live, or feel the same. Rather than subsuming the works of disability studies or women of color feminism under trans studies, a trans analytic invokes coalition with these approaches in order to further understand the metaphorical and material realities of gender embodiment across populations. A trans reading of speculative creative work holds multiple truths in conversation, by suspending a dominant sense of 'the real' while still acknowledging the limits presented by social, historical, and institutional systems. It does not seek to establish a new kind of trans 'authenticity,' but rather explore alternative ways of being-in-the-world that systems of categorization and containment foreclose. By engaging speculative creative work through a trans reading, this project can explore the kinds of futures

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[27]Green, "Troubling the Waters"; Pearson, et al., *Queer Universes.*
[28]Pearson, "Alien Cryptographies", 25; Pearson, "Towards a Queer Genealogy of SF," 74.
[29]Green, "Troubling the Waters," 79.

and alternate realities offered by trans mutable embodiment.

Intersections With Race & Disability Studies

Staying grounded by embodied actualities is crucial to the success of this work. The material imposes inescapable constraints on malleability, including through social, bodily, historical, and institutional forms, and these constraints need to be part of theorizing as well. Such constraints include: that one's flesh cannot be unceasingly altered without critically affecting health, freedom of choice often remains securely entwined with whiteness, and institutional surveillance enforces systems of tractable categorization. Early posthumanist thought often made the mistake of presuming a white, middle class, able body that was somehow infinitely resculptable. While the possibilities offered by posthumanist thought are fascinating, this project hopes to further contribute to scholarly conversations by illuminating the mutability of embodiment in the context of race and disability scholarship. Engaging with work in these fields deepens an understanding of the lived experiences of trans persons through social, institutional, and medical structures. Additionally, it guides the work to ask questions of embodiment that engage with multiple co-constitutive systems of oppression, usefully engaging with the full richness of gender non-conforming experiences.

Critical Race Studies has engaged in crucial scholarship about bodies and flesh, pointing to particular ways that technologies of anti-blackness are employed to maintain hierarchical biological and sociopolitical structures.[30] In other words, politics of embodiment and personhood are always already racialized. Scholars in Disability Studies have interrogated how the category

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[30]See Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering*; Ellison, "The Strangeness of Progress and the Uncertainty of Blackness"; Green, "Troubling the Waters"; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*; Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

of 'disabled' is made to signify any and all types of failure or excess to conform to societal norms– even norms of whiteness, gender, and sex.[31] Engaging in race and disability scholarship thus reveals the mobilization of disciplinary power that determines what types of personhood and embodiment exist under imperialism. Choice and agency are, in themselves, troubled by these scholarly fields. Western notions of agency assume both certain privileges and certain directions of resistance. Both race and disability scholarship have engaged with what it means to be human, and the types of embodiments (and personhood) that are given access to 'humanness.'[32] Intellectual engagement with 'the human' has allowed scholars to articulate the many dynamics of embodiment and choice. It bears stating, however obvious it might seem, that the ability to choose one's embodiment is a privilege granted to few. Yet, perhaps more relevant to this work is that socio-politcal relations shape that which can be chosen. More explicitly, those that can choose their embodiment already have access to humanity, and their choices are limited to embodiments that are recognizably human. Those that have not been granted humanity not only have less access to choice (as it is figured in Western ideology), but they must also choose an embodiment that moves them closer to the recognizably human.

Importantly, these limitations are intellectual as much as they are physical. In *Normal Life*, Dean Spade critiques the legal equality framework for social change, arguing that such

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[31]Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 30. See also Baril, "Transness as Debility"; Erevelles, & Minear, "Unspeakable Offenses"; Hegarty, "Sexuality, Normality and Intelligence. What is queer theory up against?"; Herndon, "Disparate but Disabled"; MacRuer, *Crip Theory*; Melzer, "And How Many Souls Do you Have?"; Padilla, "Introducing Latinx Identity"; Pickens, *Black Madness:: Mad Blackness*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Samuels, *Fantasies of Identification*; Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*; Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*.

[32]See Wynter, "Beyond Miranda's Meanings," "Beyond the Word of Man," "Human Being as Noun," and "Unsettling the Coloniality." See also Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering*; Ellison, "The Strangeness of Progress and the Uncertainty of Blackness"; Erevelles, & Minear, "Unspeakable Offenses"; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; McKittrick, *Sylvia Wynter*; Pickens, *Black Madness:: Mad Blackness*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*; Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Weheliye, *Habeas Corpus*; Womack, *Afrofuturism*; Yergeau, *Authoring Autism*.

strategies will not result in true transformation. He signals how power relations impact "the ways we understand our own bodies, the things we believe about ourselves and our relationships with other people and with institutions, and the ways we imagine change and transformation."[33] Attention to race and disability points to the constructed nature of truth, and how the ideologies of who gets included in humanity are figured around racialized and ableist notions. However, these scholars also seek to acknowledge the material consequences of administratively disseminated truths. Man-made realities are no less harmful simply because they are constructed. Acknowledging the construction of truth is, however, necessary for (re)thinking the trajectories of mutable trans embodiment. Social progress is largely measured by legalized access to rights and privileges. Race scholars suggest that what acces to rights really measures is proximity to the category of 'human.' This method is inherently flawed, as it hinges on accepting a reality that supports white supremacy and colonialism.[34] Moreover, achieving inclusion to the human simply shifts the burden of non-human Other onto a different group; instead of actually challenging the category of 'human,' this strategy repeats minoritizing narratives of "We're *more* human than them." Trans people who engage in binary transition might gain more nearness to the human, but only through their appositional relationship to GNC people with a more mutable embodiment, who are in turn displaced further from 'humanity.'[35] Drawing from this insight, this project seeks not to compare the experiences of embodying transness, blackness, or (dis)abledness, but to understand these embodiments as related and co-constitutive. Engaging in the work of Race and Disability Studies is not simply about 'accounting for' race and (dis)ability, but is an intellectual

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[33]Spade, *Normal Life*, 6.
[34]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 77.
[35]In this particular example, 'the human' and 'humanity' can be understood as synonymous with the cisnormative.

and moral imperative to understand race and (dis)ability as *always already* imbricated in trans embodiment.

Why Multiple Mediums?

As will be discussed in the following chapters, the texts analyzed in this project span across mediums, including comic books, television, video games, short stories, and novels. Two of the three (*The Sandman* and *The Witcher*) have been adapted several times. Certainly, these adaptations provide a wealth of information from which to source an analysis, far more than can be reasonably managed in this project's scope. However, these multiple mediums also allow this project to attend to questions of embodiment through an additional framework. Media studies scholarship has explored the ways that interacting with texts– be they written or visual, physical or virtual– affects not only the received message, but also the audience's experience of embodiment. The text and the audience act recursively on each other, creating– in a sense– a new joint text through the interaction: "production, signification, consumption, bodily experience, and representation... is in constant feedback and feedforward loops."[36] This relationality between the audience and text means that texts are not simply passive conduits of meaning but part of more complex meaning-making systems.

A crucial part of this technology of meaning-making is the embodiment of the audience and the ways texts influence those experiences. Different mediums will initiate different experiences of embodiment.[37] While it is not the intention of this project to comment on each text's various adaptations and hypothesize about their effects on an audience's embodied experience, attending to the capacity of the medium to inspire various responses in its audience

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[36]Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 28.
[37]Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*, 28.

adds an important dimension to the exploration of the types of embodiment the speculative works inspire. By attending to both the texts and their medium, this analysis hopes to better understand the possibilities these works inspire and how they are tethered to embodied actualities.[38]

Organization

The question of an individual's bodily control, which is central to trans lives, will guide the investigation. Beginning with the work representing the most individual bodily control and moving to that which represents the least, the texts complicate autonomy by becoming increasingly attentive to the social realities of lived embodiment. The limits of materiality intensify through the analysis, gesturing toward a kind of imaginative process wherein boundless alternatives are presented, then gradually hewn through discursive understandings of sociopolitical existence, resulting in a rupture of dominant truth claims grounded in sociohistorical contexts. The varied stories will present opportunities to be attentive to the diverse desires and experiences of gender non-conforming persons, as well as the layered and conflicting methods of control enacted by social, historical, medical, and institutional systems. In other words, the project begins by presenting the broad potential of a trans mutability framework, a theory that when taken to the extreme, seems to offer infinitude of potential embodiments, and bodies as spaces of limitless shifting. The project continues to refine the potential of mutable trans embodiment through material and social constraints in order to attend to the multiple and co-constituting positionalities of race, ability, class, gender, and sex. In doing so, this project

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[38]Further discussion of the interactivity between text and audience can be found in cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*; cárdenas, *The Transreal*; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Melzer, *Alien Constructions*; Salter & Blodgett, "Fanfiction Transformative Works, and Feminist Resistance in Digital Culture"; Sanders, "Of Storytellers and Stories"; Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*; Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*; Towle & Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native."

hopes to address these contexts not simply as constraints that foreclose futurities, but as generative complexities to making multiple, meaningful possibilities.

Chapter one– Figurations– presents *The Sandman* as unsettling truth claims about bodies. Through the few trans characters in the story, chapter one explores how gender non-conforming people are already unsettling narratives about bodily authenticity. Becoming is already a large part of the trans experience, regardless of whether this truth is acknowledged in popularly circulated narratives. The character Wanda presents a way of thinking about the inconsistencies between trans self-identity and a medicalized transition model of transness. Her experiences articulate the harms that ideologies of bodily authenticity and 'naturalness' continue to have on trans persons. Desire, on the other hand, represents the types of gender ambiguity that have begun to circulate in cultural texts and points to the ways that alternative ways of being-in-the-world that invoke trans mutable embodiment are *already* disseminating, even if they are not named as such.

The chapter then draws on micha cárdenas's work on shifting to explore the titular character, Dream. Dream is a personification of the universal forces of imagination and possibility and engages in constant physical metamorphosis. His existence literally outside of human construction grants him fantastical freedom of choice; he is able to alter his form based on his intentions, rather than as a survival strategy. Dream's ability to rewrite reality epitomizes the work of destabilizing normative notions about natural, true, or authentic bodies and sexes. *The Sandman* continually asks its audience to question reality and even change it. In a trans reading, the story seems to question the 'realness' of gender and sex as we know it. *The Sandman* situates shifting not only as protection from cisnormative reality, but as a disruption and rewriting of cisnormative logics.

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Chapter two– Frictions– begins the work of exploring the limitations on bodily mutability through *The Witcher* by explicitly attending to race and (dis)ability. This chapter responds to its predecessor by questioning the assumption that mutability is an inherent good. Witchers and sorceresses complicate notions of agency with regard to bodily changes, particularly in medical and social contexts. *The Witcher* questions the rationale behind medicalized transition, pointing to parallels between medical transition and racialization. Geralt's role as a monster-hunter for hire allows for thinking about racialized ungendering. Neither he nor his lover, Yennefer, had true power of choice in their transformations. Yennefer's own position as a (dis)abled woman before she becomes a sorceress clarifies the ideological power of the 'cure,' and how mutability can be wielded to enforce bodily norms rather than to free one from them. Turning to the notion of the 'human' grounds trans embodiment in the material effects of marginalized people's experiences. By attending to how mutability is often conscripted to police the boundaries of 'humanity,' the chapter explores Geralt's appositional position to the not-so-universal category. It introduces the possibility of existing alongside humanity without being included within it, and sets the stage for exploring alternative embodiments.

The final chapter–Futurity– delves into *Broken Earth*, which speculatively considers settlement and slavery to refigure histories where bodies deemed problematic were forced to live in scripts that derogated their capacities. Of all the pieces, this trilogy most clearly articulates a self located outside of the body yet unrelentingly bound to it. It continues the discussion of racialization, attending to enfleshment and bodily consumption, engaging the ways that imperialism works to consume the very bodies it precaritizes. Jemisin's creation offers a language to locate trans self-concept as distinct from, but in conversation with, one's physicality and how society views it. The heroine Essun's intellectual and emotional journey works to

unearth previously obstructed capacities for embodiment and modes of sociality. She unearths spaces of freedom in her oppression to engage in world (re)creation in relationships with others.

The spaces Essun uncovers are modeled by stone eaters, strange humanoids that she comes to understand as representative of an alternate way of being-in-the-world that values, rather than fears, change. These people model what it might be like not simply to acknowledge their lack of entry into humanity, as Geralt does, but to willingly move away from the 'human' and to an existence otherwise. Their mutability is intrinsic to their being, as well as their relationships with the world and with others. Crucially, this capacity for change is also a part of the world (re)making that Essun and her community must engage in order to make a livable future for themselves. This project draws on Jemisin's injunction to understand the end of a world as the transformation into a new futurity.

CHAPTER II: FIGURATIONS

Transition– and thereby, transness– is often conceived of in the context of medicalization.

Medical resources such as hormone replacement therapy (HRT) and sex reassignment surgery

(SRS) offer possibilities for transgender people to ameliorate their gender dysphoria and are

considered synonymous with the term "transition."[39] Cisnormative notions of gender assert that

it can be determined by the physical body, either in part or in whole, with particular authority

given to one's original form.[40] Such gestures to the 'authentic' or 'natural' body promote the idea

that trans gender performance is merely a disguise for a body's sex. This emphasis on artificiality

serves to invalidate the truth of trans identities; a philosophical approach that constructs a false

dichotomy between that which is fabricated and that which is true. Feminist notions of gender

performance have worked to delink the fabricated from the false, asserting that even cisgender

embodiments contain aspects of performativity. Medical transition in many ways works to

further that assertion: the ability to alter one's body, even to the level of genitalia, serves to

prove, for some, that both gender and sex are cultural constructs that can be (re)made.[41]

An oft-repeated expression is that trans people have been "born in the wrong body," or

have a soul that is "mis-matched" with their physical form, and transition allows them to end

their discomfort. Transition, in this imagining, is that which "strips the body bare to what it

should have been": an excavation of some previously unseen authenticity.[42] Not only does

transition supposedly operate on a scientifically measured timeline, but it is also figured as the

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[39]Sex reassignment surgery is also known as gender-affirming surgery. This second term is largely preferred within trans communities, yet the medical system in the United States largely uses the former term. In this work, both will be used interchangeably.
[40]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 12.
[41]Heaney, *The New Woman*, 297.
[42]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 82.

demarcation between two discrete selves– the falsely sexed body, now slain by the power of medicine, and the final product, a long-desired truth. The bodily ambiguity of transition is expected, but only during the first few years of medical treatment.[43] Thus, medicalization is employed to situate gender mutability within a temporal definiteness. In other words, there exists for trans people some kind of binary authentic form, and it is the role of medicalization to take a body that is wrong and turn it into a body that is right. The popularity of this story is at least partly due to the ways it accurately describes some gender non-conforming people's experiences with gender, dysphoria, and transition. However, this narrative has become embedded as the singular way to be trans. Though employed to counter anti-trans appeals to biological 'truth,' medicalization is often wielded such that transness hinges on the undergoing of medical transition. That is, in order to be properly trans, one must be seeking to undergo or have undergone a full transition and must desire to 'pass' as one's gender identity.[44] Rather than eroding the ideological power of the physical body, transition employed in this way reiterates notions of gender grounded in the material form. These norms work to police more gender-ambiguous people not only by transphobic rhetoric, but also by their fellow trans community.[45] Transition administered in this way does not make space for more gender ambiguous embodiments, but is only acceptable as a means to a binary end.

However, simply adding a third category to the man/woman binary does not truly revolutionize the gender system, but rather expands the system to encompass more people. Creating a 'third gender' category serves to imply that the existence of a system of gender

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[43]Coleman, E. et. al, "Standards of Care," S254.
[44]Shuster & Lamont, "Sticks and Stones," 111.
[45]Spade, *Normal Life*, 68.

categorization is somehow unproblematic.[46] The inclusion of third, fourth, or even fifth gender

categories maintains an implied "or" – as in, man *or* woman *or* non-binary *or* agender (and so

on). This implied 'or' results in a continuation of the limiting thinking that many trans people

face. It suggests that a person can only be one identity. Transition in this way of thinking remains

singular, linear, and finite; erasing any sense of bodily history in the move toward clear

categorization. Even gender categorization that seeks to account for bodily ambiguity must

inherently expunge much of that ambiguity by the act of becoming categorizable. In other words,

employing transgender-ness in this way, much like medicalization, contributes to the

stabilization of the very gender categories which are damaging to gender non-conforming lives.[47]

Thus, though it is important to imagine worlds that do not marginalize alterity, it is equally

important to do so in ways that question the entirety of the gender system, rather than mere

aspects of it.

In *Poetic Operations*, micha cárdenas examines contemporary media in order to develop

understandings of the survival strategies of trans people of color. She argues that perceptibility is

a key factor of survival for trans women of color, while simultaneously offering a method of

resistance to rigid gender categories.[48] "Shifting" is how she describes trans women of color's

ability to modulate their embodiment so as to remain in control over one's perceptibility.[49] That

is, trans people can modulate how visibly ambiguous they are, should they need to 'pass' in order

to exist safely. Unlike passing alone, however, shifting allows trans persons to experiment with

the malleability of reality and discover other types of embodiment that might be available to

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[46] Towle & Morgan, "Romancing the Transgender Native," 484-485.
[47] Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 148-149.
[48] cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 73.
[49] cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 72.

them.[50] For many, identity and embodiment exist along a continuum, rather than a series of discrete and static personas.[51] Shifting allows for thinking about these bodily negotiations in more complex ways than the passing/not passing, authentic/non-authentic binaries that medicalized transition often invokes.

Neil Gaiman's *The Sandman* directly refuses attempts at static, finite, or gender-normative embodiments. Though the series has a complex relationship with its explicitly transgender characters, the narrative defies prevailing medical and psychiatric assumptions about transition by presenting alternative approaches to understanding embodiment and the potentials, limitations, and interconnections among those modes. The representation of several gender non-conforming characters– Wanda and Desire, in particular– unearths how portrayals of transness often flatten the complexity of trans existence. Rather than focusing on representation for its own sake or evaluating how 'good' or 'truthfully' *The Sandman* depicts gender nonconformity, this analysis exposes the ways that affirmative portrayals of transness, in seeking to challenge pathologization, can reaffirm binaristic notions of gender and gendered 'realness.' Dream, though not explicitly labeled as gender non-conforming, challenges notions of the binary and the real, presenting how trans malleability offers possibilities for being-in-the-world beyond fixed trajectories. His multiplicity encapsulates the sense of transness not as a fixed identity, but as a creation of new possibilities for gendered, sexual, and social being in the world.

The Sandman is a comic book series written by Neil Gaiman and published by DC Comics. Running from 1989 to 1996, its 75-issue original series won international acclaim.[52]

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[50]cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 79.
[51]cárdenas, *The Transreal*, 39.
[52]"Awards and Honors."

The series remains well-regarded not only as one of DC Comics's best titles, but as a "paragon of the comic book form."[53] One issue was the first story in the comic format to win the World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story, and another received a GLAAD Media Award.[54] 2022 marked the Netflix release of the television adaptation, receiving positive reviews and renewal for a second season.[55] The series relates a mythology of the Endless, god-like personifications of metaphysical concepts. Dream, the titular character, represents the universal forces of imagination and possibility, ruling over dreams and nightmares. The story follows the King of Dreams as he attempts to regain control of his neglected kingdom after his captivity at the hands of a mortal mage. Forever changed by the experience, Dream proceeds to rectify his past mistakes even after he rebuilds his domain, The Dreaming. The narrative also includes shorter story arcs about other characters in the fictional universe who are affected by Dream or his domain. Wanda appears in a miniseries collection titled "A Game of You" (Vol. I, 822-973). Rather than presenting the first-person perspective of Dream as is usual, this series offers a third-person account of the effects of Dream's power on humanity.

Though Gaiman wrote the series three decades ago, there are several instances of characters with genderqueer expressions in the comics: including several cross-dressers, a drag queen, and a variety of queer relationships. Each offers a variety of gendered ways of being and representations of the genderqueer community. While delineating each of these explicitly risks being repetitive, these various representations remain remarkable examples, even by today's standards, and their importance should not be overlooked. Like most characters in this series,

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[53]Murphey, "The Origins of The Sandman," 3.

[54]Bratman, "A Game of You– Yes, *You*," 44; Sanders, "Lesbian Language, Queer Imaginings, and *Death: The Time of Your Life*," 188.

[55]Hurst, "'The Sandman' Season 2: Netflix Release Date Estimate & What We Know so Far."

they rarely receive much attention from the narrative. Wanda, however, holds an important place as one of the few human characters central to a narrative arc. As the only explicitly transgender character in the series, Wanda's ordeals in the collection mirror the limited and pathologizing nature of cisnormative notions of the trans experience. Trans life as represented by *The Sandman* remains (unfortunately) accurate. Both Wanda's experiences within the story, and her treatment as a character exemplify how static and binary notions of gender transition are ultimately harmful to many gender-nonconforming people. In contrast, Desire represents narratives about gender non-conforming people that refute pathologization without seeking legitimacy in the gender binary. The modern adaptation of the series into a television program paid particular attention to casting, ensuring that the character of Desire, at least, is in the hands of a nonbinary performer. In doing so, the television show implicitly insists on the existence and legitimacy of minority persons and holds itself accountable to the subjugated knowledges of its performers. The show's casting choices negate dominant accounts of reality, namely, the cisnormative logics that Wanda faces in the comics. Desire is representative of the ways that understandings of transness are – slowly – evolving. The change in the treatment of this character from the original comics to the modern television show is a clear demonstration of the ways that media representation of the gender non-conforming experience, when guided by gender non-conforming persons themselves, has begun to develop beyond the binary and their characterization shows how trans mutable embodiment is already circulating in cultural conversation.

The comic book medium is certainly an appropriate source from which to glean the difficulties with appropriate gender non-conforming representation. Traditionally, comic book

audiences are largely (if inaccurately) conceptualized as heterosexual, cisgender, white men.[56]

Critical cultural scholars have analyzed the exclusionary practices that ensure this assumption

becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.[57] In short, graphic novels are written with normative

audiences in mind, thus attracting normative readers and repelling diverse audience members so

the readership remains heterogeneous.[58] Neil Gaiman's comic series largely departs from this

pattern. He reaches broad audiences, attracting minority readers and offering a doorway for those

readers to explore the comic book genre.[59] Also, he places genderqueer lives at the forefront of

his stories. In doing so, he engages in an important form of transliteracy in which audiences

might develop better appreciations for trans lives. I draw the notion of transliteracy from

Akkadia Ford's work in *Trans New Wave Cinema*, who describes it as a theoretical approach to

cultural interactivity (6). Transliteracy is the work of translating genderqueer narratives and

imagery to a wider audience, particularly when informed by the experiences of those producing

the work.[60] This theory works in parallel with speculative creativity to create spaces where the

exchange between the audience and text engages with political and social concepts. The comics

medium, as a format, works to blur the separation between art and audience, involving the reader

in meaningful story creation.[61] Furthermore, its generally accepted role as a "lower" form of

literature might allow for a type of "stealth attack" on complacent readers who do not expect

[56]Laity, "Illusory Adversaries?: Images of Female Power in *Sandman: The Kindly Ones*," 65.

[57]See Bird, "Welcome to the Men's Club: Homosociality and the Maintenance of Hegemonic Masculinity"; Ging, "Alphas, Betas, and Incels: Theorizing the Masculinities of the Manosphere"; Pepe,"'The Source of Our Power': Female Heroes and Restorative Collaboration in Contemporary Television"; Salter & Blodgett,*Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*; Scaptura, "Masculinity Threat, Misogyny, and the Celebration of Violence in White Men"; Scaptura, & Boyle, "Masculinity Threat, "Incel" Traits, and Violent Fantasies among Heterosexual Men in the United States."

[58]Salter & Blodgett, *Toxic Geek Masculinity in Media*, 5.

[59]Murphey, "The Origins of The Sandman," 19.

[60]Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema*, 6.

[61]Sanders, "Of Storytellers and Stories," 38.

serious subject matter.[62] Thus, engaging with Wanda, Desire, and Dream helps to track the kinds of conversations circulating about transness while conceiving of a multitude of alternative potentials offered by trans mutable embodiment.

Waking

The character Wanda, as the only explicitly transgender woman in the original comics, represents all-too-common experiences with medicalized transition. Her story in "A Game of You" is one of only a few in the entire series of The Sandman that is largely free of the mystical, esoteric, or metaphorical (Vol. I, 822-973). This choice makes clear Gaiman's intention to represent to his audience the ordeals that many trans people live through, while simultaneously lending a legitimizing weight to Wanda's ability to self-identify. Her capacity to acknowledge the entirety of her gendered history is crucial to disrupting the limiting notions of biological authenticity. The art engaged in the mini-series works together to engage with an understanding of trans existence, though not necessarily along parallel lines with Gaiman's original intent. The collaborative nature of comics results in a sense of dual– or dueling– narratives. Wanda's art often serves to reinforce stereotypes of trans women, particularly highlighting masculine traits that are frequently used to 'prove' the falsity of transwomen's gender identity. This duality within the work makes this mini-series crucial for articulating the incongruity between the ways that medicalized transition is wielded to reinforce binary gender as well as how it is employed by gender non-conforming people for their own safety and comfort.

Wanda is at first introduced as a companion to Barbie, a character readers met in previous issues of the comic. However, as events unfold, Wanda's perspective becomes increasingly

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[62]Sanders, "Of Storytellers and Stories," 38.

important to the narrative. When Barbie's dreams begin to enter the waking world, it has effects not only on her, but also on her neighbors and friends. Each of them experiences terrible nightmares brought on by fellow neighbor George, who turns out to be an agent of the entity trying to possess Barbie. Fortunately, another neighbor, Thessaly, is a witch who discovers the plot and is able to rescue Wanda and their two other neighbors, Hazel and Foxglove. The four women rush to Barbie's aid, but she is already comatose. Upon discovering that the source of the attack is coming from within Barbie's dreams, Thessaly, Hazel, and Foxglove embark on a mystical dream-walk, leaving Wanda behind with Barbie's sleeping form and the remains of George. Rather than focusing on the mystical events unfolding around the other characters, the collection spends most of its time on Wanda's comparatively mundane experiences.

While the dialogue and narration remain chiefly supportive of Wanda (particularly for 1993), the art continually evokes harmful negative stereotypes of transwomen as manish and gaudy (see Figure 1). Though the duality makes it difficult to determine if the mini-series is on the whole pro- or anti-trans, such a determination is less useful for a trans analysis than the complexity presented by the series. Wanda's art relies heavily on camp and the cisnormative assumption that trans women will always be recognizably 'other.' Her chin is thick, square, and often emphasized (Vol I, 823). Her shoulders and arms have defined muscles, emphasized by her outfits and poses. The frames she is in often emphasize her height and size, especially in comparison to the other women (Vol I, 885). Her ostentatious makeup seems to suggest that Wanda is posing as a woman. The artist in later installments softens her chin, but keeps her jawline fairly masculine (Vol I, 875). Carrying Barbie princess-style, Wanda's torso seems even more masculine despite the soft curve of small breasts (see Figure 2). Later, her body language and poses gain a feminine affect (toying with her hair, making herself small) but her silhouette

remains largely rectangular (Vol I, 877). Her facial features are characterized by thick lines and sharp edges, echoing the techniques used on hyper-masculine character art. She is described twice as tacky, once directly by Barbie and once in reference to her favorite lipstick color: "Tacky Flamingo" (Vol I, 829; 980). These comments seem to refer to the supposed inauthenticity of her femininity: her bold and ostentatious style, which would likely be praised were she assigned female at birth, is read as campy or in bad taste. Rather than taking her feminine choices as proof of her identity, the results are instead understood to be emblematic of her ultimate failure at womanhood. Her imagery seems to suggest that her femaleness is a costume.

Figure 1. Wanda's Art in the Collection's First Installment, "Slaughter on Fifth Avenue."

Note. Drawn by Shawn McManus. Taken from Gaiman, Vol I, 823.

Figure 2. Wanda's Art in the Third Installment,"Bad Moon Rising."

Note. Drawn by Colleen Doran. Taken from Gaiman, Vol I, 875.

In Barbie's vision of Wanda after death, her art changes once more (see Figure 3). While she is still taller than the femme-presenting Death, it seems only by a few inches (is it simply coincidence that Death's arms are so well-defined?). Her hair is longer and straight, laying in a more feminine cut (Vol I, 982). Her face shape is completely changed: made smaller and rounder with thinner eyebrows, a subtle button nose and small rounded lips. She wears a dress that is nearly a parody of girlishness: all done up with frills and bows and revealing no skin but her hands and face. If readers were not told this figure was Wanda and aided by the visual cue of her distinctive hair color, one might assume this figure was an entirely different person. This alteration is beyond the variations presented by using multiple artists. Perhaps, the change in art is indicative of Barbie's internalization of Wanda's 'woman-ness,' or meant to suggest that this is Wanda's soul as it always looked, and Barbie can simply see it now. If so, this is a direct critique of the treatment Wanda received in life. No appeals to genitalia or biology can deny the femininity that Wanda exudes in this art. She is, apparently, happy, free to be herself, and fully accepted by her fellow women. However, even as a critique of the transphobic treatment Wanda suffered, this art relies on femininity that is more palatable to cisnormativity. She is denied

happiness in her (non-conforming) life and 'granted' happiness (read: normativity) in death. Her transformation serves to reinforce gender categories rather than question them, to see normativity as a necessity rather than an option, and to perpetuate a false trans acceptance that rewards conformity and does deep violence to alterity. To clarify, it is not the depictions of Wanda as masculine or feminine in themselves that are the concern, but rather how these depictions are utilized to evoke certain 'truths' about Wanda's body and gender. The dichotomy of her masculine physical form and her feminine soul form perpetuates common body/self distinctions or, put differently, the narrative of "being trapped in the wrong body."[63] It puts the onus of being properly gendered on Wanda, rather than questioning the systems that assign gender based on a body's masculinity or femininity.

Figure 3. Wanda's Art in the Final Installment, "I Woke Up and One of Us Was Crying."

Note. Drawn by Shawn McManus. Taken from Gaiman, Vol I, 982.

The third-person perspective in this issue ensures that, even as other characters misinterpret Wanda, she advocates for herself directly to the audience. Wanda faces a world that

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[63]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 69.

cannot – or will not – comprehend her existence. Readers are able to watch typical microaggressions towards trans people play out without interpreting them as truth, instead learning about trans lives and identities in a way that challenges cisnormative assumptions. This work begins when Wanda reveals her birth name to Barbie, who mistakenly labels it her 'real' name. Wanda immediately, though gently, corrects her friend's mistake: "Wanda's my real name, Barbie-baby. Alvin's just the name I was born with" (Vol. I, 835). She is able to comfortably track the progress of her name and identity with Barbie, without fear of repercussions. This comfort also allows her to assert to Barbie the difference she sees between real and legal names, denying anyone other than herself the power to determine the authenticity of her identity. For Wanda, the realness of her name has nothing to do with inheritance or administration, but with her own transformational process. That which is fabricated about her is no less real to her identity than what she was born with (or, in this case, given at birth). Rather, it is the very fact that she has reconstructed her life that makes her current identity even more real and true than her sex assigned at birth.

When Wanda describes her parents' reactions to her transition, she continues to gesture to the authenticity of her reconfigured identity. The description of her parents keeping her old room as she left it provides imagery for the difference between normative notions of identity and trans identity concepts: the room represents the static understanding of embodiment held by Wanda's parents. To them, "Alvin" will always be more true than "Wanda" because they refuse the notion that an altered body could be more real or natural than the identity given to one based on medical and social criteria. Her parents will not acknowledge Wanda's present identity because they see their child as fixed to one form of existence. Wanda, however, is able to exist in her present embodiment while still acknowledging the past. Her narrative of transformation is emblematic of

the mutability of trans self-concepts. She can acknowledge the time she spent as a male-presenting person without questioning the legitimacy of her current identity. She need not erase her past to assert her future, rather, her story elucidates how *becoming* Wanda is just as important to her embodiment as *being* either Alvin or Wanda.

From here, events take a darker turn, as cisnormative focus on binary biology and genitalia make Wanda a side character in her friend's story. There is an entire plot beat dedicated to Hazel seeing Wanda's bulge, at once outing and othering Wanda (Vol. I, 875). Hazel's role as the dumbest of the group leads readers to infer that she was the only one in the dark about Wanda's identity, which reasserts the idea that most people will always be able to tell if a person is trans, that truly passing is not possible. This act also seems to imply that Wanda has intentionally attempted to deceive her friends, another common trope about transwomen. As Julia Serano notes in her manifesto *Whipping Girl*:

> Even though 'deceivers' successfully 'pass' as women… these characters are never intended to challenge our assumptions about gender itself. On the contrary, they are positioned as 'fake' women, and their 'secret' trans status is revealed in a dramatic moment of 'truth.' At this moment, the 'deceiver's' appearance (her femaleness) is reduced to mere illusion, and her secret (her maleness) becomes the real identity. (37)

This plot beat seems to serve to rehash transphobic archetypes, but it also presents a moment for Wanda to advocate for herself, saying to Hazel, "Didn't anyone ever tell you that it's not polite to draw attention to a lady's shortcomings?" (Vol. I, 875). By referring to herself as a lady, Wanda is able to assert her gender identity regardless of her genitalia. This dichotomy between Wanda's self-determination and others' reactions to her bodily history is a recurring pattern in the mini-series.

Hazel's discovery of Wanda's "thingie" begins a pattern of biological essentialism that

continually invalidates Wanda's identity as a woman (Vol. I, 875). Unlike Barbie, Wanda's other

neighbors (as well as the gods they invoke) hold to a stricter notion of womanhood. Thessaly's

moon magic relies on a sense of "true" womanhood, so while Wanda is not the only one barred

from contributing to the spell, she is the only one barred from using it (Vol. I, 890). Even as

Thessaly claims that she is sorry, her moon magic establishes a truth of gender that she cannot

(will not?) argue with. Arguably the most masculine-presenting of all of them, Hazel remains

firmly entrenched in womanhood while Wanda, for all her femininity, is literally left behind.

George purports to offer rationale:

> You've got the uh, you know. The male nasty thing…And to be honest uh well
> even if you had the operation it wouldn't make much difference to the uh moon.
> It's chromosomes as much as uh anything… It's like gender isn't something you
> can pick and choose uh as far as gods are concerned. (Vol. I, 912)

George's words mirror current-day conversations that attempt to bar trans persons from their

identities, citing a variety of philosophical or medical 'truths' in order to uphold firm gender

binaries.[64]

Wanda's neighbors assume that her womanhood is inauthentic because it does not

correlate with her genitalia, following a binaristic logic that naturalizes cis people's gender

experiences as it dismisses those of gender non-conforming people.[65] By denying her

participation, Thessaly is nullifying Wanda's reality: that she is a woman, and has been living as

such for years. Wanda's exclusion is a sobering reminder of the ongoing power of gender

categories; by unashamedly presenting her transness to her friends and neighbors, the realness of

Wanda's gender (the typical goal of transition) has been undone. Unprotected by Thessaly's

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[64]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 12.
[65]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 13.

magic, Wanda dies in the storm and her body is sent back to her family, where it can be reinscribed with cisnormativity (Vol. I, 958; 970). Her family cuts her hair, puts her in a suit, and buries her under "Alvin" (Vol. I, 973; 977). Unable now to advocate for herself, it is up to Barbie to reassert Wanda's identity. Though she tries to be an advocate, readers are left feeling as if it is not enough (Vol. I, 980). Chillingly true to real life, readers must face the tragedy of a life cut short and erased by transphobia. This moment poignantly reveals the limits of reinvention: the power to state one's identity, to (literally or figuratively) rename oneself is limited by transphobic violence.

Desiring

As of this writing, Wanda has yet to appear in the television series, though the adaptation of Desire lends some hope for the direction of Wanda's made-for-TV transformation. Both the original comic and the television remake suggest that bodily ambiguity is already flourishing in stories and the world. The vast differences between Wanda and Desire's treatment establishes the wide range of responses that gender non-conforming people receive. Desire's role in the series attends to the direction that trans politics is currently moving. Yet, Desire also represents the limits of current ways of thinking about being-in-the-world and future-generating transformation. Their treatment remains emblematic of the goals of current gender advocacy; goals that limit themselves to seeking inclusion within gendered systems rather than a full reconsideration of such systems.[66] Thus, Desire is crucial to understanding the point at which trans mutable embodiment pivots away from contemporary advocacy and toward new types of being-in-the-

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[66]In the original comics, Desire is given it/its pronouns. These are altered to they/them in the series adaptation. For the purposes of this work, the alteration in the series will be interpreted as Gaiman's corrective to modern understandings of grammatically-sound pronouns, and they/them will be used to discuss Desire.

world.

The Endless associated with want and attraction, Desire is one of the most obvious presentations of genderqueer life in both television and comic format. Introduced as Dream's "sister-brother," Desire is the personification of want in all its forms: driving ambition, passion, and devotion (Vol. I, 252). They are often an unseen influencer in *The Sandman*, though their role in events is rarely revealed until after the fact. Though framed as an antagonist throughout much of the narrative, Desire's gendered form is never the subject of Dream's perturbation. Their gender – or, perhaps, lack thereof – is inextricable from Desire's important role among the Endless pantheon. Desire might meddle in Dream's affairs, but the relationship between the two Endless is complex and Desire's actions are not always for ill. In fact, it is Desire in disguise who helps Dream at his time of greatest need (Vol. III, 779).

Desire presents in multiple forms– both humanoid and not– throughout the comics and show. The comics introduce them wearing a boxy suit and cropped hair while sporting pink lipstick and dramatically shaped eyebrows (see Figure 4). Later, they don a skin-tight black catsuit, complete with ears and a tail (see Figure 5). Each time Desire appears in the story, their form alters slightly, but it is always androgynous, favoring neither femininity or masculinity (Vol. I, 254; 439). Unlike Wanda's treatment, Desire's art never succumbs to revealing any sex markers. Their chest and groin remain consistently obscured by clothes or shadow, evading all searches for a categorical sex (see Figure 6). The show draws from Desire's original art, but updates the look slightly. Though Desire's costumes retain some of the 80s' aesthetic, bolder makeup and slimmer silhouettes align their appearance with a more modern conception of androgyny (see Figures 7 & 8). Rather than hiding their chest and groin, they are simply revealed to have nothing resembling sex markers (see Figure 9). These depictions of embodied gender

ambiguity trace a history of the cultural conception of genderqueer bodies. The turn away from

hiding Desire's anatomy to revealing it as something otherwise shows how imagining trans

embodiment has become more possible over the decades. Hiding human genital areas suggests

that the artist could not conceive of a naked body without binary sex characteristics. In contrast,

revealing Desire's genital difference indicates a greater capacity to think about alternative kinds

of bodies more aligned with gender non-conforming identities. Likewise, the updated costumes

rely less on stereotypical representations of gender non-conforming identities (the original

powder-blue suit seems to particularly hearken to 90s butch lesbian tropes) and more on stylish

unisex fashion.

Figure 4. Desire's Introductory Art in "The Doll's House."

Note. Drawn by Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. I,

254.

Figure 5. Desire's Catsuit in "Lost Hearts."

       Note. Drawn by Mike Dringenberg and Malcolm Jones III. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. I,

439.

Figure 6. Desire's Threshold.

       Note. A tower built in their image. From "Lost Hearts," drawn by Mike Dringenberg and

Malcolm Jones III. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. I, 439.

Figure 7. The Television Adaptation of the Threshold.

Note. Taken from "The Doll's House," 2:49.

Figure 8. Desire's Modernized Suit.

Note. Taken from "The Doll's House," 3:50.

Figure 9. Desire's Modernized Catsuit.

Note. Taken from "Lost Hearts," 34:36.

Throughout the series, characters refuse or struggle to define Desire's gender in binaristic terms. When Desire is (mis)gendered, it is usually by a human. Such moments in the text invoke a sense of Desire as being beyond gender as the reader or the human characters might understand it. One character, describing Desire, says of them: "I thought it was a man, then I wasn't so sure, for there was something dainty about his fingers, something cat-like in his walk" (Vol. III, 404). Unlike Wanda, the other characters cannot place Desire's gender, nor do they attempt to enforce binary gender onto them. Desire's refusal to be "satisfied with just one sex" exceeds the boundaries of rigid binary gender, refusing to be contained to just one category (Vol. I, 252). Framed as the natural state of a being that embodies yearning, Desire's androgyny refutes the legitimacy of the gender divide. Yet, this does not exclude the character from the realm of desirability. Desire's gender excess, while perhaps beyond limited human understanding, is still valid in the world of *The Sandman*, as they are importantly situated at the heart of human relationships. Placing an androgynous being as the sovereign of desire directly refutes notions of gender excess– and thus, genderqueer persons– as unlovable or otherwise objectionable. Rather

than ever demanding Desire make themselves legible to the gender binary, the narrative continues to accept their ambiguity without question. *The Sandman* pushes the audience to think about gender in new ways, to realize that 'commonsense' categories like "man" or "woman" simply do not work for everyone.

The cinematic adaptation continues the important work of challenging binary gender categories by featuring Mason Alexander Park, a non-binary actor, in the role of Desire. Their performance lends an embodied "trans authenticity" to the character that is important to LGBTQ+ representation.[67] That is, Park's own trans identity informs the transness featured in the fiction. By featuring Park in the role, the show allows their experience as a non-binary person to inform how to present Desire's gender. Park's portrayal of Desire grounds the character through their own lived embodiment of non-binary identity. Park becomes the *literal* embodiment of Desire on the set, thus their own gender non-conforming body is a keystone of bringing the character to life. The costume design might be seen, in this context, as a way not simply to invoke a type of character, but to honor the gender-ambiguity of the body. The actor and the character interweave to charge the fantasy with the legitimacy of the real.[68] Placing a 'real-life' non-binary person in the role of the gender-ambiguous Desire pushes the work from imagining what it might be like if gender non-conforming people existed to seeing the gender non-conforming people who *already exist*. This allows audiences to reimagine their own world in ways that make space for gender non-conforming persons.

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[67]Ford, *Trans New Wave Cinema*, 19.
[68]Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 217.

Dreaming

Unlike Wanda, Dream is not controlled by others' interpretations of him. The personification of imagination envisions the fullest potential that bodily mutability can offer gender non-conforming persons. He exemplifies ways of being-in-the-world that cisnormativity has automatically foreclosed, highlighting multiplicity, process-oriented notions of identity, and a resistance to the binary and linear. Engaging with what micha cárdenas and Jasbir Puar term "the transreal" and "trans becoming," respectively, Dream pushes the boundaries of bodily and gender plasticity, destabilizing the perceived primacy of the natural body and its capacities.[69] The comics use art and narrative structure to invite readers to understand Dream as undefinable by any particular form– that his identity or 'self' cannot be wholly located in his body– such to understand that his physical self is immaterial. It does so, however, without appealing to medicalized transition but instead pushing past the limits of materiality. His existence continually asks audiences to not only consider, but take for truth, trans forms and experiences that are not discernable in their physical body.

Granted power over imagination, creativity, and possibility, Dream's influence extends beyond leaving dust in the eyes of sleepers. Wielding a pouch of sand, Dream is able to shape fantasy and reality, the physical and the immaterial. His power to wield reality as he wishes offers a unique perspective through which to understand how gender non-conforming people can reshape their own realities. Despite his humanoid appearance throughout most of the story, it is clear that Dream is not limited in form or corporeality. More often than not, he chooses his form based on what would be most beneficial to the task at hand. For dreamers, this often means that

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[69] cárdenas, *The Transreal*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 56.

the Lord of Dreams appears as one of their peers: often a pale human man in an innocuous t-shirt and jeans and a black trench coat (Vol. I, 82). Even this form, however, is not static. The comics employ a variety of artists, thus changing (if only slightly) Dream's appearance from issue to issue (see Figures 10 & 11).

Figure 10. One Interpretation of Dream's Most Common Form

Note. Drawn by Sam Keith & Mike Dringenberg. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. I, 82.

Figure 11. Another Interpretation of Dream's Most Common Form

Note. Drawn by Mike Dringenberg & Malcolm Jones III. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. I, 201.

Dream is fully cognizant and in control of his shape-shifting ability, revealing how one's body "can be a sign with more than one signifier."[70] In the comics, Dream reunites with his ex-lover Nada, an African queen of ancient legend (Vol. I, 231). As he waits to see her, a half-page of vignettes depict him nervously making himself ready, culminating in a physical transformation upon her entry (Vol. I, 721). He becomes a tall dark-skinned man with dreadlocks, and Nada addresses him as "Kai'ckul" (Vol. I, 722). This brief scene illustrates not only the Dream Lord's ability to shape change, but also his comfort with many forms and names. His transformations are not about making himself more capable in any way, but about visually gesturing towards his multiplicity.[71] In this scene, his altered form visualizes the history Dream has with Nada, the love they shared, and his regret for the way he treated her in the past. He has not set aside his role as the King of Dreams, but focuses on embodying a different aspect of himself.

Near the end of the original series, Dream dies and is reincarnated, which is visually represented by a complete redesign of his character (see Figure 12).[72] However, though his oldest and closest companions note vast alterations in his personality, Dream seems assured that he is still 'him.' He waits apart from his family and friends as they hold a memorial service for his old self, saying, "I see no need to remember myself. I mean, I am me, after all" (Vol. II, 916). Dream remains confident that his previous incarnation is a part of him, refuting an understanding of his

[70]cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 77.

[71]Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 56.

[72]'Death' and 'reincarnation' are used loosely here; as a personification of metaphysical concepts, Dream cannot die in a mortal sense. However, because the events are treated within the comics as a death and rebirth, these terms remain the most accessible language to discuss them.

identity as wholly transfigured from one static form to another. He insists on a being-in-the-world that is "multiple and incongruous" —what better way to demonstrate this existence than to literally sit outside his home as a funeral is being held *for him*?[73] His rebirth is a way of signaling how he has developed over the course of the series, visually emphasized by the change in art. Previously, he was once visually imposing, and this art matched his dour and arrogant attitude. His art often included nods to shadows and death; he was a deeply unsettling presence unless he specifically made efforts to change that, as he did with Nada (Vol I, 570; 722). After his reincarnation, his lines have softened, his unshaded art makes him feel somehow more approachable, and he surrounds himself with motifs of plant life (Vol. II, 899). It is the culmination of his character arc, a symbol of how he learned to take up space in the world in ways that demonstrate care, connection, and humility. His eyes remain black, however: a visual cue of the continuity of Dream's identity.

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[73]cárdenas, *The Transreal*, 39.

Figure 12. The Redesign of Dream.

Note. Drawn by Michael Zulli. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. II, 899.

Dream's ability to constantly reconceptualize himself, molding his own reality, engage

him in a type of shifting. For Dream, there is no objectively true or original form to embody–

they are all him. However, each form (as well as each issue of the comics) represents only an

aspect of the character. Dream embraces an identity that is a combination of all of his forms, a

"nuance for a multiplicity of worlds and the usage of reality as a medium."[74] That is, even as he

may alter himself to ease his navigation of the human world, Dream does not make himself into

something that fits normativity, but engages in a constant process of self (re)creation. This

process culminates in the final miniseries of *The Sandman*, "Overture" (Vol. III, 647- 810). The

first issue suggests to readers that this collection will be a prequel: it focuses on heretofore

unseen events that precipitated the beginning of the entire collection (Vol. III, 647-672). The

second issue immediately complicates this assumption by spending the first several pages

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[74]cárdenas, *The Transreal*, 30.

detailing Dream's actions after he is reincarnated (Vol. III, 673-690). When the reincarnation of

Dream is revealed to be attending the same event as 'original' Dream, "Overture" simultaneously

becomes a prequel and a finale (Vol. III, 691). This time loop in the chronology highlights the

"impossibility of linearity, permanence, and end points" of mutable trans embodiment.[75] Neither

form can truly be understood as Dream's 'original' because the actions of the reincarnated

Dream made possible the events of the entire series previously released, which in turn made

possible *the very existence* of Dream's reincarnation. Linear time, or any presumption of an

'original' self as somehow more 'true' does not exist in trans mutability. The notion of a linear

'false' self before physical transition and a 'true' self after physical transition simply does not

hold, because the self after transition cannot be seen to exist separately from the self before.

Trans mutability pushes identity "past the limits of material contours" into a being-in-the-world

that exceeds a sense of daily reality.[76]

The event that Dream(s) attend in issue two of "Overture" is a meeting of all the versions

of himself, where the audience discovers that each facet of Dream exists simultaneously across

the universe (see Figure 13). There are Dreams from distant planets and times, each represented

by a different form and artist (Vol. III, 677). These other aspects are him-yet-not-him; though he

remembers being them, they each have separate understandings (Vol. III, 680). He cannot help

but recognize familiar character traits within his other facets (Vol. III, 679).[77] The vastness of his

capacity proves his own mutability– his ability to shift, yet also understand each of these shifts as

him, if only in partiality. Cárdenas suggests in *Poetic Operations* that "the ability to shift makes a

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[75]Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 56.

[76]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 85.

[77]In many ways, this offers Dream a mirror that induces the self-reflection that inspires his transformation at the
end of the original series, reiterating the impossibility of understanding his form as linear.

body into media," and "Overture" does this quite literally: the art, dialogue, even the framing of his various forms communicates a more full picture of who Dream is/was, sustaining a sense of transformational movements rather than ends and beginnings (88). The audience can no more ignore these shifts than they can ignore the Dream they have come to recognize. Though the readers did not know it, Dream has always been informed by his multiplicity of selves. This conjures a sense that trans mutability has unlimited potential for alternate forms of being-in-the-world. Whereas Wanda's story ends in cisnormative tragedy, Dream's ends in limitless possibilities. Or rather, it does not end at all: the final page of "Overture" depicts Dream as he was in the very first issue of *The Sandman* (Vol. III, 804). This reiterative loop functions to render Dream as "awash in pure immanence," generating a trans mutability that refutes material and immaterial bounds, refuses legibility, and reshapes reality like clay.[78] However, such bodily malleability is only useful insofar as it attends to the realities of race and ability, as the next chapter will contend.

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[78]Puar, *The Right to Maim*, 56.

Figure 13. Dream Meets his Other Selves

Note. Multiple artists. Taken from Gaiman, Vol. III, 673.

CHAPTER III: FRICTIONS

Conceptions of transgender identities center notions of one's inevitable transition: to be trans, one must always be seeking, undergoing, or have undergone this change. These stories assume that transition is about fitting into the gender binary, or becoming objects of heterosexual desire.[79] Rooted in cisnormative logics of dimorphic sex, such narratives perpetuate the idea that the physical shape of the body is meaningful in a way that sensations, desires, or relations cannot alter.[80] While medical services can be a tactic to live more comfortably for many gender non-conforming people, these services are not what defines a trans person's sense of gender.[81] Medical transition allows gender non-conforming people to negotiate with their body parts, disregarding normalcy for gender expression. For many people, the power to self-identify outside of sex reassignment surgery is just as important as the power to undergo the procedure. Every choice, action, movement, and relationship are steps in the continuous process of embodiment. Gender is a process in continual iteration as a trans person moves through the world. Which is not to say that the material body has no meaning; however, gender non-conforming people live and do gender in ways that contradict the notion that one's birth sex is somehow more true than one's felt sense of embodiment (regardless of physical form).[82] While trans embodiment does not ignore the power bodily materiality wields, it simultaneously recognizes immaterial influences on gender. The body (particularly its sexed- and gendered-ness) is a "willed phenomenon," clay that can be molded by individual experience including, though not limited to, medical

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[79] Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 153 & 260-261.
[80] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 2.
[81] Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 260.
[82] Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 93.

intervention.[83] Gender-affirming medicine, in this view, is not the capstone of the trans experience, but merely one step in the process that is trans ontology.

Even with a complete binary transition, trans people still find themselves irrevocably separate from their cisgender counterparts. Not only do they have vastly different experiences of gender, but the act of undergoing transition marks many trans people permanently as 'other than.' Transition can make gender non-conforming persons more visible rather than less, particularly early in the process, in ways that expose them to more violence. That is, rather than erasing difference, gender-affirming surgery can emphasize it.[84] This system repeatedly exposes trans bodies to violence during otherwise mundane activities like buying alcohol, traveling by plane, or receiving a speeding ticket. Given these common results, seeking gender-affirming care is not often about complying with normativity but with an individual's desires and needs for their embodiment.[85]

The narrative of one's inevitable transition often operates under the belief that medical transition works to 'fix' a trans person's body: making them less visually ambiguous, more attractive, happier, and so on. Alison Kafer calls this ideology the "curative imaginary": an understanding of disability that cannot fathom a (dis)abled body that does not undergo intervention.[86] Transness, like disability, is seen as a defect always in need of a cure. The pre-operative trans body is figured, much like (dis)abled bodies, as unwell or undesirable and

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[83]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 14.

[84]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 153.

[85]Julia Serano writes, "The assumption that we transition in order to 'fit in' to the gender binary has virtually no relevance in most transsexual's lives. For many of us, the decision to transition comes after years of successfully 'passing' as 'normal' members of our assigned sex- for us, transitioning entails the complete antithesis of trying to fit in" (*Whipping Girl*, 153).

[86]Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 27.

medical intervention is framed as its savior.[87] Surgery is seen as the cure for those suffering from gender dysphoria. Perpetuating this framework ensures that transition loses its power to rupture the gender binary, because these ideologies ensure that the systems that provide relief from gender dysphoria often do just as much violence. Administrative and legal systems enforce regulations that shape access to gender-affirming medicine. In order to participate in the institutionalized process of medical transition, gender non-conforming persons need to make themselves legible subjects within that system.[88] Trans people are forced to conform to strict normative gender norms in order to access medical and administrative technologies that ensure not only their happiness but also their safety, "making 'passing' a prerequisite for transitioning."[89] Their bodies (particularly their genitalia) must be rendered recognizable within the gendered system. Many trans people only find acceptance once they are recognizably altered according to medical and legal policies, justifying their identities to doctors and legal officials. Governments require a variety of medical procedures in order to alter one's legal documentation, thus gatekeeping bodily identity via the processes of diagnosis and medicine.[90] These requirements range in demands: from a physician-signed document attesting to a diagnosis of gender identity disorder to documented proof of complete medical sex reassignment including hormone therapy, top surgery, and genital reconstruction. If a person does not fulfill these requirements, they are not granted a documentation change, even if they have been successfully living as their gender identity.

Further peril comes from transition medicine itself. Gender-affirming medical technology

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[87]Plemons, "Reconceiving the Body," 41.

[88]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 122. [89]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 116. [90]Salamon, *Assuming the Body*, 187.

is relatively new and under-researched.[91] This poses risks both to the health of the patient and to the quality of the result: potential failure or harmful side effects of medical procedures are only a few afflictions risked. It is not uncommon for someone to need more revisionary operations to correct the initial results of gender-affirming surgery.[92] Notions of binary gender further delimit the possibilities offered by medicalized transition. Medical technologies are shaped by the philosophies of those who invent and discharge them, limiting what kinds of medical procedures are available. Most surgeons offering transition-related procedures focus on providing trans persons with results that emulate cisgender bodies.[93] While vaginoplasty and phalloplasty services are becoming increasingly common, there are few surgical options for those who might get dysphoria from either set of normative genitals.[94] Other forms of surgical intervention are similarly limited. For example, masculinizing top surgery is conceived of as a total removal of breast tissue; surgeons often refuse service to or ignore those who desire merely a reduction. Non-surgical options for transition, including hormone replacement therapy, are also limited by gender binarism. Hormone therapy procedures for nonbinary patients have only recently begun to be established.[95] The circulation of bodily norms in the medical community envisions a limited set of possibilities for genitalia and sex characteristics. Though medicalized transition purports to offer other choices for trans bodies, these norms have already made clear what a person can*not* choose. The very notions of consent and choice obscure the systemic medical and administrative (re)production of binary sex and gender.

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[91]Plemons, "Reconceiving the Body," 36.

[92]Salgaldo et al., *Gender Affirmation*, xii.

[93]Shuster, "Uncertain Expertise and the Limitations of Clinical Guidelines in Transgender Healthcare," 321.

[94]Salgaldo et al., *Gender Affirmation*, xi.

[95]Shuster, "Uncertain Expertise and the Limitations of Clinical Guidelines in Transgender Healthcare," 326.

The Witcher centers on Geralt, a member of a guild of magically mutated monster-hunters known as Witchers, and Yennefer, a sorceress of great power and Geralt's on-again/off-again lover. Originally a set of short stories he began in 1986, Andrzej Sapkowski later collected these works and furthered the narrative with a six book series, with the final installment released in 2013. The novels inspired a popular game series, with over 50 million copies sold.[96] In 2019, Netflix released a television adaptation that, as of this writing, will run for five seasons.[97] Both the television and game adaptations draw heavily from the original novels but remain non-canonical additions to the work.[98] The Witchers are set apart from other guilds by the bodily transformation its initiates must undergo in order to become full members. Young boys train at the Witcher stronghold before undergoing bio-magical alterations known as "The Changes." This painful process is a "combination of alchemy, genetics, biology, and black magic" with a steep mortality rate (*Sword*, 339). If they survive the process, the young men gain superhuman skills: faster reflexes, heightened senses, increased endurance, immunity to toxins, and strength. They also gain access to certain magical abilities, as well as the use of performance-enhancing potions that would otherwise be deadly. Geralt's enhanced abilities allow him to perform dangerous tasks that others are unable and unwilling to do, but the process left him visually marked by his white hair and cat-like eyes. The potions he uses give him a terrifying visage (see Figure 14), and his skill with a blade intimidates many. Folklore depicting Witchers as unfeeling killers ensures that Geralt may just as soon be labeled a monster as the creatures he hunts. Geralt's attempt to

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[96]"Media." *The Witcher - Official Website*, www.thewitcher.com/us/en#media. Accessed 10 Aug. 2023.

[97]Hudspeth, "Liam Hemsworth Is Picking up Geralt's Sword for the Witcher Seasons 4 and 5." [98]There was a Polish film adaptation followed by a television series continuation in 2001 and 2002, respectively. Due to its poor reception and Sapkowski's heavy criticism, however, these will not be covered in this work. Additionally, multiple attempts at a graphic novel adaptation have been made by Polish and U.S. comics publishers. In the interest of concision, these will also remain outside the scope of this project. See Copeland, "There Was a Witcher Movie"; "NYCC 2013."

navigate the complexity of his existence in a world deeply entrenched in war, disease, racial violence, prejudice, and moral complexity generates useful frictions about consent, agency, and humanity that must be explored in order to generate a framework of mutable trans embodiment.

Figure 14. Geralt's Terrifying Visage

Note. Geralt (Henry Cavill) has taken a potion to increase his strength and stamina. "Betrayer Moon," 47:00.

The Witcher wields medical transition to question the logics of (dis)ability, racialization, and consent. Geralt's relationship with his Changes disrupts commonly held beliefs about transition, embodiment, and gender, and exposes the limitations of Western notions of embodied agency. His continued persecution offers a lens to view the racializing imposition of gender, while Yennefer's transition into a sorceress reveals the ways that medicalized transition works to police possibilities for embodiment. Also, Witcher and sorceress positions as outside of the human reveal the crucial role that mutability plays in classification, normativization, and control. Interrogating these frictions is crucial to developing a sense of trans mutability that does more than simply recreate institutionalized continuity. Not everyone has the option to choose to be mutable or not, not everyone has the option to choose what they shift into. In contrast to Geralt,

Dream's shifting remains largely under his control. Though many of his selves remain as strangers to him, Dream is usually able to determine which aspect or form of himself to embody. Much of this accommodation is based on convenience or comfort, whereas a trans person's shifting directly impacts their ability to survive.[99] Defining one's identity for oneself is not a guarantee of safety, and not everyone is an anthropomorphic personification of an intangible concept. While theorizing about the unlimited mutability demonstrated by Dream may be euphoric, ultimately few people have the capacity to truly control how their relationships with others shape their embodiment. Only normative (white, straight, cisgender, male, able) bodies can claim access to or benefit from a post-embodied future. To be able to entirely reconstruct oneself is a privilege. To not have to is also a privilege. The choice is denied to people whose lives discrimination continues to structure.[100] Dream's power grants him a safety that genderqueer persons rarely have: instead, they must often concede identity expression in lieu of escaping oppression. Oppressive systems often demand mutability in order to maintain state power. Sometimes, shifting is a necessary submission to survive another day. In other cases, a body is forced to shift. Trans studies must be wary of any theory that does not account for the material and social realities faced by gender non-conforming persons.

The Changes

The Changes a Witcher undergoes might be seen as a type of medical transition: hormones are used alongside herbs, mutations, and infections to bio-magically reshape one's

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[99]cárdenas, *Poetic Operations*, 85.

[100]Sherryl Vint writes, "Technological visions of a post-embodied future are merely fantasies about transcending the material realm of social responsibility… The ability to construct the body as passe is a position only available to those privileged to think of their (white, male, straight, non-working-class) bodies as the norm. This option does not exist… for those whose lives continue to be structured by racist, sexist, homophobic, and other bodily- based discourses of discrimination" (*Bodies of Tomorrow*, 8-9).

physicality (*Last* 131-132). In this sense, a Witcher's body is quite literally constructed, reborn into a new form more suited to its destiny. This literal constructedness is the essence of transition.[101] Geralt's relationship with his body post-Changes elucidates the distinctions between trans and cisnormative notions of embodied gender. Geralt does not feel a sense of wrongness about his newly altered body. He is able to incorporate his bodily changes into his body image, to claim his cat-eyes and white hair as *his*, much as post-operation trans people have already claimed their new sex characteristics through a "felt imaginary" of embodiment.[102] This can be understood as Geralt's felt sense of Witcher-ness even before his Trial, that his transition has simply revealed. However, the side effects of the Changes trouble assumptions about transition's relationship with embodiment and gender.

Gayle Salamon's work *Assuming a Body* develops a complex notion of the transgender bodily schema that accounts for both self-production as well as the gaze of the Other. She cautions that any reading of trans embodiment focusing "exclusively on the agency of the individual misses [the] entire matrix of power in which gender takes shape."[103] The body is not unproblematically available to us, rather, both material and cultural forms are only realizable through the complex matrices of systems, relations, mental representations, and historicity that one must navigate and predict before engaging with bodily mutability.[104] Augmentation and harm are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Even in a world with magically-enhanced

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[101]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 7. [102]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 85. [103]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 80.

[104]See cárdenas, *The Transreal*; Hausman, "Virtual Sex, Real Gender"; Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*; Melzer, *Alien Constructions*; Pearson, "Towards a Queer Genealogy of SF"; Plemons, "Reconceiving the Body"; Prosser, *Second Skins*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Salamon, *Assuming a Body*; Smith, *American Archives*; Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*; Spade, *Normal Life*; Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*; Vint, *Bodies of Tomorrow*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

technology, the body cannot be transcended either physically or ethically. Flesh grounds the possibilities offered by technology even as it is the canvas for imaginative transformation. In other words, there are both material and immaterial limits to the possibilities physical alterations can offer. There are very real consequences and risks to engaging with transition. Health and bodily plasticity are particularly relevant concerns within the mechanics of the video game adaptation.

As part of his role as monster-hunter, Geralt regularly ingests body-altering chemicals. Like hormone medication, these potions continue the work of transitioning Geralt into a Witcher. As he says, "a Witcher without potions is half a Witcher."[105] Though the potions Geralt takes can have negative side effects, he is able to decide for himself if the benefits granted by the concoction are worth it (*Season* 6). However, the toxicity of these chemicals highlights the limitations of physical transformation. Furthermore, the video game adaptations trouble the assumption that Geralt is always willing to take such risks with his body. In the games, the player takes on the role of Geralt. His characterization is not wholly up to the player: scripted dialogue in both cutscenes and gameplay establishes Geralt's identity outside of the player's influence. Ultimately, the player controls most of Geralt's actions and can choose to follow or ignore that characterization as they see fit. The gameplay allows the player to use mutagens and potions to improve their abilities at the risk of the negative effect of toxicity, in order to generate a sense of strategy within the game.[106] Unlike in the books and show, however, Geralt's ability to consent is murky. Though guided by depictions of what Geralt believes, the player need not make decisions based on that characterization. The choice to use potions and mutagens (or not) is

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[105]CD Projekt Red, Witcher.
[106]CD Projekt Red, *Witcher 3*.

left entirely to the player, who can completely ignore Geralt's feelings on the matter.[107]

Yet, the nature of role-playing video games is such that, in a way, the player *is* Geralt. Vivian Carol Sobchack's work on media as a phenomenological experience, *Carnal Thoughts*, helps elucidate the blurring of audience and art, such that each can affect the other. She argues that cinematic and digital media offer dynamic and contingent experiences that construct hermeneutic play between the fictional world and the audience's world.[108] Sobchack advocates for a perspective on media analysis that accounts for the ways that media "may be 'charged' for us with an *embodied* and *subjective* sense of what counts as the *existential* and *objective* 'real,'" thereby extending the embodiment of the audience into the reality of the media (and vice versa).[109] Through mechanics like cutscenes and scripted dialogue trees, players are encouraged to engage with Geralt's identity while playing. The resulting person is neither Geralt nor the player, but a blending of the two in which a player holds an embodied and subjective accountability to the character of Geralt. The game's mediation asks players to take Geralt's feelings as real, and thus take responsibility for the ethics of their engagement with the character and the embodied results of their decisions.[110] Knowing Geralt's complicated relationship with mutation, a player might choose to forgo the use of that particular game mechanic, accepting the increased challenge of playing without those benefits. Players who do use mutagens must then

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[107]This interaction between gameplay and narrative is known as "ludonarrative dissonance." For more on this topic, see Denizel et al., *Multidisciplinary Perspectives on Narrative Aesthetics in Video Games*; Dennin & Burton, "Experiential Play as an Analytical Framework"; Ehret, et al. "How Young Adult Videogames Materialize Senses of Self through Ludonarrative Affects"; Hocking, "Ludonarrative Dissonance in Bioshock"; Howe,"Ludonarrative Dissonance and Dominant Narratives"; Jayemanne, *Gaming and the Arts of Storytelling*; Reblin-Renshaw, *Ludonarrative Synchronicity in the 'BioShock' Trilogy*; Toh, *A Multimodal Approach to Video Games and the Player Experience.*

[108] Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 208.

[109]Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 137; 211.

[110]Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 213.

monitor the effects on Geralt's health, stamina, and other abilities. Since Geralt's body is the tool with which players must succeed or fail, these fictional body-altering chemicals have very real effects on the player.

Through the gameplay, players gain a sense of the help and harm offered by medical technology. Even as medicine develops, we continually face the reality that the flesh cannot be treated only as a possession: it is also "a material subject that experiences and feels its own objectivity, that has the capacity to bleed and suffer and hurt."[111] Both the pain and mortality rate of Witcher transition are repeatedly cited as uncontrollable consequences. "Three out of ten boys survive the trial."[112] Others might go "insane, stuffed full of narcotics," have their "brain burst[ ] from hallucinations," or their "eyes rupture and gush forth, instead of becoming cats' eyes" (*Sword*, 399). Though the results of botched gender reconstruction surgery are less likely to be deadly, the drastic nature of failed Changes emphasizes the hazards of any invasive medical procedure. Players can improve Geralt's abilities, but at a cost. They must negotiate the negative side effects, such as toxicity levels, that risk health loss, slowed stamina, and eventually, death.[113] This mechanic allows players to make both ethical and strategic decisions about altering Geralt's body while understanding that they, too, will suffer some consequences. The character's physicality is not wholly available to the player: there are limits to bodily plasticity.

The Cost of Creation

Theoretical explorations of bodily mutability often presume it to be an available choice as well as an inherent good. Mutability, while often a tactic for survival, is not a straightforward

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[111]Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 142.
[112]"Much More," 45:17- 45:18
[113]CD Projekt Red, *Witcher 3.*

path to freedom. Mutable embodiment, while useful, necessary, and sometimes freeing, does not necessarily indicate freedom or agency for trans people. It is also forced onto marginalized persons in order to control, contain, and dominate. In the previous chapter, Dream's ability to continuously self-determine gestured to vast possibilities for trans embodiment. However, the mutability engaged by gender non-conforming people– in whatever form it takes– is not necessarily an indication of equal power. The agency demonstrated by Dream is not granted to genderqueer, (dis)abled, and racialized persons. While an Endless is not subject to systems of power and control, Witchers and sorceresses are. Any theory of mutable trans embodiment must understand that bodily changes are just as often wielded for categorization and control as they are for individuation.

The Changes render Geralt's body into fleshly capacity, making clear the process of "ungendering" in the Atlantic slave trade that served to make Black bodies into property.[114] Ungendering, as coined by Hortense Spillers, is the historical practice of physically and intellectually severing gendered and sexed-ness from Black bodies in the process of enslavement.[115] This served to make Black bodies into flesh, positioning them as objects available for any subject and allowing for their consumption by the slave trade.[116] Gender is the intellectual staging ground for this enfleshment and similar logics pervade modern-day (un)gendering. Social and institutional structures own, define, and control gender.[117] Jasbir Puar argues in *The Right to Maim* that racialization "is a form of impairment unto itself (black flesh as

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[114]See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; McKittrick, *Demonic Grounds*; Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*; Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Wallace,*Constructing the Black Masculine*; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.
[115]Spillers, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe," 67.
[116]Wilderson, *Red, White & Black*, 38.
[117]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 183.

disabled flesh), as well as an invitation and solicitation to visibilize(sic) debilitation as a marking

of this symbolic relationship (disabled flesh as black flesh)" (81). Bodily mutability cannot, then,

be seen as wholly emblematic of agency. Utopian interpretations obfuscate its cruel history in

chattel slavery.[118] This framework is aligned with the works of (dis)ability and race scholarship

that gesture towards understanding the purpose of medical intervention as a form of disciplinary

power. Mutable trans embodiment must attend to the ways in which the ability to make choices–

as well as the choices available– is limited for trans people seeking gender-affirming

transformation.[119]

The question of consent– or lack thereof– pervades each adaptation of *The Witcher*.

Either through oaths made or simple abandonment, the young boys initiated by the Witchers are

given to the guild by their parents.[120] The narrative does not clarify if they are informed of the

risks before undergoing the Changes, but Sapkowski regularly emphasizes that the initiates have

no choice in the matter.[121] Likewise, when she was a young girl, Yennefer's parents sold her to

Tissea, the head of the sorceress' guild.[122] Both she and Geralt were left in the hands of

institutions to do with what they would. While nowadays it is rare for a trans person to be

literally forced into medicalized transition, the ability to consent to medical procedures is not as

simple as saying 'yes' or 'no.' Claiming a trans identity is to own oneself as being "gender

displaced," that is, claiming a status outside of the binary.[123] This often results in interactions

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[118]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*,78.

[119]Though the theoretical potential of stasis is not directly explored here, theories of trans embodiment must understand that refusing mutability (to whatever extent such a thing is possible) can also be a sign of resistance.
[120]CD Projekt Red, *Witcher 2.*

[121]CD Projekt Red, Witcher.

[122]"Four Marks," 3:49 - 5:02.

[123]Prosser, *Second Skins*, 2.

with cisgender persons and power systems that attempt to affix trans persons– usually violently–

to a location within the binary. If either Geralt or Yennefer were to refuse their transformations,

they might have been at risk of even greater violence.[124] Even still, these transformations did not

save either Geralt or Yennefer from administrative discipline and population-making. They are

also wielded to reinforce normative gender and continue the administrative erasure of racialized

and (dis)abled persons.[125]

    Unlike many female-focused guilds in the world of *The Witcher*, the sorceress guild

accepts talented students regardless of their appearance, agreeing to train "ugly or crippled girls"

with uneven or crooked legs, "harelips," "bones which had badly knitted, … scars, birthmarks, or

pox scars" (*Last* 270).[126] However, as a prerequisite for a young woman's induction into

magical society, young sorceresses undergo painful body modifications that designed to correct

physical imperfections and beautify the subject (*Last* 270). Notably, Yennefer's transformation

served to cure her of kyphosis (*Last* 304).[127] This procedure was crucial not only to her

acceptance into magical society but also into society at large, particularly given mages' roles as

members of royal courts. Yennefer's cure comes at a steep price: the process includes a full

hysterectomy (*Blood* 329).[128] Though Yennefer wished to be rid of her kyphosis and sought

inclusion in magical society, she cannot be seen as having consented to this sterilization. Without

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[124]Geralt's continued use of potions might be interpreted as a continual affirmation of consent, however, the complex relationship with choice in the games, described in the previous section, complicates that interpretation.
[125]Shuster & Lamont, "Sticks and Stones Break Our Bones, and Words Are Damaging," 110.

[126]Though not the focus of this project, it cannot go unstated that Sapkowski's relationship with both (dis)ability and femininity leave much to be desired. Yennefer is in turns pathologized and sexualized, a pattern that the Netflix adaptation problematically emulated.
[127]'Cure' is used here because it best represents how Yennefer sees this transformation. It is not, however, meant to affirm compulsory able-bodiedness.
[128]"Betrayer Moon," 46:11- 24. It is revealed in "Rare Species" that Geralt is also unable to procreate, indicating a consistent logic behind ensuring that certain types of bodies–and bodily capacities– must remain under administrative control (23:17 - 23:19).

the procedure, she would have been exposed to more violence; so much so that to be denied the procedure was unthinkable for her. Later, however, she sees this treatment for what it was: a removal of her agency.[129]

Denial of agentive choice is not merely a symptom of administrative transition, but a key aspect of its population-making process. Yennefer's hysterectomy is a direct result of Tissea's own rules for the guild: "I demand all apprentices be sterilised. Without exception" (*Blood*, 329). Her argument is that unrestrained, untrained access to genetically-inherited magic could be deadly. However, might it also be an attempt to avert genetically-inherited (dis)ability? (Dis)abled people have been and continue to be figured as threats to futurity, through logics of both genetics and social productivity.[130] Many states and European countries require sterilization in order to change one's gender documentation, regardless of whether or not the trans person in question wishes to undergo sex reassignment surgery.[131] These policies echo historical eugenics programs that aimed to prevent the proliferation of mixed-race or (dis)abled persons.[132] Tissea acerbically describes the children of sorceresses as "morons," catatonic women, "dribbling seers who soil themselves … cretins whose minds are degenerate" (*Blood* 329). Thus, clearly part of her reasoning involves preventing a future that includes (dis)ability. Forced sterilization operates as a population-level intervention utilizing genetics to remedy any issues of social or bodily ambiguity (read: defect).[133] Individuals and groups that exist outside of the norms created by disciplinary power, the 'improper' subjects, are framed as threats to society; sterilization then

[129]Yennefer says in "Rare Species": "They took my choice. I want it back." (22:50 - 52)

[130]Kafer, *Feminist, Queer, Crip*, 31. [131]Honkasalo, "In the Shadow of Eugenics," 26. [132]Honkasalo, "In the Shadow of Eugenics," 18.

[133]Ellen Samuels posits in *Fantasies of Identification* that this notion might be understood as the "genetic imaginary" (191).

seeks to neutralize that threat. Eugenics laws act to reassert control over the gender non-conforming population by distributing life chances to ensure the continued othering of trans bodies. Preventing the birth of new generations of trans persons is also a part of the continued cultural assertion that trans bodies are lesser: by stripping bodies of reproductive capacity, gender non-conforming people will never be able to participate in social and familial structures in the ways that are valued (i.e., parenthood) in society.[134]

Though her magical abilities allow Yennefer to influence national politics, her inability to reproduce ensures that her womanhood is regularly dismissed. Background characters in the games say to Geralt: "You should find yourself a real woman. Everyone knows witches are barren."[135] Yennefer's inability to procreate ideologically bars her from accessing the normatively (and desirably) gendered. Wanda, from Neil Gaiman's "A Game of You," experiences similar violence in a nightmare, where the family of her childhood comics (The Weirdzos) forces her to undergo unwanted sex reassignment surgery.[136] They insist that she make her gender medically legible: "So what you am? A man or a woman? Whatever you am, we make it better."[137] The Weirdzos, previously a place of refuge from her dysphoria, have become a place of further discrimination. To have a penis denies her a place in womanhood, therefore, in order to truly identify as a woman, Wanda must submit to its removal. Wanda wakes from the nightmare, but must face this same logic in her waking life. 'Proving' her transitional status, she lists off the medical procedures she has undergone in order to 'become' a

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[134]That such policies actually affect future generations is unknown; there is currently no clear statistical indication that trans identities are hereditary. See Gomez-Gil et al.,"Familiality of Gender Identity Disorder in Non-Twin Siblings."
[135]CD Projekt Red, *Witcher.*
[136]Gaiman, *The Sandman*, Vol. I, 912.
[137]Gaiman, *The Sandman*, Vol. I, 857.

woman.[138] Wanda sees medical knowledge less as a cure for that which is faulty, but as a tool to shape the body, regardless of normative body formations. Regardless of the materiality of the rest of her body or her lived experiences, her failure to 'completely' transition renders her too ambiguous to situate her within womanhood. When she does not consent to a binary life, she is punished for refusing to 'fix' her condition. The experiences of these women reveal the inherent violence in the processes that are supposedly for the benefit of trans people.

Of Monsters and Man

Bodily mutability has a genealogy originating from chattel slavery, as traced by C. Riley Snorton in *Black on Both Sides*. Western understandings of selfhood understand identity (including gender identity) as a possession that one holds, if one has agency.[139] Black enslaved people, as property themselves, were denied ownership of their gender. Under the conditions of slavery, black bodies were made fungible, seen as constantly revisable property.[140] Slaves were continuously ungendered, regendered, granted humanity, or dehumanized as needed by their white oppressors. It is this connection between (un)gendering, fleshliness, and fungibility that Snorton explores in his monograph. Snorton employs the gruesome history of gynecological medicine to explore how enfleshment "functioned as a disarticulation of human form from its anatomical features," particularly those features that are seen to indicate sex and/or gender.[141] The specifics of Black anatomy– not merely skin color, but health, scarring, supposed ability to feel pain, etc. – were made to symbolize the fungibility of Blackness.[142] Following this

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[138]Gaiman, *The Sandman*, Vol. I, 912. [139]Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 135. [140]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 57.
[141]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 18.
[142]Fungibility will be explored further in Chapter Three.

framework, we can understand that Geralt's physical differences become indicative of his exclusion from humanity: his yellow eyes and white hair marking him as a consumable resource.[143] The kingdoms Geralt works for define the subjectivities available to him: he is either a threat to be eliminated or a tool to be wielded. Violently making his body into an object ensures that Geralt's abilities will always be available for consumption.[144] The transformations undergone by Witchers and sorceresses serve to make them productive for human society, while simultaneously excluding them from access to the 'human.'

Proliferating narratives about who a population is– and is not– maintain control over minoritized persons by framing them as threats to that population.[145] Medical and administrative systems police the boundaries of the human, ensuring that the lives of racialized, (dis)abled, and gender non-conforming persons remain administratively impossible. Dean Spade's *Normal Life* renders clear the disciplinary power of legal, social, and medical norms to produce "security for some populations and vulnerability for others" (4). For Geralt, there is no passing as human: his mutated body drives not only his identity but also his position in the world. If he is not immediately recognized as such, he must regularly out himself as a Witcher, displacing himself from the norm. Once his Witcher status is recognized, Geralt's interactions with others become shaped by that status. The manufactured nature of his body becomes justification for the fear, hatred, and disdain others show him. He is haunted by variations of the phrase "we don't want your kind here."[146] Transness occupies "a conditional relation to the human as such to be

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[143] *The Witcher*'s status as an overwhelmingly white-centric text does not ellide its use for exploring the process of ungendering and population-making. That said, this project is not attempting to equate witcher- ness with Blackness, nor to erase the violences and complexities of Black history *including* the consistent lack of representation of people of color particularly within the fantasy genre.
[144] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* 83.
[145] Spade, *Normal Life*, 57.
[146] The End's Beginning," 3:13- 3:49.

admitted only ever in ways that are curtailed, surveilled, disciplined, and constantly subject to shifting."[147] Racialized, (dis)abled, and gender non-conforming people experience a society that sees them as unnatural and inhuman; a belief that serves as justification for surveillance, violence, and (civil) death.[148]

Though constantly denied humanity, Geralt is occasionally allowed into human society– but only on others' terms. Predictably, these shifting conditions are frequently contradictory: a trans person must have a normative gender performance, but must be easily recognizable as trans, for just one example.[149] Nor does perfect obedience to these conditions (if such a thing were possible) guarantee respect for one's humanity. Linking race, (dis)ability, and gender ambiguity to crime, poverty, and other social dangers creates a legal structure that renders minoritized populations "civilly dead," that is, unprotected by the rights and systems granted normative populations.[150] Geralt's interactions with the human population are fraught with prejudice and violence. His humanity is frequently questioned on the basis of his mutations, which are understood to have stripped him of emotion.[151] This, combined with a Witcher's swordsmanship, has generated a perception of Witchers as killing machines, as evil as the monsters they were created to slay. Humanness is an institutional framework to control those that might resist normative power structures. Depending on the needs of his employers, he is (un)gendered or (un)racialized in order to produce hierarchical relations that keep him under their

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[147]Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*, 82.
[148]Serano, *Whipping Girl*, 207. [149]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 112. [150]Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*, 154. [151]"The End's Beginning," 11:23-26.

control.[152] Every interpretation of The Witcher features at least one story in which Geralt

follows every rule, law, or command, and still ends up beaten and imprisoned. In one

novel, he is brought to trial and described thusly:

> The accused is… a witcher. He is a mutant, beyond the margins of human society,
> flouting human laws and placing himself above them. In his criminogenic and
> antisocial profession, he communes with criminals, as well as non-humans…
> Law-breaking is a part of a witcher's nihilistic nature. (*Season* 34, emphasis
> added)

Audiences see this process play out over and over again as Geralt is continually pressed into life-

threatening service as punishment for falsified criminal charges. His humanity is inexhaustibly

revisable according to the needs of humans who see him as a tool for their uses.[153] As such, his

rights are nonexistent, and his freedom can be revoked at any time.

Despite his role in keeping so many safe, Geralt is not welcome in society at large. His

interactions with humans are laced with undertones of hatred, and thus he must be always on

guard against the individual and institutional violences. To be nonhuman (or other than human)

is to be devalued, contained, and eliminated. Monstrosity is used to define the limits of

community, and in Geralt's world, anything from criminal activity to being a member of a

nonhuman population can earn one the term 'monster.'[154] Seen as monstrous himself, Geralt

clearly feels respect and empathy for nonhumans. Like the elves, his home was destroyed, and

the Witcher's lineage ended.[155] Like the dwarves, he is repeatedly sent to his death and then

cheated of compensation. Embodying Geralt's perspective generates a felt sense of the unseen

forces that dehumanize. The mutually constitutive nature of gender, race, and sex is illustrated as

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[152]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* 40 & 83.
[153]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* 64. This idea will be explored further in chapter three.
[154]Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women*, 180.
[155]CD Projekt Red, *Witcher 2*; "Of Banquets, Bastards, and Burials", 28:12-14

Geralt finds the delineation between 'monster' and 'man' increasingly indefinite.[156]

When people deny his humanity based on his superhuman abilities, Geralt does not disagree. However, it is not merely his mutations that fuel his refusal of the term 'human' (*Last* 56-57). He is most vehement about the subject in the context of the other non-human races, finding solidarity with other social outcasts who human society maligns. For his survival, he has learned to live with humans, but can never live *as* a human.[157] Geralt's refusal to be called human may be symbolic, but it articulates what disciplinary power seeks to hide: the ways that the boundaries of humanness are policed.[158] Being called human erases the myriad ways that category is withheld from minoritized populations through structured insecurity and (mal)distributed life chances.[159] Where a human would find reward for life-threatening deeds, Geralt finds only exploitation. Geralt tells people, "don't call me human" because the term neglects to account for the ways that his being-in-the-world is an inherently racialized experience.[160] Such is the co-constitutive nature of administrative discipline: continuous population-management strategies that work to destroy alternative embodiment in the present and thus foreclose alternative futures (including future generations). Through Geralt and the moral dilemmas he deals with, the audience learns that not all cruelty can be explained away by mutations or curses and that sometimes, those seen as monstrosities are the most worthy of the term 'human' (*Lady* 381). Geralt's position in the world offers an example of solidarity between "the forgotten, the inconceivable, the spectacularized, and the unimaginable."[161]

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[156]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides,* 97.
[157]"Four Marks," 43:00-43:20.
[158]Spade, *Normal Life,* 11.
[159]Spade, *Normal Life,* 9. [160]"Four Marks," 44:10.
[161]Spade, *Normal Life*, 12.

CHAPTER IV: FUTURITY

The relationship between black ungendering and transness might be uncomfortable for modern thinkers, for it can seem that mutability relies on an uncertain agency for its liberating potential. Transition is frequently seen as that which can bring an end to the suffering trans body. In this view, mutability is the balm that ameliorates pain, whether that pain be internal or from an external expectation of binary gender. The acquisition of gender-affirming care and name changes is bound up in notions of choice that are denied to racialized bodies. Many gender non-conforming people emply name changes positively, but the same act of name changing is laden with histories of Black fungibility. In other words, preferred names are viewed as liberatory because they are a refusal of a gendered category. Since racialized bodies are denied a choice in their malleability (specifically, the choice to refuse it), much liberalist thought automatically assumes that nothing but harm can come from it.

Harm is a key component of Alexander Weheliye's *Habeas Viscus*, a monograph in which he explores how the processes of suffering and racialization affect the modern concept of the 'human.' He argues that liberal individualism positions suffering from political violence as a "dehumanizing exception," rather than emblematic of the continuing systems of imperialism.[162] Victims of political violence can then wield their suffering as currency to gain limited access to certain rights as 'redress' for those harms.[163] Paradoxically, those populations are further differentiated from the category of 'human' by the very existence of such suffering.[164] This frame posits suffering as representative of *only* harm, and liberal politics as the method to end

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[162]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 14.
[163]Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering*, 13.
[164]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 75.

and redress that harm.[165] Such a view ignores, however, the ways that one mode of racialized extraction inevitably establishes the foundation for another: how white settler colonialism and Indigenous genocide set the ideological and administrative stage that would enable the creation and perpetuation of the Atlantic slave trade and the consumption of Black bodies. Contemporary policies are merely the successors to these institutions, and as such, representation and inclusion in these systems is only symbolic and does not erase the enfleshment of racialized bodies. What justice can be found in a legal system that was created to establish and maintain slavery and colonialism? In other words, it is not enough to note that colonialist expansion set the stage for enslavement, scholars must begin thinking about ways of being that *do not rely* on the acknowledgement or cooperation of the system.

Suffering and enfleshment might, in fact, be integral.[166] Understanding trans mutability as racialized offers a theoretical move that, while acknowledging harm, refutes exceptionalism. If black fungibility is 'the exception that makes the rule' of what 'human' means, then such violence will, in itself always result in a peripheral relation to humanity. What then, might it mean to turn away from the fixity of 'humanness' and toward mutability as a new kind of being-in-the-world? Examining enfleshment reveals the ways that the body and the world are "reversibly enfolded each in the other," not separate or even at a distance.[167]Transition narratives that juxtapose the inside– an immaterial truth– and the outside– a false physicality, oversimplify the fleshly negotiations ubiquitous to the trans experience.[168] The flesh, rather than being the delineating boundary between the 'self' and 'other,' instead binds them. Instead of seeking to

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[165]Abbas, *Liberalism and Human Suffering*, 13.
[166]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 131.
[167]Sobchack, *Carnal Thoughts*, 226.
[168]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 114.

'redress' enfleshment, how might exploring one's fleshy negotiations offer a kind of possibility? Trans mutable embodiment must account for all types of mutability– the chosen and unchosen, the beneficial and the harmful. Nor can these so-called 'opposites' be truly disentangled from one another. Acknowledging its harm does not automatically foreclose enfleshment's usefulness. That very enfleshment might also represent possibilities for being-in-the-world unimaginable by white supremist imperialism.

N. K. Jeminsin's *Broken Earth* trilogy interrogates the ways that Black, trans, and (dis)abled bodies become resources for the continuation of white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism through the processes of racialized extraction. Rather than seeing this as a collapsing of possibilities, she instead presents a lens through which to imagine the kinds of futures that are available to those whose bodies have been made fungible. Her novels further elucidate how embodied realities are informed by the structures in power, with particular attention to fleshly consumption. Yet, subjugated positions might simultaneously offer insight to moving beyond the limit of normative reality– a kind of fugitivity that presents alternate ways of knowing and being. *Broken Earth* uses mutability to suggest not only that there are other kinds of being-in-the-world, but to interrogate what (or who) ideologies of humanity serve.

The novels portray an alternate universe where the planet constantly teeters on the edge of global catastrophes known colloquially as "Seasons." The first novel begins with a major earthquake fracturing the continent. At the same time, Essun, the main character, discovers that her husband has murdered their son and kidnapped their daughter.[169] She must now navigate the

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[169]Essun has several names throughout the trilogy, including 'Damaya' (her childhood name) and 'Syenite' (a name she takes up during her adolescence to young adulthood). When discussing specific instances within the novels, this work will refer to the character with the name she is going by at the time. For consistency, general references to the heroine will also use 'Essun.' The novel is in second-person perspective, so any quotes containing the subject "you" can also be assumed to refer to Essun.

apocalyptic world to find her daughter, Nassun. Essun and her children are orogenes: people with telekinetic control over the earth. Flashbacks reveal that Essun was once a part of the Fulcrum, an organization that houses, trains, and manages orogenes. As a child, her family gave her up to a member of the Fulcrum, Schaffa, who took charge of her training. Essun grew up in and worked for the organization until, as a young adult, she escaped and went into hiding. In the current day, Essun and Nassun struggle on their respective journeys. Schaffa, now distanced from the Fulcrum, rescues Nassun from her father. Mother and daughter both meet other orogenes as well as humanoid creatures known as stone eaters, and learn more about their own abilities. Eventually, Essun catches up to Nassun before sacrificing herself via magical petrification to save her daughter– and the world.

There are some few characters who are explicitly trans, not the least of which is Tonkee, a friend and ally to Essun. While the casual references to their sex and gender might be seen as attempts to normalize trans bodies, these characters take a back seat to the larger conversations the text is generating. Race, too, comes up less explicitly than a reader might expect of novels specifically addressing colonialism and enslavement. Some scholars have argued that social status based on racial differences has "compellingly been displaced onto a different figure of otherness more suitable for the speculative genre" – orogeny.[170] However, while references to the cultural connotations of race are subtle, to declare them nonexistent is a potentially harmful misreading. Essun is Black: described as having "ropy fused locks, each perhaps as big around as her pinky finger, black fading to brown at the tips," with skin somewhere between "ochre-

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[170]Ferrández San Miguel, "Ethics in the Anthropocene," 480. Also, the assertion that race is not a "suitable" subject for speculative work is both troubling and erroneous, given the long history of Black speculative creation and Afrofuturism. See Bahng, *Migrant Futures*; cárdenas, *The Transreal*; Green, *Reimagining the Middle Passage*; Pearson et al., *Queer Universes*; Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*; Schalk, *Bodyminds Reimagined*; Womack, *Afrofuturism*.

brown" and "olive-pale" (*Fifth* 10). In direct contradiction to the claim that race has no cultural meaning in the trilogy, readers are immediately informed that this skin tone would earn Essun the label "mongrel" in some cities, as it indicated her multiracial lineage (*Fifth* 10). Perhaps even more notable is that the Guardian Schaffa is white (or at least white-passing): with "paper-pale" skin, "flat" hair, and "silvery-gray" eyes (*Fifth* 29). That Jemisin spends so much time on Damaya's attempt to make "racial sense" of the man, and his position of power over her, gestures to the cultural importance of race in the world. In short, it is important to view orogeny not as a *replacement* for race, but as a speculative *extension* of racialization in order to make more clear the multiple intellectual moves with which *Broken Earth* is engaging mutability.

One such move is to destabilize the characters' (and the reader's) understanding of reality. Jemisin's focus on colonization and enslavement generates a framework that interrogates how normativity shapes reality. Particularly addressed is that which defines 'real' humanity. Contrary to colloquial understanding, the concept of the human has never been a "universal or neutral term," rather it has always been employed to establish a hierarchy of norms, privileges, and entitlements.[171] Likewise, 'truth' and 'reality' are weilded in intentional, non-neutral ways to maintain white supremacy, colonialism, and capitalism. However, the novels do not ignore the power that normative reality has. Accounting for power structures like colonialist imperialism demonstrates the "historical weight" of the body and its impacts on a theory of mutable trans embodiment.[172] This weight refers not only to the physical truths of the body, but also the "historical gravity" placed on a body by the power structures it moves through, which then

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[171]Ferrández San Miguel, "Ethics in the Anthropocene," 481.
[172]Zita, "Male Lesbians and the Postmodernist Body," 126.

collectively influences "the 'sexedness' of the body and the possibilities of experience."[173] Race, class, and ability all shape experiences of one's gendered body in undeniable ways.

Unlike Dream, who exists outside of human structures, the characters in Jemisin's work do not have complete access to or control over their embodiment. Dream's capacity to define reality ensures he is always in control of his identity in the eyes of others.[174] Dream is never subject to what others perceive as real, because it is in his power to shape reality. Though he can change his body to suit the system he's living in, he also need not exist within said system. In contrast, Geralt and Essun's realities are defined by the systems they are subject to rather than themselves or other people. Geralt cannot truly escape the systems he is subject to, and for much of her life, Essun cannot either. They do not have the agency over their embodiments that Dream does. Unlike Geralt, however, the apocalypse and resulting destruction of most forms of government gives Essun the space to begin to shape herself into something new. The first obstacle is her own conception of what is possible. The violence she experienced not only affects her material conditions, but also "sets ideological parameters around the possible."[175] In other words, as readers follow Essun's negotiation of her own embodiment, it becomes clear that her life up until the presumed "present" of the novels has shaped her thinking to specifically limit the kinds of subjectivities she can imagine for herself.

Mutability, as it is engaged in *Broken Earth*, details the kinds of enfleshment that establish racialized humanity. Enfleshment signals the ways that racialized bodies are made to signify types of being-in-the-world that perpetuate hierarchies of categorization.[176] Enfleshment

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[173]Zita, "Male Lesbians and the Postmodernist Body," 126.

[174]Gaiman, *The Sandman*, Vol. II, 312.

[175]Goldberg, "Demanding the Impossible," 634.

[176]See Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*; Lowe, *The Intimacies of Four Continents*; Puar, *The Right to Maim*; Rifkin, *Fictions of Land and Flesh*; Snorton; *Black on Both Sides*; Spade, *Normal Life*; Spillers,

is the process by which black bodies were made fungible through the Atlantic slave trade.[177]

Continuing the discussion of fungibility from chapter two, Essun's experiences in the Fulcrum

were structured to make her productive for the continuation of society. Her bodily capacity to

engage in orogeny is made to be extractable in the service of the Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation

(Sanzed Empire) in order to maintain the existence of the government and non-orogene (or,

"Still") persons. Essun's life is a speculative recreation– in brutal detail– of the ideological and

physical violence of racialized extraction.

But Jemisin does not content herself with retelling alone. Instead, Essun's ultimate

transformation into a stone eater signals a "kind of fugitivity from the Human."[178] *Broken Earth*

suggests forgoing inclusion within normative humanity in lieu of seeking embodiments beyond

racialized personhood. Drawing on Alexander Wehiliye's *Habeas Viscus*, Essun's ultimate

transformation seems to suggest that being made flesh might provide "a stepping stone toward

new genres of human" (45). The stone eaters represent an alternative possibility for embodiment;

a type of being-in-the-world that has mutability as an inherent given. Their capacity for

malleability is not limited to their physical shape, but also their relationality with the world.

Their connection with Earth and with each other establishes a move away from a framework of

individualism and toward an ethic of relationality for world-making. In other words, embodied

mutability becomes not merely about an individual's physical being, but creating worlds

antithetical to the proliferation of anti-Black imperialism.

The Fulcrum & Fungibility

The institution known as the Fulcrum and its influence on society in the trilogy sets in

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"Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe"; Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*.

[177] Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 57.

[178] Goldberg, "Demanding the Impossible," 641.

heart-wrenching relief the power that racialized extraction has over both physical and intellectual circumstances. Jemisin further develops C. Riley Snorton's work in *Black on Both Sides* by making literal (through a speculative lens) the ways that enslavement harnesses bodily malleability for white production. Processes of enfleshment ensure that the capacity of orogenes is continually refigured in the service of the very systems that manage orogenic fungibility. In this way, the processes of extraction make Essun malleable and multiple. Her experiences demonstrate how, under systems of racialization, black transness might be understood as an inability to be a singular self.

The Fulcrum is an agency of the Sanzed Empire employed to control not only the destruction caused by earthquakes but also the orogene population. Led by an elite group known as the Guardians, the institution conscripts and trains children with orogenic ability before finally sending them out into the world as trained agents for the Empire's purposes, aiding towns and averting natural disasters. The Guardians (and by extension, the Fulcrum) have perpetuated the idea that the institution is all that stands between society and an organically-induced apocalypse. This narrative ensures that community members will be sure to report the presence of orogenes. To young Damaya, however, Schaffa presents himself as a savior from the prejudice of her family and community. He begins a narrative that her training at the Fulcrum will uphold: that the institution is all that stands between orogenes and a lynch mob. This contradictory position guarantees a constant supply of compliant orogenic power to the Fulcrum.

National narratives of orogenic threat suppress how crucial orogeny is to maintaining society. Orogenic ability is viewed as inherently deadly, chaotic, and borderline criminal. The Guardians preserve orogeny, even as they hunt it down, because the power is essential for human survival. Schaffa explains to Nassun later in the series: "This is the task of the Guardians… We

prevent orogeny from disappearing- because in truth, the people of the world would not survive without it. Orogenes are essential. And yet because you are essential, you cannot be permitted to have a *choice* in the matter" (*Stone* 177-78). The non-orogenes depend on orogenes. It is precisely that dependence that motivates the Fulcrum not only to enslave orogenes, but to hide the true breadth of their power. In the guise of teaching young orogenes about their abilities, the Fulcrum inculcates limitations on orogeny. Trainable orogenes are placed in a hierarchical system of rings, ostensibly determined by skill: the greater their mastery over their abilities, the more rings an orogene can earn. However, rings are granted most often on the basis of obedience than on any scale of ability (*Fifth* 63). Higher ring levels come with increased freedoms, while lower levels endure more surveillance and containment (*Fifth* 66). Fulcrum orogenes learn that the basic rights of non-orogenes– privacy and choice– are for them, rewards for excellence (*Fifth* 67). Notably, the Guardians determine the scale of just how skilled an orogene can become. The skills demonstrated by a ten-ringer orogene is declared to be the maximum capacity of an orogene, not by orogenes themselves, but by those in control of the orogenic population. The Fulcrum teaches that orogenes must not feel emotion, as emotion hinders their control. That orogenes cannot work together without harming one another. Even that orogenes are an "inferior and dependent species" (*Obelisk* 258). These processes are what Spade refers to as "population management," which distributes life chances to certain populations while characterizing others as "drains or threats."[179] The Sanzed Empire is built on the foundation of orogenic/racialized extraction.

Jemisin's writing makes clear the ways that racialized bodies are framed as tools

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[179]Spade, *Normal Life*, 57.

(objects) rather than persons (subjects) by denying them access to the category of 'human.' They are not people, but rogga: "a dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing" (*Fifth* 140). Or (not to put too fine a point on it) as Schaffa says, orogenes "must be tools– and tools cannot be people. Guardians keep the tool… and to the degree possible, while still retaining the tool's usefulness, kill the person" (*Stone* 178). Within the larger structure of the Fulcrum, the education of young orogenes involves no small amount of indoctrination and brutality: young orogenes are beaten, starved, and manipulated in order to ensure their docility. After only a few days of 'rescuing' Damaya, Schaffa breaks her hand to teach her that "orogenes have no right to say no. I am your Guardian. I will break every bone in your hand, every bone in your *body*, if I deem it necessary to make the world safe from you" (*Fifth* 99). Orogenes who do not conduct themselves 'properly,' who disobey the Fulcrum or are deemed untrainable, have their orogeny taken from them. A pseudo-lobotomy removes the child's orogenic control beyond instinctive use, ensuring that they will react to– and quell– all tectonic disturbances in their vicinity (*Fifth* 142). They are then placed in a vegetative state and their bodies sustained by artificial means. These "node-maintainers" are placed all across the nation, seen as a "reliable, harmless, completely beneficial source of orogeny" (*Fifth* 142). In this way, orogenic capacity is disarticulated from any understanding of orogenes as humans.

Orogenes who survive re-education are given a lasting reminder of their fungibility: a new stone-inspired name, as if to make explicit the ways orogenes are objects perpetually (re)sculptable by the institution (*Fifth* 198). Framed as a reward for a young child's skill, these names mark them and (perhaps more importantly) their orogeny as property of the state. Essun cannot have a singular self, because the violence done to her continually recreates her for the varying needs of the Fulcrum. In other words, "to feel black in the diaspora… might be a trans

experience."[180] Jemisin makes this idea explicitly clear through the process of renaming young orogene trainees, which simultaneously recalls both the history of white slave owners renaming enslaved persons and the practice of trans people choosing preferred names. In contrast, orogenes derisively refer to those without orogenic ability as "Stills." Though this nickname ostensibly refers to their lack of Earth-shaking ability, it also attends to the ways that those admitted into the category of 'humanity' do not suffer the violent enfleshment that racialized bodies undergo. Orogenes are made multiple (read: malleable), non-orogenes are not.

Flesh Made Stone

Jemisin does not shirk from depicting the violence and harm that racialized extraction does. However, she also refuses to ignore the possibilities that mutability– even that which is borne from violence– might offer if being is not limited to recognizable humanity. Few characters in *Broken Earth* escape the systemic harm of their society. Yet, as the stone eaters suggest, brutality does not eradicate one's transformative capacity. Despite (or, perhaps, because of) their great strife, the stone eaters have survived and continue to move toward their goals. Their existence suggests that mutability is inherent to being itself and that, in moving away from the human, trans mutability might move toward a new kind of being-in-the-world.

Long before the present-day of the novel, there were magically-inclined Indigenous humans known as Niespeople.[181] However, the reigning empire of the era, Syl Anagist, conquered them. The Niespeople were subjected to technologies of dispossession and extraction, colonization of not only their lands but also their abilities for the benefit of the Syl Anagist. Empire pseudoscience attributed the Nies' spectacular abilities to innate biological differences:

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[180]Snorton, *Black on Both Sides*, 8.
[181]Magic, in this world, is a type of psychic control over electromagnetism in the world around the user.

"that was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all" (*Stone* 210). It was only after the total annihilation of the Nies that this theory was debunked. Since the entire structure of Syl Anagist was based on the premise of the Nies' inhumanity, acknowledging otherwise would have been nothing short of apocalyptic. Instead, what remained of their genetic material was engineered into what were known as 'tuners,' a people designed and decanted to have both heightened magical abilities as well as pronounced racialized differences in appearance (*Stone* 211). The tuners, now satisfactorily monstrous, were enslaved and made useful in Syl Anagist's efforts to harvest energy from the earth's core.

Eventually, the tuners rebelled: Syl Anagist fell into ruin and (as an unintentional side effect) the cycle of the Seasons began. As a punishment for the harm the tuner's contributed to, the living Earth altered them once more, and thus the tuners became stone eaters. Stone eaters are humanoids with mineral-like bodies and incredible abilities. They exist outside the bounds of Sanzed society, usually keeping to themselves. Despite their apparent apathy towards human society, stone eaters are framed as deadly monsters to be avoided. Importantly, one remaining tuner escaped unchanged and unharmed, and through her lineage was orogenic ability born and spread (*Stone* 343). Jemisin's attention to the historical cycle of racialized extraction is a crucial element of the trilogy's climax. The parallels between Syl Anagist and the Sanzed Empire are impossible to miss. These parallels are not attempts at comparisons between the two nations, but rather an examination of the ways that one mode of racialized extraction inevitably sets the foundation for another.

The world Essun lives in presumes that change is an inherent evil, destructive and deadly. Even the name of the supercontinent– "The Stillness"– gestures toward a deep-seated ideological

commitment to stasis. This refers not merely to the physical danger of tectonic instability, but also in the hierarchical socio-political system of the Sanzed Empire. The transformative capacity of the orogenes and stone eaters is threatening to the world the Fulcrum works to maintain. Not only are orogenes necessary for the maintenance of Sanzed, but they are also fully capable of its destruction. Fortunately for the Fulcrum, the orogenes are visually marked: not only does their shared progenitor make them more likely to have certain racial traits, but the very nature of orogeny leaves visual evidence of its use (most commonly frost). Importantly, Essun's conditioning has taught her not only to associate change with danger and the nonhuman, but to constantly visually assess bodies for the capacity to undergo change and their proximity to humanness. The stone eaters completely baffle those understandings. For them, transformation and change are inherent to their way of being, regardless of how they look to the naked eye. Aboveground, stone eaters are often so still that they appear inert, even statue-like. However, not only can they move at superhuman speeds and across great distances, stone eaters are also able to phase through and consume rock. She assumes they are as inert and unyielding as they appear. But the phrase "still as stone" becomes much more complicated if, at any time, a humanoid figure could step out of the earth. And as her stone eater companion, Hoa, tells her: "It takes centuries for us, the *who* of us, to… cool. Even the slightest pressures… can damage the final shape of [our] personality" (*Stone* 282). Perhaps, what is most important here is not what a stone eater looks like, but *who* is doing the looking. Indoctrinated as Essun is, she struggles to see stone eaters beyond their monstrosity. Comprehending that they might have once been human requires her to rethink all she knows, it involves her acknowledging change that she cannot notice or imagine. Moreover, given her close relationship with Hoa, it demands that she unlink her association of change with harm.

It is undeniable that the stone eaters have undergone great harm throughout the course of their long lives. They have been altered and re-altered, never with their consent and always in the service of another power. They are denied entrance to the human, but importantly, they also never sought such inclusion. The tuners' rebellion was never intended to change Syl Anagist, to gain rights and privileges in the legal systems. No, the empire's destruction was always their goal. Nor have they sought to join any of the communities or governments in the many centuries since. Rather than moving away from the malleability that made them extractible, stone eaters made themselves at home in their new forms "because to fully inhabit the flesh might lead to a different modality of existence."[182] Moving away from 'humanity,' rather than toward it, allowed them to move further from extraction than if they had sought representation in the empire that subjected them. Or, in the words of Hoa, "we are the monsters they created, and more, but we will be the sort of monsters we wish to be" (*Stone* 321).

For much of her life, Essun's conditioning serves to ensure her continued docility.[183] Only after she discovers that these truths are not objective is Essun able to envision new lifeways for herself and her kin. Essun begins to question her assumptions about the world and herself: including that the Fulcrum is the authority on all that orogenes are capable of. Essun learns about her body, orogeny, and capacity, refusing the notion that the Fulcrum knows her better than she knows herself. Normative truth restrains and contains alternative capacities. Bodies are capable of experiences outside the realm of prescribed reality, capacities that might even resist such reality. Through the history of the stone eaters, Essun begins to see transformation not as a danger, but as inherent to being- that "all things change in a Season" (*Stone* 285). In other words,

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[182]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 112.

[183]Docility, here is relative. While Essun does resist the Fulcrum, eventually even running away, it is years before she actively resists the systems and ideology that ensure orogenic extraction.

she begins to understand that orogeny need not be a threat, but simply a different way of being in the world. Rather than trying to align her body or capacity with the normative, Essun begins to explore an existence previously unaccounted for. Shedding the Fulcrum's metrics, Essun is able to tap into the true strength of her abilities. Her old lover Alabaster teaches her to use magic: "elusive tendrils of connection" that she starts to manipulate effortlessly (*Obelisk* 139). She also discovers that all orogenes have the potential to wield this new ability once they push past the Fulcrum's "conditioning meant to steer [orogenes]... away from magic" (*Obelisk* 203). Halting the Seasons, bringing the moon back into orbit– things that once seemed impossible– are now achievable not simply through magic, but through pushing the bounds of acknowledged reality. In other words, Essun is only able to use magic because she looked beyond the horizon of what the Fulcrum told her was possible. The heroine's experience, however revolutionary, is not utopian: it means pain as often as it means power. She cannot forget the harm done to her, but can find something like a "loophole of retreat."[184] What she saw as 'fantastic' is not truly fantasy, she discovers, but imposed limitations.

Lattices

Though the stone eaters help her recognize that there are other ways of being-in-the-world, it is Essun's own journey that helps elucidate what those alternatives might entail. Jemisin uses Essun's multiple transitions over the course of the trilogy to explore the possibilities that enfleshment might offer. Her increasing skill in orogeny and magic work to establish a framework of relationality, not only between her flesh and her selfhood, but also between herself and others. By differentiating Essun's various transformations through the use of multiple names,

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[184]Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection*, 9.

Broken Earth also asserts that mutability is a continuous process rather than a singular event. Nor need it always involve sweeping bodily changes: much like the stone eaters, not all of Essun's metamorphoses visually mark her. Enfleshment revokes personhood but what, Jemisin asks, might it grant?

Orogenic and magical ability offers a frame through which to see interiority and exteriority as interacting through the flesh, where the material and the immaterial become variables instead of fixed points. Orogeny allows a person to reach past themselves into the world around them (*Fifth* 6). Their connections to both the inanimate (stone) and the animate (their fellow orogenes) help to reimagine the boundaries between the self and the other, destabilizing the singular self and providing space for an alternative understanding of identity. Magic connects all life (current or prior) and it allows Essun to connect with her fellow orogenes in powerful ways that ensure their continued survival, working together "in a way that supports and strengthens each, making a stronger whole… a network of orogenes working toward a single goal, all of them together stronger than they are individually" (*Obelisk* 363). The network is able to defeat the community's attackers and take the next step to preventing the oncoming global disaster. Essun's petrification literally reinscribes her body with the truth that she is no longer a "lonely, vengeful woman" but part of a larger community (*Stone* 285). Her use of magic and orogeny indicates a resignification of materiality, suggesting that interiority (the intangible) can also affect exteriority (the physical), not simply the other way around. For the more she connects to her magical ability, the more her own body begins to show physical signs of that connection through petrification. The parameters for Essun's self-concept change: rather than seeing herself contrasted against others and the world, she begins to realize a self that is constituted through her relations with the world.

There is a sense of dramatic irony that Essun's realization comes so late in her life. Throughout the first book of the trilogy, the reader is privy to Essun's full history, a narrative that makes clear that she has always existed in relation to others. It is precisely these relations that galvanized the multiple transitions she underwent throughout her life. Transformation is not new to Essun. She has been changed and needed to change who she was several times over the course of her life in order to survive (*Fifth* 172). These changing identities alongside her changing body are much like Dream's shifts, if more influenced by survival than by convenience. Like Geralt, her bodily schema is not "an entirely voluntaristic project, somehow freely chosen by the subject."[185] Essun can only partially control her body's changes, her experiences and positionality still shape her. Each of the main character's identities share similarities, retain key knowledges and experiences. Her transitions mark not only her growth as a person, but also her changing priorities and beliefs. As her knowledge changes, so does Essun's body. Her capacity shifts: the petrification of her arm marks the moment she realizes just how vast these changes may be (*Stone* 25). But Essun remains recognizable to herself and others: "external bodily change here becomes the sign of internal continuity and persistence" rather than a betrayal of static identity.[186] Her new forms can never be entirely disentangled from the old: poorly-healed wounds still bother her and she struggles to learn to live with one less appendage. The history of the body is held in tandem with its capacity for mutability, each self sutured to the other across time and form.

Before she was Essun, the main character was named 'Damaya' by her parents. She remained under this name until the time of her first test at the Fulcrum, when she was able to

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[185]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 31.
[186]Salamon, *Assuming a Body*, 114-115.

pick out a new moniker. Though her new name was a sign of her ownership by the Fulcrum, it also became a moment for Damaya to choose who she wished to become. She chose to become someone who could withstand the violences being done to her: "with heat and pressure [syenite] does not degrade, but instead grows stronger" (*Fifth* 331). Damaya's willingness to become someone new exemplifies the ways that experiences of violence can result in multiplicity.[187] Being renamed 'Syenite' typified how not only her orogeny, but also her reproductive capacity had become a tool for the Fulcrum to wield.[188] Once she is old enough, Syenite becomes one of many who are made to breed in order to continue the Fulcrum's access to orogenic flesh. During this time is when she realizes that "she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves… the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body" (*Fifth* 348). Through the physical and sexual violence done to her, she was acutely aware of the ways she was, in the words of Vivian Sobchack, "an *objective subject* always imminently and substantially 'here' and open to being externally acted on" by those in power (227). That is, though she was objectified, she was conscious of this process and its effects on her. It is because of her awareness of her own enfleshment that Syenite suffocates her child rather than hand him over to the Fulcrum. She is "not so much tasked with becoming a mother, as she is with reproducing a commodity," quite literally giving birth to slavery.[189] Realizing this, Syenite enacts motherhood the only way she can, through "a kind of cold, monstrous love. A determination to make sure your son's life remained the beautiful, wholesome thing it had been up until that day, even if it meant you had to end his life early" (*Obelisk* 105).

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[187]cárdenas, *Poetic*, 105.

[188]Snorton elaborates that as a condition of fungibility, enslaved Black people were "compelled to produce white value through their intimate labor and, by their reproductive capacity, surplus value in the form of the production of additional laboring bodies" (126).

[189]Wickham, "Identity, Memory, Slavery," 40; Greene, "Immersion and Participation," 338.

Unable to live with her actions, the heroine becomes a new self to reject what Syenite had done. She distanced herself from everything and everyone associated with the Fulcrum, even her own orogeny, in order to become 'Essun.' Her multiplicity, though initiated by the violence of the Fulcrum, became a life-long strategy for survival. 'Essun' is the identity she took on in order to live a quiet, hidden life. As Essun, she was able to pass as non-orogene and rebuild her life in a small community. But the reality of trans bodies is such that their forms are always haunted by others: transition grafts alterations onto a body, but does not erase past materialization.[190] Essun's past lives continue to haunt her present, and in an effort to keep her daughter safe, reenacts the same violences done to her onto Nassun. Essun may have left the Fulcrum, but the world she lives in still relies upon the subjugation of people like her and her children. And the cycle of trauma will continue unless the systemic structures of the world change. Which is why it is darkly convenient that the world comes to an end. 'Essun' is the name held onto the longest by the trilogy's heroine, but that does not mean her identity remained static. Her journey across the continent called for yet a different person: "the self you've been lately doesn't make sense anymore; that woman died with Uche. She's not useful, unobtrusive as she is, quiet as she is, ordinary as she is" (*Fifth* 42). Even still, Essun could not entirely abandon that self on her quest to find Nassun. Essun was the mother of children. To shed that identity completely would make her unrecognizable to the daughter she was trying to save. Essun hardened, becoming more practical and ruthless, while never abandoning the sense of responsibility or desire to nurture that was the cornerstone of her life as Essun. Shifting her identity allowed Essun to come into her own subjectivity in an objectifying system. Remaining 'Essun' does not invalidate the

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[190]Rose, "Keeping the Trans in Translation," 51.

possibilities offered by shifting, but reveals how the embodied self "comes into existence only as the result of a laborious stitching together of disparate parts."[191]

Even Essun's ultimate transformation into a stone eater does not come whole-cloth. Her first moment of petrification comes after saving her community. The effort sends her into a coma-like state and when she wakes she discovers that her right arm has been turned to stone. "Most of the joint is still flesh… The rest of the arm… has changed nearly past recognition… fine definition has vanished into a texture that is gritty and dense, like unpolished sandstone… The color is an even, allover grayish tan" (*Stone* 16-17). Essun struggles to process the loss and the accompanying impairments:

> The thing is really heavy. (Your *arm*. Not 'the thing.' It's your right arm. You've lost your right arm. You're aware of that, and soon you'll mourn it, but for now it's easier to think of it as a thing separate from yourself. An especially useless prosthesis. A benign tumor that needs to be removed. These things are all true. It's also your rusting arm.). (*Stone* 19-20)

Her experience of loss is layered not only with the sense of losing a part of herself, but also with the contentious relationship of disability with survival and humanity.[192] Essun assumes that the loss of her arm signals the undoing of her humanity: her monstrosity, once limited to only her orogeny, has spread and set her perceptibly apart from her community. Her stone limb is now a problem to be dealt with before it does more damage– much the way she once viewed her orogenic abilities. Essun realizes that going forward, any engagement with orogeny or magic will have permanent effects on her body. She limits her use of these skills, but is eventually faced with loss once more.

Everything within you seems to *twang* in response, in resonance, and– oh– oh no–

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[191]Steinbock, *Shimmering Images*, 102.

[192]Unfortunately, a full treatment of the trilogy's relationship with disability is beyond the scope of this project.

you feel the amplitude of the resonance rise as your cells begin to align… and compress into stone. You can't stop it. You can, however, direct it. In the instant that you have, you decide which body part you can afford to lose. (*Stone* 120)

Essun must negotiate with her ability and her body in order to maintain a self that can survive the harsh realities she is facing. She chooses to petrify her left breast and finds that she is "too shocked to mourn. Yet" (*Stone* 121). Though she is coming to understand and benefit from her relationality with the world, she fears her ultimate petrification the way one might fear death, understanding that it marks the end of her existence as she knows it.

In the final chapter of the trilogy, readers discover that this story is being told by Hoa to the being that was once Essun. She has been transformed into a stone eater, and the story was a means to prime her with who she once was. In a sense, Essun is once again being told who to be by someone else. Hoa is certainly in a position of power in this way, and even admits to shaping the narrative to certain ends: "There passes a time of happiness in your life, which I will not describe to you. It is not unimportant. Perhaps you think it is wrong that I dwell so much on the horrors, the pain, but pain is what shapes us, after all" (*Fifth* 361). Yet Hoa's position as a stone eater suggests that his process is less about making Essun fungible for his uses and more aimed at guiding her towards an understanding of her enfleshment as a condition of possibility integral to her being. The identity formation is reciprocal, even, as Hoa works to recreate himself even as he preserves Essun's memories. In the article "Immersion and participation in N.K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth Trilogy," Elliott Greene argues that this second-person perspective is crucial to the narrative because of its power to entangle the narrative roles of not only Hoa and Essun, but the reader as well (331). This creates a sense that the reader is not simply observing events, but actively co-acting in the story, just as Hoa is acting within the story by the narrative choices

he makes.[193] This dual narrative intersubjectivity (between Hoa and Essun as well as between the text and the audience) models a notion of self- and world-making that relies on both individual and communal perspectives.[194] Unlike within the world of the Fulcrum, Essun and Hoa *must* work together; their senses of self literally rely on each other.

Essun's stony transition, and its resulting intersubjectivity, may represent the cumulation of what Jemisin imagines mutable embodiment might offer: a mode of being that refuses the violence of imperialist individuation. The final scene emphasizes a notion of "radical contingency" with the world that relies on recognizing the barriers that imperialism erects between subjects.[195] The heroine is not dead, but metamorphosed. More importantly, her metamorphosis highlights a mode of being-*with*: with the Earth, with Hoa, with her community, with her multiplicity of selves.[196] Her petrification is bound up in the knowledge that "there's more than one way to be human," and that includes her new form (*Stone* 391). Perhaps more importantly, this new way is in excess of the singular Human, instead reliant on lattices of relationships with living and nonliving things. Readers are left with the sense that Essun's story is not over; this is not likely to be her final self. She will continue to transform as part of her interactions with the world and others. It is, perhaps, this very inter-dependence that is crucial to the revolutionary possibilities offered by Essun's mutable embodiment.

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[193]Greene, "Immersion and participation in N.K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth Trilogy," 331-332.

[194]Greene, "Immersion and participation in N.K. Jemisin's The Broken Earth Trilogy," 345.

[195]Goldberg, "Demanding the Impossible," 638.

[196]Jesse Goldberg writes: "Thinking another way of Being that is offered by the trilogy's consideration of imperial conquest, slavery, extraction, ecological disaster, and timescales—a way of being that Alexis Pauline Gumbs indexes as "the strength of no separation . . . the audacity of never saying this is me, this is not you." How might Jemisin's Broken Earth suggest a mode of Being against individuation?" ("Demanding the Impossible," 640).

CHAPTER V: CONCLUSION

Choosing 'Other'

When I started this project, I was searching for ways that space could be made for people like me. Upon reflection, it might have been foolish to engage with a subject that lands so close to home. For better or for worse, I wanted a satisfactory conclusion– a sense of justification of my own existence, or a concrete direction for world-making. Perhaps it was unrealistic to assume that a project on mutability would resolve itself into neat packaging. If I did not conclude with more questions than answers, it probably would have indicated that I took a wrong intellectual turn somewhere along the way. Still, it remains mildly exasperating that as I finish this project, I have come to reconsider the frame of reference that led me to it in the first place. Seeking 'space' will merely perpetuate, rather than transform, the very systems this work intended to question. Demanding tidy, unified answers only collapses the dynamic (might I even say 'liberatory?') possibilities that multiple nonidentical, yet nonetheless non-contradictory truths might present. So it is in service to this intellectual unruliness that I acknowledge my discomfort with the open-ended, even as I turn towards it. This acknowledgement is not meant to reiterate the 'wrongness' of indeterminacy but an attempt to continue to point to the ways imperialism works to shape how we think– even those of us who spend our time constantly questioning those systems. Regardless of my discomfort, this work is a stepping stone, not a final destination. And, like many stepping stones, there is more than one path. The questions generated by this project offer a few options for direction.

Over the course of writing this, I found myself continually at an impasse with regards to structure and language. Some of this may, of course, be attributed to skills still in development. But in the name of intellectual unruliness, perhaps trans studies may be better served by other

forms of discourse. Other scholars have begun this exploration: for example, Katherine McKittrick's *Dear Science and Other Stories* explores a fascinating citational practice, Alexis Pauline Gumbs engages in poetry and prose, Finn Enke's in-progress work "With Finn and Wing" is a graphic memoir engaging their childhood drawings, and Keguro Macharia publishes his writings publicly online so as to be more accessible to the populations he hopes to serve.[197] But the types of intellectual work that are most validated, that represent the focus of upper-level education, are very particular forms of formal literature. What if, like Macharia, trans studies can turn away from making itself legible to 'mainstream' academia and towards making itself legible to gender non-conforming persons?[198] What might other mediums offer for generating not only accessibility, but also new ways of thinking transness? Put differently, why limit ourselves to thinking mutability through a linear medium?

Due to the limitations of time and space, this work could not engage with Disability Studies in as comprehensive a way as I might have liked. Further reflection on the intersections of trans mutability and (dis)ability might provide additional frictions, insights, or potentials. Specifically, Essun's negotiations with the loss of her arm and breast seem ripe for interrogating the tensions between loss, health, beauty, and the 'natural.' Yennefer's position as both pathologized and sexualized puts her in a unique position with regard to those same concerns. Also, what can mutability do when engaged with mental health? Particularly interesting are Dream's many selves, their interactions with each other and their varying lived experiences. How might these Dreams offer a reflection on experiences with complex trauma or dissociative experiences?

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[197]McKittrick, *Dear Science*; Gumbs, *Undrowned*; Gumbs, *Spill*; Enke, "Graphic Memoir"; Macharia, "On Being Area-Studied." This is not, by any means, an exhaustive list.
[198]Macharia, "On Being Area-Studied," 186.

Relatedly, more time ought to be spent on how mutable trans embodiment might open new modes of seeing medical and social transition, including gender-affirming care. What does it mean for lived practices of transition that the technologies associated are borne out of, and designed to perpetuate, racialized extraction? What might this line of thought contribute to troubling appeals to the 'natural' or 'authentic?' So, too, could the 'monstrous' be further engaged in an effort to imagine alternate beings-in-the-world. Jeffery Jerome Cohen suggests that "fear of the monster is really a kind of desire."[199] One interpretation of his assertion is that the fear of being labeled monstrous is also the desire to fully embody the self. What might it mean, then, to *desire* monstrosity? How might choosing to embody monstrosity rupture institutionalized continuity?

Indigenous thought also remained, unfortunately, largely uninterrogated in this project, though both *The Witcher* and *Broken Earth* make clear gestures towards thinking about histories of Indigenous genocide. Inspired by Robin Wall Kimmerer's *Braiding Sweetgrass*, it might also be pertinent to ask what attending to reciprocity might do to further the types of relationality suggested by this work. How might trans mutability be furthered by attending to the connections of human (read: homeo sapiens) and non-human forms of life? What might Essun's final materiality, that is, being made of the same 'stuff' as the Earth make clear about networks of relation, kinship, and ecology?

In his critique of the perpetuating cycle of imperialism, Alexander Weheliye describes the notion of freedom as "overdetermined".[200] Certainly, freedom in the liberalist, individualist, agency-as-refusal sense seems to be limited to a select few, if it exists at all. Moreover, he

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[199]Cohen, "Monster Culture (Seven Theses)," 49.
[200]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 137.

questions that 'freedom' must be wholly disjointed from the negative. Paraphrasing him, might there be freedom to be found in pain?[201] 'Freedom' must be more carefully considered as Trans Studies moves forward: what do we mean by it? what do we want from it? what are we demanding from 'freedom' that might be better provided by other notions? 'Freedom' seems inadequate to address the systematic excision of transness across the nation. How can one think about liberty while surviving the unlivable? With this in mind, I articulate one final piece of intellectual unruliness. What might it mean to seek futurity, rather than freedom? Futurity meaning that "different choices have always been possible."[202]

Futurity meaning not yet.

Futurity meaning "survivance."[203]

Futurity meaning abolition.

Futurity meaning pain, but also joy.

Futurity meaning soon.

Futurity meaning mutability.

Futurity meaning apocalypse.

Futurity meaning the (im)possible, the (ir)real, the (in)human.

Futurity meaning now.

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[201]Weheliye, *Habeas Viscus*, 14.
[202]Jemisin, *Stone* 395.
[203]This term was coined by Gerald Vizenor in his book *Manifest Manners* (page vii), and many scholars since have employed it as a portmanteau of 'survival' and 'endurance' and/or 'resistance.'

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