



The Critique of Colonial Cartography in N. K. Jemisin’s *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*

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Abstract: Epic fantasy is well-known for supplying readers with maps of fantastic secondary-world settings. N. K. Jemisin’s *The Inheritance Trilogy* is an example of an epic fantasy series that might have benefited from a map, but its author specifically chose not to include one. Jemisin has publicly acknowledged her aversion to the fantasy map as little more than a cliché that oftentimes spoils the role that places on the map will have in a fantasy text. Critical descriptions of cartographic images in *The Inheritance Trilogy*, particularly in its first novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, suggest there is more to the story: that the omission of a reader map adds emphasis to the series’ postcolonial critique of what map theorists call “the cartographic gaze.”

Associating the very idea of a world map with the arrogance of empire, *The Inheritance Trilogy* characterizes the god’s eye view of colonial cartography as harmfully misguided, even blasphemous, in its attempt to capture the world from a single totalizing perspective. Jemisin counters the objectifying vantage point of the god’s eye view with the subjective narrative perspective of the colonized other. She is by no means the only fantasy author to use first-person narration to promote postcolonial perspectives, but doing so enables her to recapture a depth of experience that is lost when worlds (both imaginary and real) are framed by the colonial cartographic gaze.

Keywords: fantasy, maps, cartography, colonial empire, postcolonialism

1. Introduction

Despite her known aversion to fantasy maps, N. K. Jemisin provides readers of her *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017) with a continental map of the secondary world known as the Stillness. She claims to have needed a map as she wrote the first novel in the series and admits that the strange vastness of the Stillness presented a unique case in which seeing a map might justifiably elevate the reader's "sense of wonder" and "add to the story" ("Stillness"). For her first *Great Cities* novel *The City We Became* (2020), Jemisin includes yet another map, albeit one that faithfully reproduces the real-world topography of New York City with additional scribbles that mark the locations of fantastic elements from within the story. While these recent exceptions have ostensibly become a new rule for Jemisin, her earlier works reflect a concerted disinclination toward the cartographic conventions of fantasy fiction that is well worth revisiting. The absence of a map in her debut fantasy series *The Inheritance Trilogy* (2010–2011) represents an intentional choice to avoid the fantasy map as "a cliché and a kind of spoiler" that not only reveals "locations that will become important" in a series, but also privileges global perspectives at the expense of local viewpoints or vice versa (Interview). In cases where a series' focus shifts between "the whole planet" and "one city-sized palace," she muses, "Which one should [get] the map?" (Interview).¹

The purpose of this essay is twofold. First, it aims to extend the work of fantasy map theorist Stefan Ekman by applying his ideas to a fantasy series that deliberately refuses to provide a visible cartographic depiction of its secondary world. If the fantasy map sometimes functions as a "central part of the creation process" (*Dragons* 21), then how might its absence implicitly contribute to the same? Alternatively, if the map acts as a "threshold" or "liminal space between the actual world of the reader and the fictional world of the fantasy story" (21), then what does it mean for a postcolonial fantasy like *The Inheritance Trilogy* to deny this conventional first point of contact between reader and story?

As scholars of colonial cartography point out, maps express "relations of power" and "have held particular significance as instruments of colonial control" (Harley 35, Nayar 23). They "serve not simply to represent space but to impose one way of relating to, seeing, and imagining the world – a worldview [the map] claims to be superior" (Bellone et al 34). Ekman echoes this idea when he emphasizes the "propositional" rather than representational nature of maps ("Entering" 73). Maps, he explains, do not *re-present* a place so much as they make "arguments" about that place, including the fact that it "embodies a certain ideology" (85). An official, state-produced diegetic map of *The Inheritance Trilogy's* so-called Hundred Thousand Kingdoms, for instance – like the one located in the royal apartment of Relad Arameri – would undoubtedly make arguments in favor of the dominant colonial power within that world, namely, the Itempan religious order or Amn people in general. Reproducing such a map would run counter to Jemisin's invitation to witness

¹ This question is largely rhetorical, as Jemisin is no doubt aware of fantasy texts that include multiple maps at different scales. Her feelings about a potential map for *The Inheritance Trilogy* are nevertheless clear: "I didn't want one" (Interview). The case appears to be the same for her second fantasy series *The Dreamblood Duology* (2012), which also forgoes the convention of a fantasy map.

and share *The Inheritance Trilogy's* varied perspectives of colonized others. This is, for me, the most significant and compelling reason why the trilogy does not feature a visible map of its secondary world. The absence of a paratextual map that might otherwise mediate the reader's initial interaction with the series literally and figuratively prioritizes the viewpoints and subjective experiences of characters like Yeine, the displaced narrator of *The Inheritance Trilogy's* first novel *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010).²

The second aim of this essay is to provide analysis of textual examples, particularly from *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, where Jemisin describes cartographic images or alludes to what map theorists call the "cartographic gaze" (Specht and Feigenbaum 39). In this respect, I look beyond Jemisin's own published explanations for her refusal to provide a map for her trilogy and highlight instead the connections the series makes between cartography and the colonial gaze. *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, I argue, carries an implicit ideological critique of the very idea of a world map and associates such maps with the arrogance of empire and colonial domination. Specifically, the novel characterizes the bird's or god's eye view of colonial cartography as harmfully misguided, even blasphemous, in its attempt to capture the world from a single totalizing perspective.

As Denis Wood reminds us, "People create maps only when their social relations call for them" (19). In *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, the arrogant cartographic gaze of the Arameri world order promotes an underlying political agenda shared by colonial cartography in our own world: "to define and claim outside ownership of territories" and "to root people to entities to which they ... have to be loyal, but [which they cannot] see" (Tadepalli). At the novel's conclusion, this agenda is challenged by the emergence of alternate ways of viewing the world, not the least of which is the insistent narrative perspective of the novel's protagonist Yeine, a colonized other who defies the colonial state and quite literally becomes a god. If the series offers no map of the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms, then it is partly because the central and centering arguments that such a map would make in favor of an Itempan or Arameri colonial worldview cannot hold. As the Arameri patriarch Dekarta himself predicts, "every nation on this planet will rise up to destroy us" (396). The empire that the map would portray, in other words, is doomed to fail.

2. Fantasy Maps and Colonial Cartography

Ekman observes that fantasy's use of maps is often regarded as "one of the genre's most distinctive characteristics" (*Dragons* 11). In the satirical words of Diana Wynne Jones, "No Tour of Fantasyland is complete without one" (1).³ One of Ekman's main points about fantasy maps is that they hold significance

² Yeine's story begins when she is summoned to travel from her home nation of Darr to the Arameri-controlled city of Sky, the political capital and cultural center of the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms.

³ The humor of Jones' observation plays on the prevalence of maps in iconic fantasy texts by such writers as J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, and Ursula K. Le Guin. Ekman's sample survey of 200 fantasy novels shows, nevertheless, that while maps appear frequently enough to be recognized as a well-established (even stereotypical) convention within the fantasy tradition, they are by no means "compulsory ingredients" of the genre (*Dragons* 22).

for both the author and the reader. On one hand, they can play a central role in the creative worldbuilding process. As mentioned, Jemisin admits to having needed a map when imagining the complex topography of her *Broken Earth* series. Ekman says the same was true for J.R.R. Tolkien, for whom the “map [was] primary and the story secondary, at least in fashioning the geographical setting” of Middle-earth (72). On the other hand, as thresholds between the actual world of the reader and the fictional world of the fantasy story, maps are an important part of what Ekman and Audrey Isabel Taylor call “readerly world-building,” or the process by which “readers carry out a hermeneutical construction of a world” and create the story “as a full object in their minds” (“Notes” 10).

Given the importance maps can have for both readers and authors, Ekman implores fantasy critics to analyze fantasy maps and texts together: “To ignore what the map communicates and only analyze the text means omitting a significant part of the work” (*Dragons* 67). When the work includes a map, the analysis should consist in part of a “topofocal” or “place-focused” approach that accounts for the “dynamic rather than static” system of “links” that develop between the map and the text over the course of reading the work (Ekman, *Dragons* 2, “Map and Text” 75). I agree with Ekman (and Taylor) on these points but add that the topofocal approach to fantasy might well include the deliberate omission of a map as a part of the work and as a potential source of meaning, particularly in postcolonial texts where maps are viewed with suspicion.

It is important to keep in mind, after all, that in addition to being tools for imagining pathways through worlds both fictional and actual, maps are also deployed as instruments of power and have historically been the tools of empire. Benedict Anderson, a renowned theorist of the nation-state, identifies the map as one of three primary institutions, along with the census and the museum, that “profoundly shaped the way in which the colonial state imagined its dominion” (168). For Anderson, the colonial map was not a “scientific abstraction of reality” so much as an “instrument [used] to concretize projections on the earth’s surface” (173, 174). It offered points of reference for the administrative and military operations of colonization to work within and to take shape in the minds of both the colonizer and the colonized (174). As a reproducible and widely distributed object, the map became an “intellectual weapon” geared towards the continued production and maintenance of state power (Morisson 27). It belonged to a discourse of totalization that not only differentiated the lands claimed by colonial powers externally, but also projected the semblance of stability within each territory. Anti-colonial uprisings or insurgencies were rarely indicated unless a map was specifically appointed “for the purpose of suppressing such challenges to their power” (Wanberg 6). In other words, in addition to marking the locations of strategic outposts, trade routes, borders, and towns, the colonial map represented a topography of management and control.

For many critics of colonial cartography, the totalizing and suppressive power of the colonial map is underwritten by the cartographic gaze, which objectifies the lands and people it surveys from the vantage point of the bird’s or god’s eye view. According to Doug Specht and Anna Feigenbaum, the map’s expansive aerial perspective forms a “precursor to the surveillant gaze, epitomized by Bentham’s Panopticon and the work of Foucault;” and was

“instrumental in the forming of the Other – and with that the subjugation of the Other” (40). The objectifying gaze of the divine view from above “solidifies relations [below] and immobilizes those who are mapped,” robbing them of “their self-determination” (40). It projects onto the map what Edward Said would call an “imaginative geography,” which does not represent a colonized people or territory with scientific accuracy, but conjures an image of the colonial other as a fixed object to be made governable and exploited as a resource for extending colonial influence across the world (49). If the colonial map makes an argument in favor of the “assertion of sovereignty” (Black 12), then the divine perspective afforded by the bird’s or god’s eye view is the *logos* – or structural appeal to reason – on which that argument rests.

3. The God’s Eye View of the Arameri Cartographic Gaze

Without a paratextual map, readers of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* are not afforded their own bird’s or god’s eye view of Jemisin’s world but are quickly made aware of the effects such views have on the colonized other. The novel’s second chapter provides an early example of a view that looks down from above and explicitly associates its privileged perspective with the godlike purview of the colonial gaze. When Yeine arrives at the Arameri capital of Sky, she is led on a tour that ends in her new apartment in the towering heights of Sky palace. She is immediately struck by the view: “Floor-to-ceiling windows ran along one wall, which afforded me a stunning view of the city and the countryside below – far, far below” (16). The view offers sweeping vistas that evoke the all-encompassing vantage point of the cartographic gaze. “We were so high”, she marvels, “that I couldn’t even make out people on the streets below” (16). Though it leaves her momentarily speechless, Yeine soon expresses reservations about the view from Sky: “it seemed as though I could see the whole of the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms. That was a fallacy, I knew” (74). On the surface, the “fallacy” she mentions pertains to the literal impossibility of seeing an entire world from a single vantage point, especially one proven by scribes to be “round” (74). But Yeine also means to denounce the totalizing arrogance of the cartographic gaze through which colonizers imagine their charted domains from a distance and in which the people of those domains fade from view. The idea that the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms could be collectively captured and known from the elevated viewpoint of one nation strikes Yeine as “profoundly wrong” (74). “It is blasphemy,” she insists, “to separate oneself from the earth and look down on it like a god” (74).

While her condemnation of the god’s eye view is couched in religious terms, the separation to which Yeine refers reflects the political hierarchy imposed by cartographic viewpoints that elevate the surveyor over the surveyed, the mapper over the mapped. For critics of colonial cartography, this “false sense of separation” promotes a notion of “space as an object” and engenders a “geographical imagination where nature and its local inhabitants have become merely resources for settlement, domination, and exploitation” (Bellone et al 18). Ironically, the objectifying cartographic view Yeine encounters from her apartment window sharply contrasts with her own narrative perspective as a colonized subject. As Jemisin points out, *The Inheritance Trilogy* falls within the category of postcolonial texts that eschew

conventional fantasy tropes of “Us vs the Other” in favor of “stories [told] from the Other’s PoV” (“Considering”). As a member and leader of the colonized nation of Darr, Yeine embodies the underclass perspective of the other who experiences colonial domination from below. Hers is a story of manipulation and exploitation at the hands of the colonial state. Standing before the god’s eye view of her new apartment in Sky, she finds herself unexpectedly inhabiting the alien perspective of the colonial gaze, which leaves her feeling disoriented and displaced, separated from herself as a colonized subject. The contrast between the view and her own grounded experience of the people and lands below works to denaturalize the cartographic gaze. Her misgivings about the view emphasize its partiality, the fact that it represents just one perspective – albeit an elevated or privileged one – that favors a specific worldview.

Yet, even as Jemisin aims to denaturalize the colonizer’s cartographic perception of the world, she draws attention to its insidious appeal. The more Yeine grows accustomed to her apartment’s Sky view, the more she admits to being enthralled by its blasphemous perspective: “I could not help drinking in the view. It is important to appreciate beauty, even when it is evil” (75). The aesthetic allure of the god’s eye view is partly what makes it so “dangerous,” says Yeine (74). It entices the viewer with vistas that can delight as much as they distort the world they frame. Part of the pleasure afforded by such a view is derived from convention, or the reiterative process by which one formal way of framing the geographic world gains recognition and credibility over others. As Specht and Feigenbaum admit, there is “a bias towards the creation of God’s eye views of the world, which frequently exclude other interpretations and understanding of existence” (50).

But the appeal of the god’s eye view is also born of the sense of order it provides, particularly in the way its broad scale enables relations to be drawn and maintained between discrete geographical features and locations that form an organized whole. According to Michel de Certeau, “this pleasure of ‘seeing the whole,’ of looking down on” and “totalizing” what is below renders the profound complexity of something like a city (or in Yeine’s case, an entire empire) “readable” – which is to say, it “immobilizes [the city’s] opaque mobility in a transparent text” (92). De Certeau has in mind what he calls the “celestial eye” that gazes down from the top of the former World Trade Center in New York City (92), but his comments likewise befit the panoramic views afforded by Sky Palace, an edifice which, like the World Trade Center, stands as an emblem of worldwide imperial influence and power. The view from Sky, in other words, is hardly neutral, as though it merely embodied the vantage point of a bird. Rather, it projects a deliberately constructed perspective of divine authority offering the “fiction of knowledge” over a teeming multiplicity of colonized lands reduced to an immobilized image – or, as de Certeau alternatively describes it, a “visual” simulacrum “whose condition of possibility” rests on a “misunderstanding of practices” carried out below (92). Put more plainly, looking out from the heights of Sky Palace promotes the semblance of order beneath the organizing purview of empire, but in the process, this view loses sight of the lives and goings-on of ordinary people on the ground, as Yeine suggests.

In the context of the *Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, this immobilizing desire for order is specifically associated with the divine perspective, or celestial eye, of Itempas the Skyfather, whom the Arameri worship as “the lord of order”

(21). Having ascended to monotheistic prominence by imprisoning the god of chaos (Nahadoth) and killing the goddess of balance (Enefa), Itempas epitomizes an overdetermined drive toward order that demands strict compliance and assimilation to a single interpretation of the world. Those who express views or distribute documents that contradict the Itempan worldview are routinely executed for “heresy” (111). A map, for instance, that were to deviate in some way from the world-ordering perspective of the Itempan cartographic gaze would surely be deemed seditious and thus dangerous to possess.

As tantalizing as the thought of anti-colonial cartographic resistance might be, Jemisin denies readers the pleasure of seeing the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms from any cartographic perspective whatsoever. She prefers, instead, to problematize the colonial cartographic gaze by narrativizing its unsettling effects on Yeine, the colonized other who is at once compelled and repelled by the colonist’s god’s eye view of the world. In this respect, Yeine’s narrative perspective captures a more nuanced impression of her world’s geopolitical landscape than a conventional fantasy map could ever hope to portray. More to the point, in addition to offering an understanding of existence that differs from the colonial cartographic perspective, her narrative specifically relates a journey through a world in which maps can be used against her.

4. Stepping into the Arameri World Map

The only map discussed at length in *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* is one that is precisely weaponized against Yeine and her people. It belongs to her Arameri cousin and political rival Relad, who invites Yeine into his apartment to explain his sister Scimina’s plan to leverage neighboring kingdoms into attacking Yeine’s home nation of Darr. The map offers an oversized view of the world comprised of “beautifully colored ceramic tiles” spread across the floor of a large open chamber in Relad’s apartment (335). In his attempt to exploit Yeine’s fears over the welfare of her homeland, Relad steps into and across the enormous map to stand like a god “in the middle of the Repentance Sea” (337). He points to variously colored stones placed on the map near the borders of Darr that represent his sister Scimina’s allied forces as well as his own group of mercenary fighters not far away. He promises Yeine the use of his mercenaries to “give the Darre a fighting chance” against Scimina’s allies if Yeine endorses him as the next heir to the Arameri throne (338).

The image of Relad taking giant strides across the world strikes Yeine “as irrationally amusing for a moment” (337), but she quickly gleans the deadly symbolism behind his cartographic performance of colonial power. For Relad, treading the geographic world as a giant is not irrational or laughable so much as it resonates with the cartographic perspective of his colonial mindset. Unlike Yeine, he is accustomed to looking down on the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms from the heights of a god, from where he sees not the people of nations below but objectified space. From his oversized vantage point within the map, the wellbeing and cross-border conflicts of nations appear as little more than a set of “pawns” that can be moved across a scaled down abstraction of the world to accumulate more power (337). Casually bartering the lives of entire populations

for his own political gain, Relad stands (quite literally in this case) as a towering figure of cold-hearted colonial egotism.

Relad's cartographic performance offers Yeine a sobering reminder of the disproportionate suffering colonized nations experience at the whims of the colonial state. She recognizes his offer of military aid not for its genuine concern for the lives of her people but for the manipulation it entails. The stone pieces he has "ranged around Darr's borders" clearly communicate the threat her nation faces as well as his own godlike power to intervene (336). He can move his own pieces into play but will only do so in exchange for a political favor. Confronted with her people's objectification beneath the colonizer's cartographic gaze, Yeine finds herself similarly objectified as just another pawn in a devastating game of colonial intrigue and sibling rivalry. With no better option than to agree to help her people on Relad's terms, Yeine accepts his proffered hand as the fate of the colonial world lies at his feet.

It is perhaps at this point in the novel where readers are most likely to notice (if they have not done so already) the absence of a paratextual map. The scene in Relad's apartment, in other words, makes the significance of that omission conspicuously available to the process of readerly world-building. In carrying out their "hermeneutical construction" of the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms (Ekman and Taylor 10), readers who empathize with Yeine's discomfort in the face of Relad's cartographic performance are invited to reflect on the politics of maps and the cartographic exploitation of colonized others in Jemisin's secondary world. Relad's map is, after all, hardly subtle: its oversized presentation makes a spectacle of the colonizer's mindset, of looking down on peoples and nations as playthings in a game of colonial domination. Not only does Jemisin's account of Relad's map draw attention to the absence of a paratextual map, but its description arguably stands as a proxy for the map the series *might* have featured if it were not for the fact that such a cartographic representation would reproduce the ways the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms are officially recognized, divided, and organized by the dominant colonial power. Denying visual access to such a map, Jemisin implicitly asks her readers to imagine her world not as it appears to characters like Relad or Scimina, for whom the map is a means to extend their power, but rather through the perspective of the colonized other, who experiences the map as an existential threat to her people.

5. Reversing the Colonial Gaze

While Relad and Scimina pursue further machinations in their competition over the Arameri throne, Yeine seeks out alliances of her own, which enable her to counteract the world-shaping power of the colonial gaze. Most notably, she gains the trust of a group of imprisoned gods called the Enefadeh, who conspire with her to disrupt the succession ceremony at which the next heir to the throne will be chosen. Not all of their plans unfold as expected, but Yeine's alliances manage to set into motion a sequence of events that culminate in the awakening of a divine soul that was implanted in Yeine's subconscious before she was born. Claiming this soul's immortal powers for her own (as well as that soul's privileged place in the pantheon), Yeine confronts the Arameri patriarch Dekarta in a scene that dramatically reverses the power dynamic of an earlier

scene, in which Dekarta, meeting Yeine for the first time, commands her to “Stand” so he can “have a look at [her]” (7). If the earlier scene captures Yeine’s sense of inferiority under the patronizing scrutiny of the colonial gaze (“I am not very interesting to look at,” she admits [7]), then the scene of her ascension to godhood illustrates Dekarta’s sudden panic at finding himself the object, rather than the beholder, of a god’s eye view. He cowers beneath Yeine’s newly acquired divine gaze and begs her for guidance over the future of his empire, only to be warned of an impending postcolonial reckoning in which the Arameri people will face “the world’s wrath” (396).

Interestingly, this reversal of power between the colonizer and the colonized is short-lived, as Yeine promises to withdraw herself from the affairs of mortal kind. Her experiences have taught her about the danger and the allure of looking down on others from the heights of a god. She is familiar with the way such views encourage a colonial mindset that distorts what it sees and captures inhabitants below not as people so much as objects susceptible to manipulation and control. For Yeine, the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms has suffered enough from the “constant interference” of divine perspectives (396). She is reluctant to engage in a process of decolonization that would merely reverse the modes of domination central to colonization, including the deployment of a god’s eye view. Unlike her cousin Relad, who steps into the world map with a colonizer’s godlike arrogance, Yeine effectively steps out of the world, taking the privileged vantage point of her goddess’s eye view with her. Her refusal to exploit her divine perspective even for anti-colonial gains not only marks the promise of more equitable future relations across the Hundred Thousand Kingdoms but also mirrors (and further reinforces) Jemisin’s own refusal to provide readers with a god’s eye rendering of those same kingdoms.

6. Fantasy’s Mutable Landscapes

If new maps are to be drawn in the wake of Yeine’s ascension, then they might de-emphasize objectifying perspectives that conflate particular worldviews with the god’s eye view. Rather, they might productively accentuate subjective local viewpoints that are subject to change. As Jemisin reminds us: “All Fantasy Things are mutable. Including maps” (“Stillness”). She makes this point in reference to the published map of her *Broken Earth* trilogy, which the reader knows to be implicitly provisional since the fictional setting of the series is subject to unpredictable geological shifting. But Jemisin’s emphasis on cartographic mutability also applies to *The Inheritance Trilogy*, particularly in terms of geopolitical changes precipitated by Yeine’s ascension to godhood. One of the few interventions Yeine allows herself at the end of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* is to transform the edifice of Sky palace into an enormous “World Tree” that casts a shady green glow over the surrounding city. In the second novel of *The Inheritance Trilogy*, *The Broken Kingdoms* (2010), this topographical change leads to a division between Arameri authorities, who continue to refer to the city of Sky by its old name, and the inhabitants, who rename the city “Shadow.” Tourists are regularly encouraged by locals to use names such as “West Shadow” or “East Shadow,” rather than Sky, if they “stop to ask directions” (*Broken* 7). Confusing though it may be to outsiders,

navigating the city requires familiarity with its shifting political terrain. Older cartographic viewpoints, especially those that persist in visualizing the city from the heights of Sky palace, no longer reflect life within the shade of the city's nascent postcolonial reality.

Discrepancies between official and unofficial geographies call for new forms of cartography that would be capable of projecting multiple viewpoints of the same territory. Though it falls beyond the traditional bounds of visual cartography, Yeine's subjective narrative perspective offers a promising counterpoint to the presumptuous world-ordering view of the colonial cartographic gaze. All cartography, including narrative accounts of geographical space, will involve "distorted rendering" to some degree, as Jemison admits ("Stillness"); but her novel writes against a long-standing tradition in colonial cartography, one in which the particular distortion of the objectifying god's eye view has been deployed (to the exclusion of alternate cartographic perspectives) to chart populations and build empires (Specht and Feigenbaum 50). Yeine's narrative point of view projects not a telescopic view that objectifies at a distance, but a particular ground-level experience of the world that turns its terrestrial viewpoints back on the empire. More like a travelogue than a map of the postcolonial fantastic, Yeine's narrative leads the readers down the precarious pathways taken by colonized others, whose lives can be forever changed when a royal hand moves stones across a tiled floor.

7. Conclusion

Even as they complement *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* in portraying varied perspectives within *The Inheritance Trilogy's* secondary world, the two follow-up novels lack their predecessor's incisive critique of colonial cartography. Their references to cartographic images are intriguing but more incidental than representative of a purposeful continuation of the cartographic theme. In *The Broken Kingdoms*, for instance, Oree, the narrator and a Shadow city commoner, makes only a brief reference to a tourist map that marks the city's various "god spots," or places affected by the power of one of the many godlings that populate the world (8). The most interesting detail of this map is that it indicates how Yeine's summoning of the World Tree at the end of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* "interrupted" the flow of Sky's "convoluted streets" (9). In this respect, the map is postcolonial, as it not only charts the presence of previously unacknowledged deities in the city but also traces the uneasy contours between an old-world order and the new.

The Kingdom of Gods (2011) offers a few more passing cartographic references, including a description of a child's bookshelf that contains "[m]aps of faraway lands" (49), a reference to a hand-written note illustrating one character's proposed journey to Sky (322), and an allusion to scribes "mapping [the] wonders" of a palace that Yeine eventually raises from the ocean to replace the old palace of Sky (472). Most intriguingly, the narrator Sieh, a trickster child god trapped in mortal form, mentions his tendency to "change directions on maps so they make no sense" (284). Although Sieh's modest acts of cartographic defiance provide food for thought, their anti-colonial potential (not unlike that of Oree's tourist map mentioned above) remains largely undeveloped. Tinkering with maps is just one of the many "small, silly things"

Sieh does to amuse himself at the expense of others (284). It means no more to him than “piss[ing] in the punch bowl at weddings” (284).

The two final books in the trilogy are arguably more concerned with postcolonial themes of forgiveness and reconciliation than with images of colonial cartography. *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms*, on the other hand, initiates its critique of colonial cartography with its own small but meaningful act of cartographic defiance – its refusal to provide a conventional fantasy map of the trilogy’s secondary world. Why deny readers one of epic fantasy’s “most distinctive characteristics” (Ekman, *Dragons* 11)? Jemisin admits that she is “not a very visual person” (“Stillness”), but neither this limitation nor her professed aversion to fantasy maps has prevented her from employing paratextual maps in her more recent fantasy series. I have argued that the most compelling reason for the lack of a paratextual map in her debut fantasy series lies in the specific connections *The Inheritance Trilogy* makes between colonial domination and the cartographic gaze. Yeine’s unsettling encounters with the expansive view from her Sky apartment and her cousin’s audacious stroll across a map of the world throw into sharp relief the objectifying distance the colonial cartographic gaze affects between the colonizer and the colonized. These scenes dramatize the process by which the god’s eye view of the cartographic gaze looks down on the lands of colonized others and sees not people so much as resources available for manipulation and control.

The omission of a traditional fantasy map is Jemisin’s first signal that she intends to engage in a critique of cartography as a tool of empire. It alerts the reader to the fact that maps, particularly those that presume to chart entire worlds, do not always serve the interests and well-being of colonized others. On the contrary, they make “arguments,” as Ekman notes, which seek to justify and embody the worldviews of those who create them (85). It bears repeating that the only world map mentioned in *The Inheritance Trilogy* is specifically weaponized against Yeine. Relad uses it to terrorize and exploit Yeine’s fears for the wellbeing of her people. Reproducing this map in lieu of available alternatives would only re-inscribe and support the map’s underlying colonial agenda. Jemisin counters the objectifying cartographic perspective of Relad’s map with a subjective narrative that validates the point of view of the colonized other. Jemisin is by no means the only fantasy author to use first-person narration to promote postcolonial perspectives, but doing so enables her to capture a depth of experience that is lost when worlds, both imaginary and real, are dominated and framed by the colonial cartographic gaze. If the presence of colonized others fades beneath the elevated god’s eye view in colonial cartography, then *The Inheritance Trilogy*, and particularly its first novel, aim to bring those others squarely back into view.

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