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Afrofuturism and Generational Trauma in N. K. Jemisin's
Broken Earth Trilogy

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Abstract

N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth Trilogy* explores the methods and effects of systemic oppression. Orogenes are historically oppressed and dehumanised by the wider society of The Stillness. In this thesis, I will be exploring the ways in which trauma experienced by orogenes is repeated through generations, as presented through Essun's varied and complex relationships with her children, and with the Fulcrum Guardian Schaffa. The collective trauma of orogenes is perpetuated through different direct and indirect actions in a repetitive cycle, on societal, interpersonal and familial levels. My reading will be in conversation with theories of trauma literature and cultural trauma, and will be informed by Afrofuturist cultural theory.

Although science fiction and fantasy encourage the imagination, worldbuilding is inherently influenced by lived experiences. It could thus be stated that the trauma experienced by orogenes is informed by the collective trauma of African-Americans, as experienced by N. K. Jemisin. Afrofuturism is an aesthetic mode and critical lens which prioritises the imagining of a liberated future. Writing science fiction and fantasy through an Afrofuturist aesthetic mode encourages authors to explore forms of collective trauma as well as methods of healing. Jemisin creates an explicit parallel between the traumatic African-American experience and that of orogenes. Afrofuturist art disrupts linear time and addresses past and present trauma through the imagining of the future. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* provides a blueprint for the imagined liberation of oppressed groups. Using Afrofuturist tropes such as technology, the "Black Genius" figure and alienation, Jemisin demonstrates the power of reclamation and the possibility of a self-created future for oppressed groups.

Keywords: N. K. Jemisin; Afrofuturism; Trauma; Collective Memory; Science Fiction; Oppression

Science fiction, though lauded as the literature of the imagination, has long been represented by a majority white male authorship. Authors of colour have been historically omitted from the canon, even when writing texts with science fiction and fantasy elements. For example, some African-American authors' work, despite containing fantastical elements, has been historically categorised as African-American literature rather than as science fiction. Science fiction and African-American interests were seen as mutually exclusive categories, as the most dominant representatives of the science fiction and fantasy author- and readership were white men. This assumption, however, is baseless, and is merely representative of the ethnocentrism and racial bias prevalent in almost all social and commercial spheres. One of the most significant African-American science fiction authors, Octavia E. Butler, continually had her work read as allegories of the African-American experience, contemporary or otherwise, despite her insistence upon the subject matter being fantasy. For example, the short story 'Bloodchild'—a tale of inter-species symbiosis and male pregnancy—has been frequently interpreted as an allegory for slavery. Butler denied this imposition, stating clearly in an afterword to 'Bloodchild': "It amazes me that some people have seen 'Bloodchild' as a story of slavery. It isn't. It's a number of other things though."¹ Among the first women to create black literary heroines, Butler has been hugely influential in creating a blueprint for future science fiction and fantasy authors, particularly African-American women. From early African-American science fiction, the genre has evolved, and many authors with this background now employ Afrofuturism as a literary aesthetic, in order to unlock imagined futures and possibilities for their characters. Afrofuturist art imagines liberated pasts, presents and futures free from the confines of history. The aesthetic mode prioritises and centres the African diaspora, and as such is intricately connected to trauma.

¹ Butler 2011, 30

Trauma originates from the Greek word for *wound*, and much of this initial meaning is preserved in contemporary use of the word. The word invokes a sense of immediacy and images of an event. When connotations shifted from a physical wound to a mental wound, definitions became complex and slippery. Roger Luckhurst states that “[i]t is useful to retain a sense that meanings of trauma have stalled somewhere between the physical and the psychological.”² Trauma is often intangible, even in its definition. In examples such as the African-American experience, the traumatic effects of colonialism and slavery are still felt today. African-Americans still suffer the trauma caused by slavery, despite the actual traumatic “events” taking place before living memory. Trauma is central to the African-American identity, being a key factor in the formation of the “African-American”. Ron Eyerman states that “the notion ‘African American’ is not itself a natural category, but rather a historically formed collective identity that first of all required articulation and then acceptance on the part of those it was meant to incorporate. It was here, in this identity formation, that the memory of slavery would be central, not so much as individual experience, but as collective memory.”³ The physical and psychological trauma of slavery is felt by African-Americans as a collective, regardless of personal experience. In this way, collective identity can be a traumatic self-fulfilling prophecy. Trauma and oppression work cyclically, as each generation of oppressors infects the next with notions of prejudice and discrimination, and each generation of the oppressed are re-traumatized by the collective memory of the past. Trauma cannot be confined to or healed by one generation or one specific circumstance. Irrespective of the intentions, reexamining trauma almost always leads to the outcome of re-traumatization. Trauma literature, such as Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), displays narratological features which define the genre, such as “disarticulation of linear narrative” and “reflections on the transgenerational transmission and the complex accommodations communities need to make with such traumatic history.”⁴ Literature is not only a powerful method of storytelling and remembering, but is also a potential device for healing from trauma, through the process of testimony.

N. K. Jemisin is a contemporary African-American science fiction/fantasy author whose work is proudly and inherently political. According to Lisa Dowdall, Jemisin “has garnered critical and popular acclaim precisely because she challenges the conventions of SF

² Luckhurst 2013, 3

³ Eyerman 2004, 76

⁴ Luckhurst 2013, 91

and fantasy in order to refocus the future.”⁵ Jemisin became the first author ever to win three consecutive Hugo Awards for Best Novel with her *Broken Earth Trilogy*, consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017). The *Broken Earth Trilogy* takes place in The Stillness, where every few hundred years, extinction-level meteorological and geological disturbances, called Fifth Seasons, take place. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* begins with one such world-ending event, and the societal structures of The Stillness, as well as its inhabitants, are thrown into turmoil. The Stillness is a society built upon oppression—the earth and all of its inhabitants are trapped in a cycle of destruction. The chaos caused by the Fifth Seasons engender periods of change, and thus provide opportunities for societal overhauls. Orogenes have evolutionarily adapted to life on The Stillness and have powers which allow them to control different forms of energy in order to manipulate geological events such as earthquakes. Orogenes have also been systematically oppressed under the governing of the Fulcrum, and are subject to prejudice and discrimination by stillheads—those without orogenic powers who perpetuate hatred and violence against orogenes. The trauma of historical oppression and violence is central to orogenes’ collective experience and memories. Ytasha L. Womack states: “Just as the right words and actions can speak the future into existence, the same can recast the past, too. This cyclical nature of time and the contemplation of it all is a favourite theme and conversation for Afrofuturists.”⁶ Jemisin brings trauma literature into conversation with the history of African-American science fiction and fantasy. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* is part of a contemporary Afrofuturist aesthetic mode which aims to encourage healing from past and present collective traumas through an envisioning of the future.

This thesis aims to investigate the presentation of generational trauma within N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*. Close analysis of the trilogy will examine the differing ways in which generational trauma is perpetuated and the consequences of this trauma on the collective experience of orogenes. I will contextualise Jemisin’s presentation of generational trauma by arguing that it has been directly informed by the trauma of the African-American experience. With the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, Jemisin combines aspects of science fiction and fantasy with trauma literature, and reimagines them through an Afrofuturist mode. The emphasis placed upon coexistence and collective emancipation from trauma is significant, and Jemisin employs Afrofuturist themes of magic and technology to explore the future.

⁵ Dowdall 2020, 150

⁶ Womack 2013, 153

The trajectory of African-American Science Fiction

Trauma can be transferred between generations, and this happens both in the societal and the domestic spheres. This phenomenon is commonly seen in particular groups of people, and according to Roger Luckhurst, “whether they are political activists, survivor groups, or ethnic, regional or national formations unite around the re-experiencing of the woundedness. Histories of gender, sexual or racial violence have indubitable reasons for finding explanatory power in ideas of trauma, yet traumatic identity is now also commonly argued to be at the root of many national collective memories.”⁷ The notion of re-examination of the wound is particularly interesting, as this is not itself a useful act. Collective memory is key to feeling kinship, and without it, certain groups may struggle to retain the same feeling of shared identity. Problems arise, however, when this collective memory stems from, and is steeped in, trauma. Science fiction and fantasy are genres commonly employed by writers who want to examine social injustices, and such works often explore the experiences of oppressed groups, either “real” and projected into the imagined world, or of an oppressed alien group. Such texts often explore trauma but are ultimately limited in their message. Gerry Canavan and Eric Carl Link write that “[i]n the hands of such thinkers [as Fredric Jameson], SF is essentially about utopian speculation, either through the positive construction of utopian blueprints or, more commonly in the American tradition, the negative depiction of the wretched dystopias that will arise ‘if this goes on.’”⁸ The use of utopia and dystopia in science fiction can provide means for examining moral questions and socio-political issues such as race, gender and identity, and it is suggested that these can have real-world applications. Darko Suvin states that “utopias exist as a gamut of Possible Worlds in the imagination of readers, not as a pseudo-object on the page.”⁹ This suggests that utopia, as a literary form and as a mode of thought, has the potential to transcend literature and have “real” consequences. This is similar to the goal of Afrofuturism, as Ytasha L. Womack claims that “just as the actions in the present dictate the future, imagining the future can change the present.”¹⁰ One of the objectives of Afrofuturism is healing the past and present by conceiving a liberated future.

⁷ Luckhurst 2013, 1-2

⁸ Canavan and Link 2015, 9

⁹ Suvin 1990, 76

¹⁰ Womack 2013, 44

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* describes The Stillness, a planet which suffers frequent extinction-level climate catastrophes. Some of The Stillness' inhabitants have developed physical adaptations in order to survive. Orogenes are a people who possess the power to “manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events.”¹¹ Although it is a natural biological evolutionary trait, orogeny as a practice is illegal unless the orogene has had training from the Fulcrum and is supervised by a Guardian. Guardians possess natural orogenic powers, which are then enhanced with the injection of a corestone as a child. This allows the Guardian to work with the magic of the earth and easily control and kill orogenes. This system creates prejudice and discrimination against orogenes, and a narrative of fear and oppression is perpetuated by stillheads (those without orogenic abilities). Orogenes have very limited agency in The Stillness, and the options for them are extremely narrow. They have experienced years of trauma at the hands of the Fulcrum, who train children into Imperial Orogenes. Imperial Orogenes must undergo intensive training which coerces the orogene into using their powers only in specific ways and only for specific tasks. This training is military-style, and works to suppress the personality and functionality of the orogene, essentially moulding them into weapons to be utilised and abused by the Fulcrum. If the orogene is taken to be Fulcrum-trained but shows little potential, they will be removed and taken to maintain nodes, which are places of high seismic activity that require constant surveillance. The most common fate of orogene children, though, is that they are killed at a young age by either their family or community when their orogenic abilities are discovered.

Afrofuturism is defined by Ytasha L. Womack as “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation.”¹² It is both an aesthetic form and a critical approach which brings imagery of the future and liberation to the fore. The term was coined by Mark Dery in his 1993 essay “Black to the Future”, where he imagines Afrofuturism as a possible response to his question: “Can a community whose past has been deliberately rubbed out, and whose energies have subsequently been consumed by the search for legible traces of its history, imagine possible futures?”¹³ Although the term was coined in 1993, early iterations of Afrofuturism have roots tracing back to literature as early as that of W. E. B. Du Bois, writing in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. As Lisa Yaszek suggests: “For nearly two hundred years African Americans have used [Afrofuturism] to dramatize the

¹¹ Jemisin 2015, 462

¹² Womack 2013, 9

¹³ Dery 1994, 180

issues most important to people of color living in a technocultural world, and to create a sense of wonder about the futures that might emerge from scientific and social change.”¹⁴ This highlights the significance of looking forward into the future for Afrofuturist intellectuals and artists, in order to move beyond the oppressive discourse of the past.

Many science fiction and fantasy texts of the past attempted to achieve healing through a reexamination and retelling of the past. This is important, as in order to move forward from past traumas we must learn from past errors. However, reexamining trauma does not in itself provide freedom. Octavia E. Butler’s seminal novel *Kindred* (1979) utilises time-travel in order to explore the complex and traumatic history of American slavery. Generational trauma is made explicit when the African-American protagonist Dana is pulled back in time, from her 1970s life to a plantation owned by her white ancestor in 1800s Maryland. The novel investigates the different ways in which the trauma of slavery permeates through American society through the study of one family. *Kindred* exemplifies how literary studies of trauma are suited to the science fiction and fantasy genres, as the novum and the subject matter are intertwined. The novum is defined by Darko Suvin as “a totalizing phenomenon or relationship deviating from the author’s and implied reader’s norm of reality.”¹⁵ The novum, here, is the possibility of time travel. However, whilst in many science fiction and fantasy novels the novum of time travel is something exciting and used to propel the narrative forward, in *Kindred* the time travel is non-consensual and works only to plunge Dana back into historical trauma. The journeys into the past are inescapable and unpredictable. Butler makes it clear how close the pain felt by African-American descendants of enslaved people is to the pain felt by the ancestors themselves. When in the past, Dana is subject to whippings and other physical trauma associated with slavery, and yet even in her contemporary 1970s “present” she experiences the effects of that trauma. Roger Luckhurst states: “Trauma is a piercing or breach of a border that puts inside and outside into a strange communication. Trauma violently opens passageways between systems that were once discrete, making unforeseen connections that distress or confound.”¹⁶ In this way, the trauma present in *Kindred* works in the same way as the novum. The form and content work together to convey the cyclical and disruptive nature of trauma. In a novel such as *Kindred*, though, there is no positive future imagined, only the continuation of traumatic cycles.

¹⁴ Yaszek 2015, 58

¹⁵ Suvin 1979, 80

¹⁶ Luckhurst 2013, 3

Connections have long been made between the historical treatment of black people and the horrors of science fiction. Studies in eugenics and scientific experiments conducted upon enslaved black people mirror torturous experiments and techniques utilised upon the alien Other in many science fiction narratives. However, artists are increasingly conflating the two and making literal the horror of the historical treatment of black people. For example, Jordan Peele's Academy Award-winning political horror film *Get Out* (2017) plays on the horror of racism in America in its varying forms. The African-American protagonist, Chris, travels with his white girlfriend Rose to meet her family for the first time. Between navigating micro-aggressions and thinly veiled racist comments, Chris is subject to a session with Rose's hypnotherapist mother, where he falls into the Sunken Place. Peele has commented that the Sunken Place represents the vulnerability and powerlessness of African-American men within the American industrial prison complex: "He saw the metaphor of black bodies being abducted and thrown into holes and he said he started crying. He wasn't used to being that person who looked at these issues systemically."¹⁷ Jordan Peele created the Sunken Place as a visible representation of the double-consciousness he was experiencing through the creation of his art. As the film develops, Chris slowly realises that Rose's family have been killing black people: Rose ensnares a victim into a relationship, and eventually brings them to her house where her neurosurgeon father performs experimental brain transplants. The family and their wealthy white friends fetishise and covet black bodies, and aim to have their brains transplanted into the bodies of the black victims when their own have aged, and in doing so artificially lengthen their lifespan and inhabit a body which they view, through the white western gaze, as physically desirable. The black victim, still partly alive in the body, is left in a liminal state of existence. Trapped in the Sunken Place, their existence is now solely negated by the white inhabitant of their body. Horror narratives such as *Get Out* bring questions of double-consciousness to a contemporary audience, told in innovative and contemporary ways, and push the boundaries of storytelling. Chris ultimately escapes surgery at the hands of Rose's father and thus permanent banishment to the Sunken Place, and by killing Rose's family he finds solace in his ability to end this family's reign of terror and ensure that there can be no further victims.

Although much science fiction and fantasy centre upon displaced real-world issues, a concern is whether the handling of the subject will heal or harm any real-world communities. Ytasha L. Womack, discussing the subject matter of *Kindred*, states that much of the horror

¹⁷ Yuan and Harris 2018

of the text is that “[s]lavery is neither the utopian future nor an ancient far-removed past.”¹⁸ There have been questions of *Kindred*'s genre, with some arguing it to be a historical drama text, though Womack makes a convincing argument for its place in the world of science fiction through the horrors of the text: “Forget the scariness of a dystopian future; the transatlantic slave trade is a reminder of where collective memories don’t want to go, even if the trip is in their imagination.”¹⁹ Butler, though, brings the transatlantic slave trade back into the forefront of collective memory. This is where, according to Lisa Yaszek, “early Afrofuturism departed from specialist SF in its pessimism about the ability of black genius to secure any future for black people whatsoever.”²⁰ Early African-American science fiction, such as *Kindred*, was arguably too pessimistic, and thus struggled to imagine a future free of oppression. Afrofuturism stems from the imagination, and thus is endlessly more opportunistic.

According to Suvin, the novum has potential to “allow for the readers’s freedom — in literary terms, that the story will not be a project but a parable.”²¹ This further suggests the possibility to utilise a science fiction or fantasy text as a vehicle in order to develop a moral lesson or plan for some real-world developments. Writing within an Afrofuturist mode also provides this potential. For example, Afrofuturist artist, lawyer and activist Rasheedah Phillips utilised frameworks of science fiction and fantasy in a work-reentry program for recently released inmates. She “talked about breaking cycles and looking to the past and present to identify patterns that no longer worked in [the participant’s] life.”²² In order to assess these patterns, Phillips adopted Afrofuturist discourse rooted in science fiction and fantasy: “She used the metaphor of a time machine and asked what [the participants] would change in their life. ‘They really connected with that aspect,’ she says. ‘They really liked discussing their past and how to change the patterns and cycles and work to build a future.’”²³ This example demonstrates how Afrofuturism, incorporated with the discourse of science fiction and fantasy can unlock imaginations and have real consequences. This need not be the Afrofuturist artist’s intention, though, and if texts are read simply with some expectation of a moral lesson or application, then this could be limiting. Ytasha L. Womack discusses this

¹⁸ Womack 2013, 157

¹⁹ Womack 2013, 156

²⁰ Yaszek 2015, 62

²¹ Suvin 1982, 7

²² Womack 2013, 185

²³ Womack 2013, 185

with N. K. Jemisin, who “views activists as people who put their lives on the line; to know that her work could contribute to that is a larger-than-life responsibility almost too awesome to comprehend.”²⁴ This is an issue particularly prevalent in twenty-first century literary society, where the separation between art and artist is ever-dwindling and many artists are placed upon a pedestal by readers anticipating a moral judgement.

Trauma in the *Broken Earth Trilogy*

Jeffrey Alexander states that for a collective, “[t]rauma is not the result of a group experiencing pain. It is the result of this acute discomfort entering into the core of the collectivity’s sense of its own identity.”²⁵ Whilst the actual events experienced by the group may be traumatic, the perpetual and insidious collective trauma is caused by the internalisation of this pain and the significance of this pain to the group’s identity. This allows the trauma to live on, bleeding between generations of the group and seeping deeper into the collective memory. This is particularly damaging for communities for which the trauma has happened in the past to ancestors, and yet the trauma lives on through the process of memory. Ron Eyerman writes how the trauma of slavery affects modern-day African-American society. He propounds that “[t]he trauma of forced servitude and of nearly complete subordination to the will and whims of another was thus not necessarily something directly experienced by many of the subjects of this study, but came to be central to their attempts to forge a collective identity out of its remembrance.”²⁶ Remembrance complicates collective healing from trauma, as it is extremely important for communities to recall and respect the experiences of ancestors, particularly as history is where communities derive senses of identity and culture. This is problematised when the ancestral history is one of trauma and pain, as the investigation into that trauma can re-traumatise the following generations. Afrofuturism aims for the healing of the past and present whilst looking to the future. Kodwo Eshun makes it clear that the Afrofuturist mode does not simply aim to conduct revisionism: “Afrofuturism is by no means naively celebratory”, but rather “by creating temporal complications and anachronistic episodes that disturb the linear time of progress, these futurisms adjust the temporal logics that condemned black subjects to

²⁴ Womack 2013, 177

²⁵ Alexander 2004, 10

²⁶ Eyerman 2004, 60

prehistory.”²⁷ Within Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy*, the trauma experienced by orogenes is contemporary. Orogenes are being oppressed, murdered and enslaved within the time frame of the trilogy, and so the trauma is ongoing, in active and direct ways as well as passively through the sharing of collective experiences.

It is significant that orogenic power is entwined with geology. Symbolically immovable, the earth is not typically easily manipulated, even in science fiction and fantasy. Orogenes take their name from the process of orogeny, which is the continental shifting and reforming that is the primary formation method of mountains. The source of the fantastical orogenic power was inspired by one of N. K. Jemisin’s dreams:

I had a dream of a woman walking toward me in the badass power walk that you’ve seen in any blockbuster movie — these grim-faced people walking toward the camera with stuff exploding behind them. But instead of stuff exploding, it was a mountain moving along behind her. She looked at me like she was really pissed, like she was going to throw the mountain at me. [...] That was the summer when, just about every other minute, there was the unjustified killing of a black person at the hands of police. Ferguson was happening, and I was angry myself. I wanted to throw a mountain myself.²⁸

The inclusion of geology in the trilogy seems symbolic, then, and representative of the immense weight of trauma in the collective African-American experience. The desire for Jemisin to “throw” this “mountain” is a powerful act of transgression and reclamation. Through the geological connections of orogenic power, Jemisin enters into a larger eco-political conversation. Gisli Palsson and Heather Anne Swanson state that “[f]or many, geologic forms do not seem to participate in social life, by common standards: they do not seem to have interiorities, they do not strive, they do not metabolize, they do not reproduce or seem to respond.”²⁹ The geological in Jemisin’s trilogy transgresses this: Father Earth is personified and given agency, with which he controls Guardians through their corestones; orogenes tap into various energies in order to manipulate geological forms; stone-eaters are conscious mineral beings. Palsson and Swanson utilise the term *geosocial* to encompass questions of “agency, intimacy and politics” through a lens which “exceeds classic notions of the term by attending to different geologic scales—to living bodies, human and nonhuman; to solid rock; and to the planet ‘itself.’”³⁰ This definition of the geosocial refutes binary differentiations between “geo” and “social”, which is similar to how Jemisin intentionally

²⁷ Eshun 2003, 297

²⁸ Derballa 2016

²⁹ Palsson and Swanson 2016, 152

³⁰ Palsson and Swanson 2016, 151

refuses to draw binaries such as human/other and insists upon a society in which all beings are connected. In *The Stillness*, Jemisin creates a symbiotic world in which beings can be both more-than and less-than human. Bruno Latour is known for his work on actor-network theory, which focuses upon the relationships between every social and natural thing and the agency of the human and non-human. Latour states: “Far from being a Galilean body stripped of any other movements than those of billiard balls, the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged *actor*.”³¹ Jemisin has given the earth agency, and in *The Stillness*, the earth has always been an actor, despite his inhabitants being ignorant to this fact.

Latour utilises the term *geostory* to reference a non-Anthropocentric shared history between humans and earth. He clarifies that “[t]he prefix ‘geo’ in geostory does not stand for the return to nature, but for the return of object and subject back to the *ground*.”³² By marking this definition, Latour rejects revisionist notions, suggesting the significance of geostory as something preexisting. This implies a disruption in time, in order to allow for the possibility of geostory. This is similar to the ways in which Kodwo Eshun describes the goals of Afrofuturism. Eshun describes Afrofuturism as being “concerned with the possibilities for intervention within the dimension of the predictive, the projected, the proleptic, the envisioned, the virtual, the anticipatory and the future conditional.”³³ Latour and Eshun both rely upon an imagined future presence within their writing, in order to both solidify their argument and to imagine a being uncontaminated by Anthropocentrism and Western colonial history, respectively. Latour speaks of the “Earthbound”, whom he imagines “[l]iving with a world that has not been previously deanimated”, and thus will be free to make statements which “will *draw* what they are *bound* to, in ways that will no longer be incompatible with the usual complications of politics.”³⁴ In a preface to his text, Eshun asks his reader to “[i]magine a team of African archaeologists from the future—some silicon, some carbon, some wet, some dry—excavating a site, a museum from their past: a museum whose ruined documents and leaking discs are identifiable as belonging to our present, the early twenty-first century. [...] Imagine them reconstructing the conceptual framework of our cultural moment from those fragments.”³⁵ He encourages the text to speak to the future in a re-framing

³¹ Latour 2014, 3

³² Latour 2014, 16

³³ Eshun 2003, 293

³⁴ Latour 2014, 16

³⁵ Eshun 2003, 287

of the past. Both Latour and Eshun, by utilising these narratological devices, ground their arguments in an imagined “reality”.

The binding force in Jemisin’s trilogy is magic, which connects the geosocial beings and is omnipresent. Magic is “[v]isible” to some orogenes as a “web of silver threads interlacing the land, permeating rock and even the magma just underneath, strung like jewels between forests and fossilized corals and pools of oil. Carried through the air on the webs of leaping spiderlings.”³⁶ With her use of magic, Jemisin brings into conversation ideas of new materialism. New materialism is a contemporary literary theory which shifts focus away from the human and offers a more holistic critical lens to traditionally Anthropocentric areas of study. The framework of new materialism speaks to the post-human and opens a new enquiry into the agency and social potential of matter. Jemisin’s magic is a force which lives in all things, including the geological. The ability of orogenes to access the power of the geological suggests an affinity with nature. Orogenes begin turning to stone if they are overexerted or get too lost in their orogenic powers and geological connections. Although this initially seems life-threatening, it later appears to be a form of freedom from human bondage. Through this process, “Jemisin ultimately suggests that new and emancipatory identities are to be found in the mutual exchanges between flesh and stone.”³⁷

All beings in *The Stillness* are categorised into use-castes, with responsibilities including breeding, innovation and manual labour. Orogenes are exempt from categorisation into a use-caste, instead existing in a sub-human category of their own. Although every being must be useful in order to survive in *The Stillness*, use-castes are seen as vocations and orogenes are merely dehumanised and treated as animals or weapons. In contemporary America, the expectations placed upon black people to be “useful” are unjustly great: as African-American majority communities are frequently underfunded, unemployment and crime rates tend to be higher. This is seen societally as a failure on the part of the African-American community, rather than a failure on the system that should protect and serve all.

Essun’s son Uche is one of the driving forces of the trilogy. *The Fifth Season* opens with Essun’s discovery of his death, and her need to find her daughter—kidnapped by her father Jija—is intensified by her need to avenge her son. Uche serves as the archetypal martyred orogene child. As children, orogenes often cannot control their powers, and if they reveal their powers, they are frequently killed by family or the community in which they live.

³⁶ Jemisin 2016, 361

³⁷ Dowdall 2020, 164

If they are not killed, they are taken by Guardians, and either used to maintain nodes, or to be trained at the Fulcrum as an Imperial Orogene. To survive into adulthood as an orogene, though, is seen as something of a privilege, and Uche's fate is the most common one. It is possible that Uche's name has Nigerian origins: in Igbo, the name Uche contains meanings such as "will", "wish", or "intention", commonly linked to God. Uche's death seems inevitable and fatalistic. As he was not old enough to train to control his orogenic power, Essun could not protect Uche.

During one of Nassun's first interactions with a trainee orogene at the Antarctic Fulcrum, she uncovers new truths of her mother's Fulcrum training. This passage highlights the generational trauma faced by orogenes.

"The Guardians used to bring kids here before the Season started. That's how I got here."

Technically that's how Nassun got here, too. "The Guardians brought me," she echoes. She is hollow inside.

"Me, too." The girl sobers, then looks away. "Did they break your hand yet?"

Nassun's breath stops in her throat.

At her silence, the girl's expression turns bitter. "Yeah. They do it to every grit at some point. Hand bones or fingers." She shakes her head, then takes a quick, gulping breath. "We're not supposed to talk about it. But it's not you, whatever they say. It's not your fault." Another quick breath. "I'll see you around. I'm Ajae. I don't have an orogene name yet. What's your name?"

Nassun can't think. The sound of Schaffa's fist crushing bone echoes in her head. "Nassun."

"Nice to meet you, Nassun." Ajae nods politely, then moves on, walking down the steps toward a terrace. She hums, swinging her bucket. Nassun stares after her, trying to understand.

Orogene name?

Trying not to understand.

Did they break your hand yet?

This place. This... Fulcrum. Is why her mother broke her hand.

Nassun's hand twitches in phantom pain. She sees again the rock in her mother's hand, rising. Holding a moment. Falling.

Are you sure you can control yourself?

The Fulcrum is why her mother never loved her.

Is why her father does not love her anymore. Is why her brother is dead.³⁸

Essun, out of love for Nassun, began to train her how to control and hide her orogeny. She aimed to protect Nassun from the threat posed to her by the stillhead community in which they lived, including her father Jija — an anxiety tragically validated when Jija beat their son Uche to death upon the discovery of his orogeny. Conversations of this nature between

³⁸ Jemisin 2016, 268

parents and children in vulnerable or oppressed groups are common, and despite the parent acting to save their child, it is still harmful to the child as they understand the reality of the threat. For example, black parents describe “The Talk”, in which they “have to prepare their sons for police encounters — out of fear, mainly, that such interactions can go horribly wrong, ending with their son dead.”³⁹ Due to institutionalised racism and racial biases, black men and children are disproportionately murdered at the hands of the police, particularly in the United States. As Lopez states, “[s]tudy after study show black men are frequently perceived as larger, scarier, and more prone to criminality than people of other races. For black parents, that means a typical police stop turning into a violent encounter is a very real, terrifying possibility.”⁴⁰ Whilst “The Talk” aims to teach black children how to carefully navigate and hopefully avoid these life-threatening situations, it alerts the children to the threat which exists irrespective of their behaviour. It also enforces understanding that the treatment of these black people at the hands of the police is due to their skin colour and racial background. “The Talk” protects children, yet it also traumatises them. Jemisin draws parallels with contemporary African-American society, and Essun’s training functions in the same way as “The Talk”. The training ultimately does provide Nassun with the tools required to protect herself, but in order to understand the threat she must view herself through the eyes of her oppressor, and she is traumatised in the process.

Although Essun was traumatised by the Fulcrum and the experiences she had as a trainee, she repeats the trauma of her Imperial training upon her daughter. Essun’s love forces her to find a way in which to protect Nassun, as she could not protect Corundum. Their “training” follows similar patterns to that of the Imperial training conducted by Guardians at the Fulcrum, even including the breaking of the orogene child’s hand. Essun acted out of necessity as the time they had for “training” was scarce, and by breaking Nassun’s hand she forced a great test on her child, at the risk of their deaths if Nassun could not control her fear, pain and anger. This was ultimately an act of love, as Essun wished for her child to live. However, as demonstrated in the conversation with Ajae, Nassun interpreted her mother’s acts as those borne of hatred. She understood the threat to her life if she did not learn to properly control her orogeny, but the source of the threat was not differentiated. Nassun learns that the source of the trauma is her identity as an orogene, and that the threat posed to her exists in both domestic and public spheres. She understands that her orogeny—an

³⁹ Lopez 2016

⁴⁰ Lopez 2016

inherent part of her physical being—is the largest threat perceived by the (stillhead-centred) society. Because society views her as a threat, she learns to view herself as a threat in order to attempt to avoid persecution by society. It is this internalisation that works insidiously alongside the oppressive governing structures to further perpetuate the traumatic collective experience. The intentions of Essun did not affect the outcome of her actions: she reproduced her traumatic experiences as an orogene child with her own child. This exemplifies how trauma and oppression can become internalised. Although Essun is a victim of the system with opposing intentions to those of the Fulcrum, she ultimately acts as an agent perpetuating the same oppressive traumatic cycle.

Nassun closes her eyes. Yes. It's all so understandable, really, when she thinks about it. The way of the world isn't the strong devouring the weak, but the weak deceiving and poisoning and whispering in the ears of the strong until they become weak, too. Then it's all broken hands and silver threads woven like ropes, and mothers who move the earth to destroy their enemies but cannot save one little boy.

(Girl.)

There has never been anyone to save Nassun. Her mother warned her there never would be. If Nassun ever wants to be free of fear, she has no choice but to forge that freedom for herself.⁴¹

This passage shows Nassun examining the role of orogenes in society, and the power that social narrative has in perpetuating oppression. She understands for the first time that she is one of the “strong” orogenes and not the “weak” stillheads, reversing the socially accepted “truth”. She classifies her mother as one of those weakened by the poisonous Fulcrum, to the point where she was unable to save Uche. Here, Nassun places the value of her life as directly at odds with that of her brother. This is ultimately her motivation for “forging” a new freedom. If Uche is the archetype of the murdered orogene child, by distancing herself from him, Nassun rejects that category and looks towards an alternate future.

Essun had a child with Alabaster when she was still Syenite. This child was conceived during their Imperial duties, and although they ran and went into hiding, Syenite's Guardian Schaffa ultimately found them. Forced breeding is one of the dehumanising expectations of Imperial Orogenes. They lack agency over their rights to conceive, in the same way that they lack agency over their orogenic powers when utilised at the behest of the Fulcrum. Lisa Dowdall explains: “When the Fulcrum's Guardians find Essun, rather than allowing the child to be taken away and forced into the role of a node maintainer, she makes the same choice

⁴¹ Jemisin 2016, 385

that many enslaved black women have made throughout history, deciding to kill her own child rather than sending him into a lifetime of servitude.”⁴² Tragically, enslaved women had no agency over their reproductive rights, and upon rare occasion, some enslaved women turned to “acts of desperation” such as “self-imposed abortions and reluctant acts of infanticide.”⁴³ The alternative to this was “to bring children into a world of interminable forced labor, where chains and floggings and sexual abuse for women were the everyday conditions of life.”⁴⁴ Whilst many stories of rebellious and revolutionary enslaved men have lived on, Angela Davis makes it clear that the role of women in slave resistance was significant. She states: “women resisted and advocated challenges to slavery at every turn,” although this was “often more subtle than revolts, escapes, and sabotage” more commonly documented as being carried out by men.⁴⁵ Few stories of these “acts of desperation” are known today, though the story of Margaret Garner, an enslaved woman who escaped slavery, only to be caught by slave-catchers and government officials, lives on. Rather than see her children returned to a life of horror and enslavement, she killed one of her children, and attempted to kill the others. Garner’s story inspired Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987) and, in part, the character of Essun. In an interview with Bryan Derballa for *Wired*, N. K. Jemisin speaks of Margaret Garner:

The story got popularized by abolitionists because, of course, the horror of slavery is implicit. It resonates with anybody who reads it — especially someone like me, who’s descended from slaves. I’m trying to depict a story about people who have reasons to destroy the world, people who view the state of existence they’ve been forced to live in as literally worse than death. And a lot of what I was feeling about being an African American living in this country — that has over the centuries done so wrong by us, and continues to do so — came through.⁴⁶

Garner’s story is embedded in African-American collective memory and has a significant role in trauma literature. As Roger Luckhurst documents the genesis of trauma literature, he states that “[f]or such a recent literature, there is already an emergent international canon of writers and works, and even an implicit aesthetic for the trauma novel. This cluster of trauma fictions opens, I would argue, with Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), a novel which has exerted a

⁴² Dowdall 2020, 155-156

⁴³ Davis 1981, 205

⁴⁴ Davis 1981, 204

⁴⁵ Davis 1981, 21-22

⁴⁶ Derballa 2016

remarkably wide cultural influence.”⁴⁷ *Beloved* follows a formerly enslaved woman, Sethe, and her family, trying to find peace and freedom from what Sethe believes to be the ghost of her eldest child. Years prior to the events of the novel, Sethe had escaped from slavery, and was living at a new address. When officers arrive to return Sethe and her children to their enslaved life, Sethe attempts to kill them to save them from the binds of slavery. She has time only to kill one child, her eldest, whose tombstone would read only “BELOVED.” The unique grief and trauma of this act clearly parallels that experienced by Margaret Garner, and any iteration of this story reproduces the trauma first felt long ago. By incorporating this event into her trilogy, Jemisin enters into a conversation with Toni Morrison and other trauma fictions, whilst keeping conversations of trauma centred upon the grief of the African-American woman.

You think of the feeling that was in your heart as you pressed a hand over Corundum’s nose and mouth. Not the thought. The thought was simple and predictable: *Better to die than live a slave*. But what you *felt* in that moment was a kind of cold, monstrous love. A determination to make sure your son’s life remained the beautiful, wholesome thing that it had been up to that day, even if it meant you had to end his life early.⁴⁸

This scene marks a pivotal moment in Essun’s life. The choice she makes—to kill her own child in order to “save” him from a life of tortured slavery—is one which many enslaved women have made throughout history. Essun (at the time known by her orogene name Syenite) did not want to conceive, despite her and Alabaster being paired together with the task of producing a child. As with many high-ranking Imperial Orogenes, Syenite and Alabaster are required to reproduce and bear children with high levels of orogeny. These children are then frequently abused, put in place as node-maintainers. On their journey, Alabaster takes Syenite to see a node. Syenite expects to see a working station of orogenes actively working towards protecting the node, and surrounding area, from seismic activity. Instead, Alabaster shows her the truth: this node maintainer is a child chained to a wire chair, “immobile, unwilling, indefinite.”⁴⁹ Node maintainers are most often young orogene children who are trapped, kept heavily sedated, reduced “to nothing but that instinct, nothing but the ability to quell shakes...”⁵⁰ Whilst it is common knowledge that nodes must be maintained, the enslavement of orogene children to do so is kept hidden by the Fulcrum. Syenite takes a

⁴⁷ Luckhurst 2013, 87

⁴⁸ Jemisin 2016, 105

⁴⁹ Jemisin 2015, 140

⁵⁰ Jemisin 2015, 141

closer look at the child, “whose skin is almost as dark as Alabaster’s, and whose features might be a perfect match for his if they weren’t so skeletal.”⁵¹ When Alabaster reveals that he has been paired with many other orogenes in order to reproduce, and estimates that he has fathered a dozen children—the majority of which are presumably node maintainers—Syenite understands that any child she would bear whilst she was serving the Fulcrum would suffer the same fate. She falls pregnant in Meov, where the two of them go into hiding after renouncing the Fulcrum, and not even here are they safe from the Guardians of the Fulcrum. When Schaffa eventually finds them, Syenite sees only one option for protecting her child: “She will keep him safe. She will not let them take him, enslave him, turn his body into a tool and his mind into a weapon and his life into a travesty of freedom.”⁵² By killing her child herself, she ensures that he escapes the fate of a node maintainer at the Fulcrum. The only outcome for Corundum is death, whether whilst enslaved by the Fulcrum or at the hands of his mother. By killing him herself, Syenite denies the Fulcrum the opportunity to abuse Corundum. However, her actions, though borne of love, work to further perpetuate the traumatic oppression of orogenes. The “cold, monstrous love” felt by Syenite is emblematic of the trauma bonds that permeate orogene relationships.⁵³

Essun, as Damaya the child, was manipulated by Schaffa. Damaya is alone and vulnerable after her family discovers she is an orogene and summon a Guardian to have her taken away. Schaffa, her assigned Guardian, replaces her family and professes his love to her. Damaya has no choice but to trust the only adult now responsible for her protection. Their relationship exemplifies a manipulative trauma bond, as the relationship between orogene and Guardian is highly complex. An orogene child, once removed from their home, is assigned a Guardian, whose responsibility is to “track, protect, protect against, and guide” the child throughout Imperial training at the Fulcrum.⁵⁴ The training for Imperial Orogenes moulds them into tools to be utilised and misused by the Fulcrum. This training suppresses their natural ability, coercing the orogene into using their power only in a way which is deemed acceptable by the Fulcrum. They utilise techniques such as breaking orogene children’s bones in order to test their control. During Schaffa and Damaya’s journey to the Fulcrum, Schaffa breaks Damaya’s hand. This is a traumatic event which Damaya, later in life as Essun, recreates with her own daughter Nassun. The action is seen as something necessary in order

⁵¹ Jemisin 2015, 140

⁵² Jemisin 2015, 441

⁵³ Jemisin 2016, 105

⁵⁴ Jemisin 2015, 403

to protect Damaya, and it is a significant moment in the text as the formation of Essun's character. The manipulation begins immediately following the event, with Schaffa professing his love:

Schaffa keeps stroking her broken hand. "I love you," he says. She flinches, and he soothes her with a soft shush in her ear, while his thumb keeps stroking the hand he's broken. "Never doubt that I do, little one. Poor creature locked in a barn, so afraid of herself that she hardly dares speak. And yet there is the fire of wit in you along with the fire of the earth, and I cannot help but admire both, however evil the latter might be." He shakes his head and sighs. "I hate doing this to you. I hate that it's necessary. But please understand: I have hurt you so that you will hurt no one else."

Her hand *hurts*. Her heart pounds and the pain throbs with it, BURN burn, BURN burn, BURN burn. It would feel so good to cool that pain, whispers the stone beneath her. That would mean killing Schaffa, however—the last person in the world who loves her.⁵⁵

It is the promise of love which dissuades Damaya from acting on her natural instincts and defence mechanisms. Damaya here learns to associate the pain in her hand with the promise of love from Schaffa. In turn, she internalises his message that she must be hurt in order to not hurt others. It is this troubled understanding of love which Essun then repeats with Nassun. Essun is limited in her choice of actions when training Nassun how to hide and control her orogeny, so acts based on her own experience. She wants to protect her daughter because she loves her, so she repeats the actions of a man who broke her hand, because the reasons he gave for her pain were love and protection.

When Essun kills Corundum in order to protect him from Schaffa and a life as an enslaved node maintainer, Schaffa is a witness. The complexity and toxicity of the relationship is encapsulated in Schaffa's thoughts: "(Schaffa saw her hand on the child's face, covering mouth and nose, pressing. Incomprehensible. Did she not know that Schaffa would love her son as he loved her? He would lay the boy down gently, so gently, in the wire chair.)"⁵⁶ This demonstrates how blurred the lines can become between love and trauma, and how any supposed intention is irrelevant.

By the time Nassun meets Schaffa, he has partially lost his memory, though some of his foundational motivations and beliefs remain. He fulfils his Guardian role, understanding that Nassun must be protected and protected against. Nassun believes that her parents do not love her, and as such she holds on to the image of Schaffa as a replacement parent, and

⁵⁵ Jemisin 2015, 99-100

⁵⁶ Jemisin 2016, 38-39

someone to love and be loved by. This is once again a mirrored experience to that of Essun. Initially, Schaffa does not know that Nassun is Essun's daughter, and Nassun tells him of her training with her mother. She tells him of her broken hand, repeating the traumatic symbol of her mother's training. Schaffa's reaction pleases Nassun:

Schaffa is very quiet. He knows what she is now, though: a child so willful that her own mother broke her hand to make her mind. A girl whose mother never loved her, only refined her, and whose father will only love her again if she can do the impossible and become something she is not.

“That was wrong,” Schaffa says. His voice is so soft she can barely hear it. She turns to look at him in surprise. He is staring at the ground, and there is a strange look on his face. Not the usual wandering, confused look that he gets sometimes. This is something he actually remembers, and his expression is... guilty? Rueful. Sad. “It's wrong to hurt someone you love, Nassun.”⁵⁷

The irony in this passage speaks to the insidious nature of cyclical trauma. Schaffa broke Essun's hand (as Damaya), causing a point of trauma in Essun's life that she subsequently re-enacts with her daughter. Both acts were associated with love in one form or another, as Schaffa immediately justified his actions to Damaya with a profession of love, and Essun wanted to save Nassun from the fate of her first child Corundum. The irony of Schaffa denouncing this act, when committed by Essun, undermines the truths which relationships are built upon. Nassun infers that her story triggers a memory in Schaffa, though she does not make the connection between his memory and her mother. Schaffa, though, remains silent and the tragic nature of the relationship between Guardian and orogene is undercut by this ironic moment.

The killing of orogene children is endemic in *The Stillness*. The prejudice and discrimination against orogenes is so deeply entrenched in society that every non-orogene is a potential threat. Orogenes are discriminated against at every systemic level of society. At the highest societal level, the Fulcrum perpetuate the oppression against orogenes with biased legal systems. As stated in an appendix, “Fulcrum-trained orogenes (or ‘Imperial Orogenes’) are legally permitted to practice the otherwise-illegal craft of orogeny, under strict organizational rules and with the close supervision of the Guardian order.”⁵⁸ This ruling means that an orogene's very existence is against the law unless negated and validated by a Guardian. Guardians have a physical adaptation which allows them to track their assigned orogene, and to be able to kill the orogene quickly and easily if they deem it necessary. There

⁵⁷ Jemisin 2016, 154

⁵⁸ Jemisin 2015, 460

is an extremely high value placed on the opinions and actions of Guardians, as they have the (legal and physical) control over an orogene's life. All of this is dehumanising and solidifies orogenes' place in society as less-than human. The orogene children who are raised as Fulcrum-trainees thus understand that their Guardian has an ultimate and unquestionable power over them. Comms, or communities, also have the agency to oppress orogenes. Based upon prejudice, comms most often deny orogenes entry into their fold. If rejected, the orogene will be forced to live travelling, without the protection of a community. This forces orogenes to hide their true identity and attempt to pass as a stillhead, as Essun does in Tirimo. The threat also comes at an interpersonal and familial level, as demonstrated by Essun's marriage to Jija, an orogene-fearing stillhead who is ignorant to his wife's powers. The typical expectation of the role of the parent is protection and unconditional love, but Jija demonstrates that orogenes cannot be safe even in the home. Jija kills one of his children and kidnaps the other upon the discovery of their orogeny. The threat to orogenes cannot be eliminated or avoided, as it has permeated deeply into every level of society.

There is an incident at Castrima, where Essun is living with Ykka and her integrated comm of mixed orogenes and stillheads. A stillhead woman attacks an orogene child, punching her to the ground. This triggers an emotional response in Essun, who remembers her son's death. The boundaries between current reality and memory blur, and the boundary between individuals is hard to discern, emphasising the universality of the violence against orogene children at the hands of stillheads. As Essun witnesses the attack, the woman's fist becomes symbolic of any stillhead fist being raised against an orogene child:

a fist that
you've seen the imprint of Jija's fist, a bruise with four parallel marks, on Uche's belly and face
 a fist that
 that
 that
 no⁵⁹

Essun's emotional distress is displayed through the fragmentation of this passage. Within trauma literature, it is common for authors to utilise formal techniques to convey a sense of traumatic confusion. Roger Luckhurst describes Toni Morrison's *Beloved* as a formative text in trauma literature. *Beloved* established a traumatic literary style as means of conveying the traumatic content: "The novel proceeds by this disfiguration of narrative coherence,

⁵⁹ Jemisin 2016, 328

compelling the reader to attempt to configure a meaningful sequence, which always comes after the fact and always feels anxiously provisional, open to further revision.”⁶⁰ It is this disfiguration of narrative coherence which Jemisin adopts in specific passages which speak to orogene trauma. Traumatic narrative devices share similarities with those associated with literary modernism. Kodwo Eshun writes that “Toni Morrison argued that the African subjects that experienced capture, theft, abduction, mutilation, and slavery were the first moderns. They underwent real conditions of existential homelessness, alienation, dislocation, and dehumanization that philosophers like Nietzsche would later define as quintessentially modern.”⁶¹ As an elemental trauma fiction text, *Beloved* combines these experiences of enslaved Africans with narrative devices and themes which echo modernist literature: disorder and incoherence, the instability of the self, the uncertainty of truth, and questions of alienation and loss. These themes become fundamental to African-American trauma fiction.

Essun, upon witnessing the attack on the orogene child, is sent into a spiral of violent action.

NOT ONE MORE RUSTING CHILD. For how many centuries has the world killed roggia children so that everyone else’s children can sleep easy? Everyone is Jija, the whole damned world is Schaffa, Castrima is Tirimo is the Fulcrum NOT ONE MORE and you turn with the obelisk torrenting its power through you to begin killing everyone within and beyond your sight.

Something jars your connection to the obelisk. Suddenly you have to fight for power that it so readily gave you before. You bare your teeth without thinking, growl without hearing yourself, clench your fists and shout in your mind NO I WON’T LET HIM DO IT AGAIN and you are seeing Schaffa, thinking of Jija.⁶²

The confusion in this passage is demonstrative of the fragmented ways in which trauma is experienced. Essun’s current situation is interrupted by her memories of her child and the perpetrator of the violence transforms and mutates between the woman attacking the orogene child in front of her, and Jija and Schaffa. The inescapable and repetitive nature of violence against orogene children is emphasised once again: Castrima, the physical setting of this scene, shifts into Tirimo and the Fulcrum as Essun’s memories of violence become incoherent and bleed into one. Essun’s automatic response to these memories is violence, again perpetuating the traumatic cycle.

⁶⁰ Luckhurst 2013, 92

⁶¹ Eshun 2003, 288

⁶² Jemisin 2016, 329

Roger Luckhurst writes that “[n]o narrative of trauma can be told in a linear way: it has a time signature that must fracture conventional causality.”⁶³ The multiple voices of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* emphasise the nature of the trauma. *The Fifth Season* is told predominantly through three distinct voices of what appear to be three separate characters: there is Damaya, Syenite, and Essun—whose story is told by Hoa in the second person. Essun’s second person narrative creates the feeling of dissociation. Essun’s story begins with her discovery of her son’s murdered body, so the second person voice seems to be reactionary to the immediate trauma she has experienced. The three voices are interwoven and the narrative jumps between different periods of time. This gives a sense of repetition, confusion and immediacy, mirroring the incoherence of cycles of trauma. Towards the end, it becomes apparent that Damaya, Syenite and Essun are one person, though the three distinct sections of her life are marked by her differing names. This also links back to the experience of trauma and the act of attempting to work through trauma in some way by re-living, re-telling and re-understanding the trauma. This can be an act of control, and is echoed in acts of reclaiming ownership of a narrative.

Fifth Seasons are often catastrophic to the point of total societal destruction, with many comms unable to survive. Despite this, oppression against orogenes is permeated deeply enough into the society of The Stillness that prejudice, discrimination and persecution against orogenes repeats after every season. This demonstrates how unacceptable the structure of The Stillness is, as it can never properly cater to the needs of orogenes, even with reform. Jemisin makes explicit the need for the collapse of such oppressive structures in the opening of *The Stone Sky*:

Say nothing to me of innocent bystanders, unearned suffering, heartless vengeance. When a comm builds atop a fault line, do you blame its walls when they inevitably crush the people inside? No; you blame whoever was stupid enough to think they could defy the laws of nature forever. Well, some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don’t lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place.⁶⁴

The effects of trauma and collective memory are such that the pain and oppression felt by orogenes is cyclical, continuing through generations. This can only end with the collapse of the structures which uphold such “nightmares”. To attempt to reform society and attempt to reconfigure the place of orogenes is fruitless, as the system has been built “doomed”. The

⁶³ Luckhurst 2013, 9

⁶⁴ Jemisin 2017, 7

system was never intended to serve orogenes, and thus it can never be adapted to do so. This echoes past African-American literature, such as that of W. E. B. Du Bois. Ytasha Womack states that “[i]n Du Bois’s analogy, race imbalances were so entrenched that only a catastrophe could bring equity.”⁶⁵ Catastrophe as an agent of social change, then, is not a new concept. Jemisin builds upon literary traditions in order to create an overwhelming sense of the inevitability of change. The catastrophic Fifth Seasons work as levellers and opportunities for societies to begin again, although this chance is wasted until Essun’s daughter Nassun takes it; she understands that a new method is required in order to create a safe future with potential for peace and justice.

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* and the African-American experience

The category and identity “African-American” is unnatural and socially constructed. Internal conflicts often arise within oppressed and subjugated groups, as the experience of the group is no longer purely their own. W. E. B. Du Bois famously coined the term double-consciousness to describe this type of identity conflict.

The Negro is a sort of seventh son, born with a veil, and gifted with second sight in this American world — a world which yields him no true self-consciousness, but only lets him see himself through the revelation of the other world. It is a peculiar sensation, this double-consciousness, this sense of always looking at one's self through the eyes of others, of measuring one's soul by the tape of a world that looks on in amused contempt and pity. One ever feels his twoness, an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.⁶⁶

The African-American experience is one of duality and dissonance. Historically, the two identities are “unreconciled”, as each seemingly negates the other. As Du Bois mentions, double-consciousness demands a dissociation from the self, and an adoption of the “American” gaze through which to view oneself. The category “American” here can be understood as the white, western male gaze, and multiple-consciousness is a fundamental concern of intersectional feminism. Women of colour have struggled to find representation and liberation in political movements, particularly in the twentieth century. Deborah K. King wrote in 1988 that “[b]lack women cannot [...] be wholeheartedly committed and fully active

⁶⁵ Womack 2013, 120

⁶⁶ Du Bois 1996, 3

in both the black liberation struggle and the women's liberation movement, because of sexual and racial politics within each respectively."⁶⁷ Furthermore, the experience of racism and sexism are often described as analogous, and this is exclusionary for the women of colour who fall within both categories. King highlights the significance of classism as underlying and adding weight to both racism and sexism in the oppression of women of colour. King's concept of "multiple jeopardy" explains that the overlap and intersection of prejudice is not experienced as a simple layering effect, wherein the oppressed finds herself "doubly" or "triply" oppressed. Instead, as the differing forces carry different weights and interact with each other in complex ways: "In other words, the equivalent formulation is racism multiplied by sexism multiplied by classism."⁶⁸ Marginalised groups are often oppressed in this compounding way.

Race, as a structural concept which encourages the separation of people into different categories, is a social construct. It is interesting to explore how one might construct race in an otherworldly science fiction or fantasy narrative. The inhabitants of *The Stillness in the Broken Earth Trilogy* vary widely in physical appearance, with characteristics connected to different locations. Physical descriptors of the different groups are included in the appendices of each book. For example, "coasters" hailing from the western continental coast "tend to be pale, straight-haired, and sometimes have eyes with epicanthic folds", and east-coasters "tend to be dark, kinky-haired, and sometimes have eyes with epicanthic folds."⁶⁹ Aside from a details such as the "icewhite eyes and ashblow hair" of the Niess people and then tuners/stone-eaters, the racial characteristics incorporated by Jemisin are those we could recognise in our world.⁷⁰ Essun, for example, is native to the midlateral areas of *The Stillness*. She is described as looking "like most women of the midlats", and "[h]er hair hangs round her face in ropy fused locks, each perhaps as big around as her pinky finger, black fading to brown at the tips. Her skin is unpleasantly ocher-brown by some standards and unpleasantly olive-pale by others."⁷¹ By Essun's physical descriptors, the reader can recognise her as having African-American traits. People sharing her physical characteristics are thought of as "mongrel Midlatters" by some.⁷² Essun's appearance here forces her to be viewed a certain way by society, and thus she incarnates Du Bois' idea of double-

⁶⁷ King 1988, 69-70

⁶⁸ King 1988, 47

⁶⁹ Jemisin 2015, 458-9

⁷⁰ Jemisin 2017, 209

⁷¹ Jemisin 2015, 10

⁷² Jemisin 2015, 10

consciousness, living through that external viewpoint. Essun is also an orogene. Orogeny has no physical manifestations or identifiers, and thus orogenes can belong to any race. Racially motivated prejudice lacks logic, as racial identity is largely socially constructed. The fact that orogenes need not share physical traits and will still be grouped together as a threatening “race” seems to be Jemisin pointing towards the constructedness of racial prejudices.

Double-consciousness can cause dissociation and internal dissonance. Toni Morrison’s novel *The Bluest Eye* (1970) explores themes of double-consciousness, familial trauma, shame and internalised racism. Pecola, an African-American girl, strives for love and beauty. She believes herself to be unlovable, and equates this to her dark skin and physical appearance. Social beauty standards are skewed to white western preferences, and as such Pecola’s appearance is not equatable to this definition. Blue eyes symbolise whiteness and thus, standardised beauty. Pecola views herself through the eyes of white western society, and longs for blue eyes of her own. The inherent racism of this society forces its way into Pecola’s own self-image and ultimately destroys her.

Trauma and double-consciousness can work similarly within the mind, causing a subject to dissociate from their “self” which experienced trauma, and inhabit an untraumatised other “self”. Double-consciousness, in this way, can be traumatic for the subject. Another way in which Essun’s double-consciousness is manifested is through her ability to code-switch. Code-switching is used to describe people shifting between languages or language types within conversations to suit the circumstance or audience. Code-switching can often be a mode of “passing” or even survival, as it allows the subject to move between different social groups and situations. Most African-American communities speak a form of English known as African-American Vernacular English (AAVE), which incorporates some American dialects and exhibits specific vocabulary and grammar. AAVE is seen societally as more informal than the English and American English languages, and thus African-Americans are often expected to switch between AAVE to more standardised English when in more formal situations. As a Fulcrum-trained Imperial Orogene, Essun represented the socially accepted educated orogene, adapted to suit life with governmental officials and regional delegates. However, in hiding, her and Alabaster adapt to a more informal life outside of Fulcrum expectations. Once she is on the road during the Fifth Season, moving between comms, the ability to “switch” out of this more formal mode of communication and behaviour provides Essun with the possibility of joining a comm, as it is likely if she approached as an Imperial Orogene she would have been killed.

There are many parallels drawn to the African-American experience within the trilogy. The way in which Jemisin shows the oppression and abuse of certain groups of people, such as orogenes, Niess people and tuners is similar to the specifics of the African-American experience, colonialism and slavery. Lisa Dowdall states that “complex race relations drive the narrative, with Jemisin’s extrapolation on Afrodiasporic experience informing her protagonists’ experiences of *The Stillness* and fuelling their desire to transform it.”⁷³

The language of the alien and the Other is often discussed in science fiction and fantasy. As Helen Merrick states, “The ‘alien’ could signify everything that was ‘other’ to the dominant audience of middle-class, young white Western males – including women, people of colour, other nationalities, classes and sexualities.”⁷⁴ This is something even more significant to Afrofuturist writing, as the parallels between the alien/Other and the African diasporic experience are rife and significant. They are significant enough, in fact, that Womack asks: “Were stories about aliens really just metaphors for the experience of blacks in the Americas?”⁷⁵ This rhetorical question clearly exaggerates, and it is too limiting to assume that all alien stories can be read as metaphor, even those written by African-American and Afrofuturist authors with questions of the alien experience in mind. However, it does demonstrate the significance and frequency of the connections between the alien and social “others”.

Orogenes are seen as other, as non-human, in the eyes of the law and therefore in the eyes of society: “Because you’re pretty sure by now that he’s not human. That doesn’t bother you; officially speaking, you’re not human, either. (Per the Second Yumenescene Lore Council’s *Declaration on the Rights of the Orogenically Afflicted*, a thousand-ish years ago.)”⁷⁶ An orogene cannot legally exist independently. They must be associated with a Guardian, and even then are not granted “human” legal status. This echoes the legal status of enslaved black people in the American south, who were legal property of their “owner” and their basic human rights were restricted by a set of codes.

Slavery has had long-lasting effects on the descendants of enslaved people in America. Alongside the psychological effects of collective memory and the trauma of slavery, African-American communities are at a disadvantage in comparison to white

⁷³ Dowdall 2020, 153

⁷⁴ Merrick 2003, 243

⁷⁵ Womack 2013, 17

⁷⁶ Jemisin 2015, 234

communities in terms of education, income and healthcare, amongst other factors. A Survey of Consumer Finances made available by the Federal Reserve System shows that in 2019, the before-tax mean household income for a white family in the United States was \$122,500, whereas the equivalent for a black family was \$59,600.⁷⁷ Racial biases become deeply entrenched in a society, in fact, so extensively that many years on from the abolition of slavery, many institutions continue to promote racial bias, consciously or otherwise. Commonly, African-American majority communities are provided less funding and opportunities than white majority communities, putting African-American youth at a social disadvantage.

Orogenes are enslaved and abused at the hands of the Fulcrum. They are trained to only use their innate powers under specific permitted circumstances. They are required to attend Fulcrum-designated tasks and use their orogeny only to the benefit of the Fulcrum. The Fulcrum has agency over the orogenes' bodies, viewing them not as humans but as weapons. Schaffa explains to Nassun: “‘This is the task of the Guardians, little one. 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. You 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.’”⁷⁸ Despite being crucial for the survival of the inhabitants of the earth, orogenes “cannot” be afforded human rights or even agency over their own bodies. Not only does the Fulcrum fail to protect orogene rights, but they actively work to “kill” the individual so far as possible whilst leaving the “useful” part of the “tool” intact. This is a clinical and dehumanising justification for certain treatments of orogenes, such as the node maintainers. This is similar to the way in which enslaved black people were intentionally dehumanised. Their worth was reduced to that of their body. Enslaved men and women were valued only by their ability to carry out physical labour, and were often regarded as work animals. Enslaved women were expected to reproduce and provide the owners with children to be enslaved and assaulted, either fathered by enslaved men or as a result of rape at the hands of slave owners, which creates an obvious analogy with the compulsory procreation for Alabaster and Syenite referred to above.

⁷⁷ Federal Reserve System 2020

⁷⁸ Jemisin 2017, 178

The restriction of orogenes' bodily autonomy is further brought into question with the reproductive expectations of Imperial Orogenes such as Alabaster. Lisa Dowdall writes that "[s]lavery, forced reproduction, and assimilation are familiar tropes in Afrofuturist SF [...] Jemisin continues this tradition of Afrofuturist, feminist writing with her representation of two mutant human groups in particular—the orogenes and the tuners—that illuminate how eugenics and scientific racism are mutually constitutive, manipulating women's reproductive labor to propagate slavery."⁷⁹ This oppressive practice once again coerces orogenes into taking part in and perpetuating the traumatic cycle in which they are trapped.

The language used surrounding the experience and lives of orogenes seems to be informed by that of the African-American experience. For example, occupants of *The Stillness* use the derogatory slur "rogga" when referring to orogenes. It seems intentional that the derogatory slur invented by Jemisin is extremely evocative of racial slurs used historically against black people, particularly African-Americans. Although it is sometimes the case that oppressed groups adopt slurs used against them, often in order to reclaim or regain control over their narrative, the slur "rogga" here is adopted by Alabaster as means of distancing himself from the experience of orogenes. For example, discussing the node maintainer with Syenite, he remarks: "'Sometimes a rogga can't learn control.' Now she understands that his use of the slur is deliberate. A dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing. It helps."⁸⁰ The slur is so efficient in its degradation that it has caused orogenes to internalise the prejudice against them, and is used by Alabaster to distance his own experience from that of the node maintainer. This is insidious and extremely detrimental to orogenes, as it suggests that the denial of the orogene identity is necessary to live peacefully and successfully.

Jemisin's choice of language again invokes images of the African-American experience when the orogenes begin to imagine equality and even power over stillheads. Syenite discusses this possibility with Alabaster: "'We could try letting orogenes run things.' She almost laughs. 'That would last for about ten minutes before every Guardian in *The Stillness* shows up to lynch us, with half the continent in tow to watch and cheer.'"⁸¹ Jemisin's use of lynching here is deliberately evocative of African-American history. It is suggested that the Fulcrum Guardians would be responsible for the lynchings, and although

⁷⁹ Dowdall 2020, 154

⁸⁰ Jemisin 2015, 140

⁸¹ Jemisin 2015, 124

they are officially permitted to kill orogenes under Fulcrum laws, the use of the term “lynch” suggests that the Guardians would be acting more as a representative of the social group of stillheads. This is vividly reminiscent of the lynchings and mob killings of black people in America throughout the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

Orogenes are caught in a bind. The best life path available to them is one of subjugation and coercion into working for their oppressor. Accepting the relative freedom afforded to Imperial Orogenes does not erase the knowledge of the fate of other orogenes in collective memory. To be “accepted” into stillhead society, even under the conditions set by the Fulcrum, does not free orogenes from the collective trauma. Syenite begins to believe that her situation is in some way distinguished from that of other orogenes, and Alabaster reminds her of their reality:

“You think you matter?” All at once he smiles. It’s an ugly thing, cold as the vapor that curls off ice. “You think any of us matter beyond what we can do for them? Whether we obey or not.” He jerks his head toward the body of the abused, murdered child. “You think he mattered, after what they did to him? The only reason they don’t do this to all of us is because we’re more versatile, more useful, if we control ourselves. But each of us is just another weapon, to them. Just a useful monster, just a bit of new blood to add to the breeding lines. Just another fucking *rogga*.”⁸²

The internalisation of racial hatred is evident in Alabaster’s adoption of the language of the oppressor.

Coexistence and magic

The inhabitants of The Stillness are trapped in a binding cycle of oppression: even Father Earth himself is both a victim and perpetrator of oppression. Jemisin demonstrates that all living and non-living beings are connected—in this world through magic, and that coexistence is key to the survival of all beings. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* demonstrates the trauma caused by colonisation, appropriation and dehumanisation.

Father Earth is at war with his inhabitants. He is a crucial agent in the traumatic cycles experienced by orogenes, as he is linked to the Guardians through their corestones. Father Earth is personified and the climate disasters appear firstly as unprovoked attacks upon his inhabitants. The personification of Earth has seeped into everyday vernacular of the beings in The Stillness, with “Evil Earth!” a common expression of shock with negative

⁸² Jemisin 2015, 143

connotations.⁸³ It is revealed that the actions of the Earth are actions of revenge against humanity:

Obligation, the Earth returns, in wavelets of heat and crushing pressure. Nassun bares her teeth, struggling against the weight of its contempt. What was stolen, or lent, must be recompensed.

And Nassun cannot help but understand this too, here within the Earth's embrace, with its meaning thrumming through her bones. The silver – magic – comes from life. Those who made the obelisks sought to harness magic, and they succeeded; oh, how they succeeded. They used it to build wonders beyond imagining. But then they wanted more magic than just what their own lives, or the accumulated aeons of life and death on the Earth's surface, could provide. And when they saw how much magic brimmed just beneath that surface, ripe for the taking...⁸⁴

Early humans, living at Syl Anagist, conquered and plundered the earth, not knowing of the magic it contained: “(Ignorance is an inaccurate term for what this was. True, no one thought of the Earth as alive in those days – but we should have guessed. Magic is the by-product of life. That there was magic in the Earth to take... We should all have guessed.)”⁸⁵ The Sylanagistines attempted to hijack this power and abuse it. Adam Trexler argues that “climate fiction has increasingly allowed nonhuman things to shape narrative. The best Anthropocene novels are not solely ‘character-driven.’ Nor do they reduce climate change to a unitary phenomenon, such as the ‘Great Storm.’ Instead, they explore how things like ocean currents, tigers, viruses, floods, vehicles, and capital relentlessly shape human experience.”⁸⁶ Jemisin turns this tradition on its head by presenting the most important “nonhuman thing” in *The Stillness* as a character. By giving the earth agency she problematises the more typical climate disaster narrative. The inhabitants of earth do plunder and deplete the natural resources, but then the earth fights back. Sylanagistines used the tuners to attempt to harness earth's powers, and in doing so the moon was flung out of orbit into distant space. This was the turning point for the relationship between Earth and his inhabitants: “Father Earth did not always hate life, the lorists say. *He hates because he cannot forgive the loss of his only child.*”⁸⁷ This suggests that the damage is irreparable. Although the tuners acted under the instructions of the Sylanagistines, Earth punishes the tuners for this betrayal, turning them to

⁸³ Jemisin 2015, 166

⁸⁴ Jemisin 2017, 247

⁸⁵ Jemisin 2017, 322

⁸⁶ Trexler 2015, 26

⁸⁷ Jemisin 2017, 103

stone. This is how Houwha became Hoa the stone-eater, despite him being essentially a tool of the Sylanagistines, devoid of agency and, arguably, blame.

Climate crises in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* provide a crucial backdrop for the plot progression. The possibility for revolutionary change is only presented within a Fifth Season, as the socio-political structures which uphold the oppression against orogenes have gone underground. The inhabitants of The Stillness are concerned primarily with survival, various animals adapt behaviourally, and many social norms and laws are thrown out. Jemisin's use of climate crisis seems incidental; although a key component of the plot, the Fifth Seasons are merely a necessary event, an environmental and socio-political leveller, in order for the "new world" to dawn. The opening sentences to *The Fifth Season* are: "Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things."⁸⁸ As Brent Ryan Bellamy states, "Jemisin's opening addresses the tiredness of world-ending as a fictional premise. Her acknowledgment emphasizes the ubiquity of the post-apocalypse as a fictional space in which to consider the future of the Earth's climate."⁸⁹ Climate change often plays a part in science fiction and fantasy, and this is only one political aspect of Jemisin's trilogy. The climate crises-induced end-of-the-world, for Jemisin, is a prerequisite for the re-envisioning of the social order. In order for orogenes to reach for liberation, the oppressive structures must collapse. This is true of both racist structures and social structures that accelerate climate change.

The Fifth Seasons allow for the redistribution of resources and the movement of people between different communities. Axel Goodbody and Adeline Johns-Putra note one trope of climate change fiction as "the collapse of a society divided between rich and poor into lawlessness and armed conflict."⁹⁰ The collapse, in the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, is what provides opportunity. However, these Fifth Seasons occur every few hundred years, with stonelore documenting each era of civilisation to be remembered by the next. Thus, it seems that each renewed and rebuilt society will fall into the cycles began by the last. This once again highlights the significance of narrative and patterns of storytelling, but also the unreliability of such narratives. "They kill us because they've got stonelore telling them at every turn that we're born evil—some kind of agents of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human.' 'Yes, but you can't change stonelore.' 'Stonelore changes all the time,

⁸⁸ Jemisin 2015, 1

⁸⁹ Bellamy 2018, 418

⁹⁰ Goodbody and Johns-Putra 2018, 6

Syenite.’ He doesn’t say her name often, either. It gets her attention. ‘Every civilization adds to it; parts that don’t matter to the people of the time are forgotten. [...]’⁹¹ Another theme prevalent in Jemisin’s work is the (un)reliability and importance of storytelling and remembering. Ron Eyerman discusses the cultural significance of black authors documenting black stories in the late nineteenth century, such as a biography of Harriet Tubman. It is unlikely that such narratives were consumed by a black readership at the time of publication: “The contemporary audience was more likely the sympathetic white reader, in need of bolstering in this reactionary period, and, one can assume, later generations of blacks who would require alternative histories to those offered by mainstream white society.”⁹² The practice of documentation and storytelling is significant for future generations. Whilst the dominant forms of documentation may tell some stories, they cannot be relied upon and trusted implicitly. This also speaks to the significance of collective memory, as such collectives are constructed on the basis of memorialising traumatic events. Within the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, hatred and prejudice against orogenes is so profound that it restarts after every Fifth Season. This also mirrors the repetitive structure of trauma itself.

Adam Trexler writes of the connection between climate fiction and morality. He states that “[i]f climate change novels do alter the world, critics could worry this signals a return to reading for that dried and shriveled fruit: the message.”⁹³ There is an intersection between the question of morality from both the climate fiction backdrop and the science fiction/fantasy genre Jemisin adopts. Both provide necessary opportunities for Jemisin to explore racial politics and oppression. Racial politics and climate politics are inextricably connected within the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, perhaps most obviously through the orogenes’ identities. The very reason for the oppression of orogenes is their powers, which are linked to the earth. Lisa Dowdall writes that “Jemisin uses geology to question widespread cultural assumptions about the ‘natural’ divisions between race, species, and matter that underpin hierarchies of the human.”⁹⁴ By aligning the orogenes with nature in this way, Jemisin undermines racial oppression based upon “natural” categorisation with irony, as the orogenes are connected to nature itself.

Afrofuturism has long had connections with trauma. Womack states that “[c]ollective memory and trauma is an issue that concerns some Afrofuturists, and many women artists

⁹¹ Jemisin 2015, 124-5

⁹² Eyerman 2004, 79

⁹³ Trexler 2015, 74

⁹⁴ Dowdall 2020, 151

and writers use the aesthetic as a healing device.”⁹⁵ Writing science fiction and fantasy through an Afrofuturist lens provides opportunities for writers like N. K. Jemisin to explore themes of trauma informed by “real” world issues and to produce a healing outcome. Consolidating the African-American and/or African diasporic lived experience with the alien narrative can allow Afrofuturism to triumph over other forms of speculative writing. Using the framework as healing device is considered useful by many Afrofuturist artists. Parallels are frequently drawn between the African-American experience and alien narratives. There is a shared displacement, horror and subjugation amongst other similarities. Mark Dery states that “African-Americans, in a very real sense, are the descendants of alien abductees; they inhabit a sci-fi nightmare in which unseen but no less impassable force fields of intolerance frustrate their movements; official histories undo what has been done; and technology is too often brought to bear on black bodies.”⁹⁶ For Dery, the focus of the comparison is placed upon the horror of the past. To continually repeat the narrative of the traumatic past is limiting and works only to perpetuate the focus of collective identity upon that past trauma. This is something Afrofuturists aim to move beyond, utilising Afrofuturist devices and science fiction and fantasy narratives in order to go somewhere new. As stated by Womack, “[t]he point of this alien and post apocalyptic metaphor [...] isn’t to get lost in traumas of the past or present-day alienation. The alien framework is a framework for understanding and healing.”⁹⁷ As such, Afrofuturism can be utilised to look into the past in order to learn how to transform the future.

Towards the conclusion of *The Stone Sky*, Jemisin refers to the interconnectivity of all natural things, living and nonliving.

And in the very moment when I realize this and have enough time to wonder fearfully what these presences think of me, their pathetic descendant made from the fusion of their genes with their destroyers’ hate —

— I perceive at last a secret of magestry that even the Niess simply accepted rather than understood. This is magic, after all, not science. There will always be parts of it that no one can fathom. But now I know: Put enough magic into something nonliving, and it becomes alive. Put enough lives into a storage matrix, and they retain a collective will, of sorts. They *remember* horror and atrocity, with whatever is left of them – their souls, if you like.

So the onyx yields to me now because, it senses at last, I too have known pain. My eyes have been opened to my own exploitation and degradation. I am afraid, of course, and angry, and hurt, but the onyx does not

⁹⁵ Womack 2013, 114

⁹⁶ Dery 1994, 180

⁹⁷ Womack 2013, 38

scorn these feelings within me. It seeks something else, however, something more, and finally finds what it seeks nestled in a little burning knot behind my heart: determination. I have committed myself to making, of all this wrongness, something right.

That's what the onyx wants. *Justice*. And because I want that too —⁹⁸

The first person within this scene is Hoa, a stone-eater who was previously a tuner named Houwha. Tuners, as well as obelisks, were created by the humans at Syl Anagist in order to control the earth. Tuners had access to orogenic powers and magic and were exploited by the humans in charge in an attempt to capture the moon, and thus harnessing the earth's powers. In order to do this, the tuners needed to utilise the power of many obelisks. Houwha attempts to connect to an onyx. The tuners have previously struggled to connect to this obelisk, but here it is suggested that a shared history of trauma is the significant factor enabling their attachment. The tuners have been conned by the Sylanagistines, believing that they were working towards a goal titled Geoarcanity. Geoarcanity promised “an energetic cycle of infinite efficiency” however it becomes clear that this would mean essentially enslaving the earth in order to exploit its power.⁹⁹ The “energetic cycle” spoken of by the humans, however, already exists, and the humans would simply be exploiting this resource. Similarly to the life cycle of energy, the cycle which powers and connects all life in *The Stillness* is magic, which is inherent in all natural things. Nassun discovers this in *The Obelisk Gate*: “Magic derives from life—that which is alive, or was alive, or even that which was alive so many ages ago that it has turned into something else.”¹⁰⁰

The passage also discusses the Niess. The Niess were a people who were dehumanised and oppressed many years before the events of the trilogy. The story of the Niess reads like an amalgamation of tales of colonisation and xenophobic prejudice. The Niess were indigenous to an area colonised by Sylanagistines, and were immediately regarded as lesser: “One of these groups was the Thniess. It was hard to say their name with the proper pronunciation, so Sylanagistines called them Niess. The two words did not mean the same thing, but the latter is what caught on.”¹⁰¹ The refusal to learn the proper pronunciation of names is a micro-aggression which can cause feelings of erasure of the person's identity. Niess people's use of magic was inherently greater than that of the Sylanagistines, and for this reason they were persecuted and forced to flee. After being

⁹⁸ Jemisin 2017, 332

⁹⁹ Jemisin 2017, 97

¹⁰⁰ Jemisin 2017, 361

¹⁰¹ Jemisin 2017, 208-9

invaded by Sylanagistines, “[t]he Niess fought, but then responded like any living thing under threat—with diaspora, sending whatever was left of themselves flying forth to take root and perhaps survive where it could. The descendants of these Niess became part of *every* land, *every* people, blending in among the rest and adapting to local customs.”¹⁰² This mirrors the experience of the African diaspora in America, and the double-consciousness of the African-American. The Niess people are at once “Niess” and “local” to whichever area they settle in. Jemisin also brings into question the relationship between physical features and racial identity: “while they lost much of the distinctive look that came of isolation within their small land, many retained enough of it that to this day, icewhite eyes and ashblow hair carry a certain stigma.”¹⁰³

Oppression of the Niess people was so extreme that they were ultimately eradicated through acts of genocide, and their image was appropriated and recreated in the form of the tuners. Jemisin documents the process of extreme othering which perpetuated violence and discrimination against the Niess:

Perhaps it began with whispers that white Niess irises gave them poor eyesight and perverse inclinations, and that split Niess tongues could not speak truth. That sort of sneering happens, cultural bullying, but things got worse. It became easy for scholars to build reputations and careers around the notion that Niess sessapinae were fundamentally different, somehow – more sensitive, more active, less controlled, less civilized – and that this was the source of their magical peculiarity. This was what made them not the same kind of human as everyone else. Eventually: not as human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all.¹⁰⁴

This process echoes the othering experienced by orogenes, and it provides some potential context for the treatment of orogenes by the Fulcrum. The Sylanagists decimated the Niess population after perpetuating racially motivated discrimination and violence, and then weaponised their identities by creating the tuners in their likeness. This is a further example in the trilogy of oppressors weaponising those who they oppress. Hoa, a former tuner, states: “Remember, we must be not just tools, but myths. [...] And only now, when we have been made over in the image of their own fear, are they satisfied. They tell themselves that in us, they’ve captured the quintessence and power of who the Niess really were, and they congratulate themselves on having made their old enemies useful at last.”¹⁰⁵ Thus, there is a

¹⁰² Jemisin 2017, 209

¹⁰³ Jemisin 2017, 209

¹⁰⁴ Jemisin 2017, 210

¹⁰⁵ Jemisin 2017, 211

pattern in *The Stillness* of conquering a people and appropriating and weaponising their skills and/or identities.

Towards the future

Donna Haraway's *Cyborg Manifesto* describes a cyborg world, which "might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints."¹⁰⁶ This seems to align with Jemisin's desire to create a society in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* which is wholly separate from earthly societies in that all racial, gender, sexual and political identities are represented and coexist. In a pre-cyborg world, with oppressive structures in place, the oppressive structures themselves need to address change. If the oppressed attempt to revolt, this can end only in death and re-traumatisation. All beings must work together in order to create change.

A cyborg future is one which only seems possible outside of the human experience, at least symbolically. Haraway goes on to discuss the writings of women of colour as a "new political voice" opposing the rhetoric of white western men.¹⁰⁷ This voice is formed from "a kind of postmodernist identity out of otherness, difference, and specificity."¹⁰⁸ The writings of women of colour inhabit the sphere of the cyborg, and sit in opposition to the historically white western male literary canon. Haraway continues that "[w]riting is pre-eminently the technology of cyborgs, etched surfaces of the late twentieth century. Cyborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism."¹⁰⁹ Any female writer thus utilises the mode of the cyborg. Female authors of colour are inherently political, as they inhabit this space of the cyborg "otherness", and fight for more diverse forms of communication.

Jemisin points towards ideas of coexistence. There are many different forms of being within the world of the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, human and non-human, inhabiting shared spaces. Jemisin does not approach this as a representation of utopia, though, and not all

¹⁰⁶ Haraway 1991, 154

¹⁰⁷ Haraway 1991, 155

¹⁰⁸ Haraway 1991, 155

¹⁰⁹ Haraway 1991, 176

species are living peacefully or equally. Instead, Jemisin presents this coexistence as a natural state of being. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, Haraway imagines a political world of companions, where “[c]yborgs and companion species each bring together the human and nonhuman, the organic and technological, carbon and silicon, freedom and structure, history and myth, the rich and the poor, the state and the subject, diversity and depletion, modernity and postmodernity, and nature and culture in unexpected ways.”¹¹⁰ For Jemisin, this act is not radical, rather the amalgamation of all beings is the neutral state. Jemisin created the world of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* in the image of earth if the societal structures such as imperialism, capitalism and white supremacy had not caused such great imbalances. As stated by Lisa Dowdall, “Jemisin celebrates the relationships between all things, living and nonliving, by imagining a network of interconnected, mutual becoming.”¹¹¹ This mutual becoming suggests a necessity for the inhabitants of *The Stillness* to work together, as liberation can only truly be achieved when it is liberation for all.

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* problematises the human category. Orogenes, under Sanzed law, are legally denied human status, and much of their collective trauma stems from failed attempts at gaining entry to “human” spheres and categories. This is extrapolated during Fifth Seasons, where orogenes, along with other homeless societal outcasts, are forced to physically fight for their survival, whilst those more “desirable” by social standards are protected by the Fulcrum. When orogenes exert themselves too far using their orogeny, they begin to turn to stone. Starting with their extremities, body parts become heavy and mineral-like. This is a significant manifestation of the trauma of orogenes, as the pain of existing as an orogene is made literal in the physical transformation of their bodies. The increasing weight of those stone body parts mimics the symbolic weight of the trauma suffered by orogenes, and the price they pay for their identity is a physical loss of self. Bessel van der Kolk, a psychiatrist, researcher and expert in trauma stress, states that “[w]e have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present.”¹¹² His work highlights the real consequences of trauma upon the body and brain, and explores the differing physical effects that trauma can have on the body and brain. It seems symbolically significant that the first

¹¹⁰ Haraway 2016, 96

¹¹¹ Dowdall 2020, 160

¹¹² van der Kolk 2015, 21

body part to turn to stone for both Essun and Alabaster is an arm. This is evocative of *Kindred*, where the protagonist Dana loses her left arm during the process of returning home for the final time. She kills her abusive slave-owner ancestor, and he grabs her arm whilst dying. The boundary between the past and present becomes incoherent and collapses as she finds herself in her present-day settings with her arm trapped in the wall of her apartment. Essun and Dana lose arms in a physical manifestation of the trauma endured by them both. The arm and the hand are symbolic for the human act of creation, and Dana loses her arm to the past in a symbolic gesture following her coerced participation in the trauma and oppression of her ancestral history. Significantly, Essun's arm is consumed by Hoa. Hoa, we later discover, saves some transformed version of Essun's arm, recreated in mineral form, for her in the future.

However, the loss of their human body could ultimately prove to offer a form of freedom for Essun and Alabaster. Stone-eaters appear to select and pair with an orogene, as Hoa has with Essun. When the orogene's body begins to turn to stone, the stone-eaters can provide the service of consuming the affected area. This process is shunned by many in *The Stillness and Jemisin* keeps details vague, however, these symbiotic relationships offer moments of tenderness within the trilogy. In Haraway's *Companion Manifesto*, she states that "[g]enerally speaking, one does not eat one's companion animals (or get eaten by them); and one has a hard time shaking colonialist, ethnocentric, ahistorical attitudes toward those who do (eat or get eaten)."¹¹³ By rejecting these colonialist, ethnocentric and ahistorical attitudes, we can see the symbiotic relationship between stone-eaters and orogenes for its mutual benefits. Once Hoa has consumed Essun's stony flesh, he recreates her likeness in mineral form. This process also happens to Alabaster, through his stone-eater Antimony. This second mineral life is ultimately where Essun and Alabaster find liberation from the bonds of oppression as orogenes. This transformation ultimately provides the reasoning for Essun's second person narrative: Hoa is retelling her story, in order for her to regain her self and control over her narrative.

Essun and Alabaster's transition into the mineral realm introduces an alternative mode of reproduction. In her *Cyborg Manifesto*, Donna Haraway states that "[s]exual reproduction is one kind of reproductive strategy among many, with costs and benefits as a function of the system environment."¹¹⁴ She goes on to state that "[w]e require regeneration, not rebirth, and

¹¹³ Haraway 2016, 106

¹¹⁴ Haraway 1991, 162

the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world without gender.”¹¹⁵ Sexual reproduction in the *Broken Earth Trilogy* is dysfunctional and traumatic: the reproduction expected of Imperial Orogenes echoes the pressures upon enslaved women to reproduce and propagate slavery. Even when they are (supposedly) free from their Imperial duties, Syenite and Alabaster’s sexual relationship is defective. Their relationship was coerced by the Fulcrum, and thus even outside of that context, they have both been too damaged by the trauma to foster a healthy relationship. Instead, their relationship is mediated by Innon, the leader at Meov where the pair settle. Innon has orogenic powers but is not tainted by the reach of the Fulcrum. Syenite remarks that “[h]e’s an orogene. A feral, born free and raised openly by Harlas—who’s a roggas, too. *All* their leaders are roggas, here.”¹¹⁶ Innon is representative of an idealised society, where orogenes can be “feral” and attain leadership positions, as befits their natural skills. This “feral” nature means that Innon has not been directly traumatised by the Fulcrum, Guardians or training, as Syenite and Alabaster have. He’s unblemished and therefore unaffected, and this enables him to facilitate a relationship between the two traumatised characters. Innon is queer, adding another layer to the symbolic freedoms represented by him and his community at Meov. He proves to be the healing intermediary between Alabaster and Syenite, and they enter into a queer, polyamorous relationship and raise Alabaster and Syenite’s son, Corundum, together. Innon is ultimately violently murdered by Schaffa when he tracks down Syenite, and this begins to mark the turning point for Syenite in the narrative. Innon is a symbol of hope for an alternative life for Syenite, Alabaster and the other orogenes, and as such the invasion of the Fulcrum into Meov and the murder of Innon serve as a reminder of the unattainability of such pockets of utopia. Even Corundum, the product of the relationship between Alabaster, Syenite and Innon, cannot survive this traumatic breach of safety.

If there is hope for the orogenes of *The Stillness* to achieve liberation, it lies with Nassun. Her mother’s “training” perpetuates the trauma experienced by Fulcrum-trained orogenes and Nassun internalises this as her mother’s hatred of her. Nassun is also held captive by her father after he murders her brother Uche. She finally breaks free, killing her father and utilising the training by her mother in order to find liberation. Nassun represents the figure of what Lisa Yaszek calls the black genius, a figure imagined by Afrofuturists in order to configure possible futures. The black genius is described as “a young (and

¹¹⁵ Haraway 1991, 181

¹¹⁶ Jemisin 2015, 349

traditionally male) scientist-inventor who uses the products of his genius to save himself, his friends and his community from white oppression.”¹¹⁷ Jemisin further radicalises this character: her black genius is a traumatised young girl. Oppression is key to the black genius narrative, as “it is precisely his experience of alienation that leads the black genius to create things that change the course of history forever.”¹¹⁸ Nassun’s specific experience of extreme trauma following the murder of her brother, and her gradual understanding of her mother’s trauma which has replayed in her own life, ultimately motivate her to find a solution or escape:

For the world has taken so much from her. She had a brother once. And a father, and a mother whom she also understands but wishes she did not. And a home, and dreams. The people of The Stillness have long since robbed her of childhood and any hope of a real future, and because of this she is so angry that she cannot think beyond THIS MUST STOP and I WILL STOP IT —¹¹⁹

The processes and the techniques through which Nassun aims to bring an end to the oppressive cycles are innovative, making her likely the only orogene capable of bringing liberation. The ways in which she utilises her orogeny are unique, as she has had an imitation Fulcrum training through Essun, but not enough to have limited her mind to the specific Fulcrum methods. Innovation is Nassun’s strength, and this survival mechanism of hers is informed by black culture. As Ytasha L. Womack states, “[i]mprovisation, adaptability, and imagination are the core components of this resistance and are evident in both the arts and black cultures at large. Jazz, hip-hop, and blues are artistic examples, but there are ways of life that are based on improvisation, too, that aren’t fully understood.”¹²⁰ Innovation, improvisation and imagination are necessary for any oppressed group to survive. Thus, a large part of black culture and art stemming from the African diaspora is grounded in improvisation. Not only does improvisation often facilitate survival, but it is also the cause for celebration. Womack is in discussion with Cauleen Smith, who states that “[i]n the Western world, improvisation is a failure; you do it when something goes wrong. But when black people improvise it’s a form of mastery.”¹²¹ This can explain Nassun’s success in the *Broken Earth*, as the combined powers she utilises are unknown to the oppressors—here equated with the Western world—due to their limited imagination, improvisation is daunting

¹¹⁷ Yaszek 2015, 59

¹¹⁸ Yaszek 2015, 59

¹¹⁹ Jemisin 2017, 248

¹²⁰ Womack 2013, 37

¹²¹ Womack 2013, 38

and would only be attempted under threat. Nassun, as a young orogene, understands that *she* is the perceived threat, and thus finds solace and greatness in improvisation. Jazz and improvisation are themes central to an array of African-American literature, including James Baldwin's short story "Sonny's Blues" (1957), where jazz is a pathway out of cyclical destructive habits. Sonny utilises his creativity through jazz music and communicates in a way that is otherwise inaccessible to him. Jazz allows Sonny to carve a pathway out of his heroin addiction and away from white supremacist prison structures and into a space where he can create freely.

Nassun has access to magic, she can "sess" the life force of it all around her, which she visualises as threads of silver. By teaching herself how to control these threads, she is able to use magic and orogeny simultaneously. Lisa Dowdall comments that Nassun "moves beyond the limits of orogeny dictated by the Empire to master the forbidden practice of magic and reclaim the radical kinds of knowledge that began with the Niess before they were perverted by Syl Analyst."¹²² This is revolutionary, and brings to the fore the role of ethnocentrism and colonialism in the historical narratives of knowledge and academia. Colonisers commonly disregarded the intellectuality of non-Western communities, and thus much intellect from colonised communities has been historically undocumented. Lisa Yaszek discusses Afrofuturist works by authors such as Nalo Hopkinson and Nisi Shawl, which "insist that the mundane and supernatural worlds coexist on a continuum and that much of what white Eurowesterners describe as magic is black scientific practice" and that as a category, "'magic' turns out to be a matter of perspective, fueled by the failure of white Americans to recognize black technological prowess."¹²³ Jemisin exposes this historically racist practice, and by tapping into the knowledge of orogeny and ancient magic, Nassun is as transgressive as she is powerful.

Nassun's high level of diverse skills are directly influenced by her imagination. She is able to manipulate the silver threads of magic purely because her imagination allows her to see them. Her success lies in her ability to combine the two energy sources she has access to, which are ultimately powered by her understanding of, and desire to end, the cyclical oppression faced by orogenes. Towards the conclusion of the trilogy, Essun and Hoa witness Nassun utilising both powers simultaneously: "'She's blending magic and orogeny. I've

¹²² Dowdall 2020, 157

¹²³ Yaszek 2015, 66

never seen that before.’ I have. We called it tuning.”¹²⁴ Hoa reveals that the role of the tuners, as created in the image of the Niess, was to use these two forces combined, as Nassun learns to do. This creates a significant sense of satisfaction and justice, in that Nassun will use these ancient techniques known by an oppressed people, to decimate the system which have kept these oppressive structures in place. Yaszek states that “Contemporary Afrofuturists also update the classic character of the black genius by connecting that character to both Eurowestern science and African or Afrodiasporic ‘magic.’”¹²⁵ This seems to speak directly to the character of Nassun, who fulfils the role of the black genius and, by manipulating multiple forms of knowledge in her world, transforms the figure into something even more revolutionary.

Testimony is a significant concept for trauma studies. Trauma survivors and their narratives lack coherence and it is often difficult to locate a “truth” of the trauma, and it is suggested that the truth is necessary for the healing process to begin. Testimony is important as it is objective rather than subjective, and thus exists outside of the trauma. Shoshana Felman describes the significance of testimony in trauma healing: “By virtue of the fact that the testimony is addressed to others, the witness, from within the solitude of his own stance, is a vehicle of an occurrence, a reality, a stance or a dimension beyond himself”¹²⁶ This dissociation from the trauma itself is useful for the trauma victim. Literature can be viewed as a vehicle for healing, as the process of storytelling is ultimately a form of testimony, with the reader in the position of bearing witness. Elissa Marder claims that “[l]iterature is one of the ways we tell one another about aspects of human experience that cannot be contained by ordinary modes of expression and that may even exceed human understanding.”¹²⁷ Afrofuturist art makes use of this healing potential, using the imagination and futuristic imagery in order to heal from the past and the present. This is an inherently political act, and Lisa Dowdall writes that “[a]lthough Jemisin’s work can clearly be read as allegory, The Broken Earth series moves beyond the future as critique of the past and the present.”¹²⁸ Afrofuturist literature can provide societal critique, can be utilised as a mode of healing for the artist and can inspire readers to unlock their imagination and seek social and personal healing. Lisa Womack speaks of the historical literary tradition Jemisin is entering into: “The

¹²⁴ Jemisin 2017, 377

¹²⁵ Yaszek 2015, 65

¹²⁶ Felman 1992, 3

¹²⁷ Marder 2006, 3

¹²⁸ Dowdall 2020, 158

idea of using sci-fi and speculative fiction to spur social change, to reexamine race, and to explore self-expression for people of colour, then, is clearly nothing new. The black visionaries of the past who sought to alleviate the debilitating system and end the racial divide used these genres as devices to articulate their issues and visions.”¹²⁹ The Afrofuturist lens is what propels narratives like Jemisin’s further beyond simply articulating and processing, into a form of healing on a societal scale.

According to Roger Luckhurst, one concern with the process of testimony in trauma healing is that “[t]rauma also appears to be worryingly transmissible: it leaks [...] between victims and their listeners or viewers who are commonly moved to forms of overwhelming sympathy, even to the extent of claiming secondary victimhood.”¹³⁰ This is highly problematic, and is one explanation to the inescapable feeling of cyclical trauma, as the victims may find themselves unable to communicate without this process occurring. Shoshana Felman solidifies this concern, stating that in the process of bearing witness, “the listener to trauma comes to be a participant and a coowner of the traumatic event: through his very listening, he comes to partially experience trauma in himself.”¹³¹ This issue is arguably negated in the *Broken Earth Trilogy*, as Essun shares her trauma with Hoa. Towards the conclusion of the trilogy we discover that Essun’s chapters narrated in second person by Hoa are representative of him speaking directly to her. As he is rebuilding her in the mineral world after consuming her human body which has turned to stone, he bears witness to her testimony of orogenic trauma, and then relays her story back to her in order to restore her sense of identity in this new physical form. Hoa is able to bear witness to Essun’s testimony without the transmission of her trauma because he is not human, and thus he lacks the ability to empathise. The tuners were intentionally created this way, as Hoa explains: “They’ve stripped our limbic systems of neurochemicals and our lives of experience and language and knowledge.”¹³² The Sylanagistines intentionally dehumanised the tuners, however, this is what ultimately provides Essun’s only escape from the inherent cyclical trauma of life as a human orogene. By joining Hoa in life as a stone-eater, both Essun and Alabaster find freedom from the oppressive regime. As stated by Lisa Dowdall, “[b]y embracing the possibilities of alien identities, Jemisin abandons the human as a category that is, in itself, a

¹²⁹ Womack 2013, 124

¹³⁰ Luckhurst 2013, 3

¹³¹ Felman 1992, 57

¹³² Jemisin 2017, 211

technology of exclusion.”¹³³ Orogenes are continually rejected from the human category and identity, and thus Essun finds more power in the transgressive act of rejecting this category and embracing the non-human. This aligns with Kodwo Eshun’s presuppositions of Afrofuturistic art: “The condition of alienation, [...] is a psychosocial inevitability that all Afrodiasporic art uses to its own advantage by creating contexts that encourage a process of disalienation. Afrofuturism’s specificity lies in assembling conceptual approaches and counter-memorial mediated practices in order to access triple consciousness, quadruple consciousness, previously inaccessible alienations.”¹³⁴ This works alongside acts of reclamation and reappropriation which have been powerful tools for African-American artists to regain control over their narratives.

Science fiction is often celebrated as a place for imagination and a literature with great transformative potential. It is significant to note that this does not necessarily mean that this potential has been utilised. Veronica Hollinger states that “[a]lthough sf has often been called ‘the literature of change’, for the most part it has been slow to recognize the historical contingency and cultural conventionality of many of our ideas about sexual identity and desire, about gendered behaviour and about the ‘natural’ roles of women and men.”¹³⁵ Even when creating extraterrestrial beings, writers often project human characteristics and social behaviours onto their characters, and build societies according to societal norms on earth. This can limit the potential development of plot and character, as it feels counter-intuitive for alien beings to be bound by the terrestrial societal rules. N. K. Jemisin has been praised for her diversity and representation. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* contains characters of differing races, sexual orientations, gender identities and physical abilities. Jemisin has stated that this was intentional, as she was imagining a world outside of the confines of societal structures on earth, so there was no reason for her to project contemporary societal limitations upon her imagined communities.

In 2010, N. K. Jemisin wrote a blog post commenting on large conversations that had been happening within the science fiction and fantasy communities, referred to as “RaceFail”. The topics debated included cultural appropriation, privilege and intersectionality. The issue of race was discussed, with many prominent authors and figures expressing arguably racist opinions. Whilst many non-white science fiction and fantasy authors expressed deep concern

¹³³ Dowdall 2020, 159

¹³⁴ Eshun 2003, 298

¹³⁵ Hollinger 2003, 126

at the potential white supremacy lurking in the genre establishments, Jemisin looked ahead and considered this time of uncertainty as a time of potential, writing:

Some of you may have heard of Lewin’s classic theory of change. Paraphrasing broadly, Lewin posited that stable organizations/systems inherently resist significant change, mostly due to inertia. They’re frozen in place by the weight of their own history, the comfort of tradition, participants who have a vested interest in maintaining the status quo, and so on. So the only way to enact change in such a system is to *destabilize it* — unfreeze it. Then quickly push through changes before a new state of stable equilibrium is reached and the system freezes again.¹³⁶

It is significant that Jemisin views instability as a time for positive action, and her adoption of Kurt Lewin’s theory of change is a clear influence on her framing of the *Broken Earth Trilogy*. The Fifth Seasons cause destabilisation within the society of The Stillness. This destabilisation is key for the events of the trilogy to take place. The liberated future which Nassun looks towards at the conclusion of *The Stone Sky* is only made possible due to the opportunity seen to make the most of instability and make changes before the old patterns repeat. This is also significant, as it mirrors the changes in the science fiction and fantasy literary communities in the years following Jemisin’s blog post. Her personal trajectory would see her make history as the first African-American author to win a Hugo award for Best Novel, for all three instalments of the *Broken Earth Trilogy*. Authors of colour are still underrepresented within the genres, but a more diverse, and thus more innovative and exciting authorship is in the future, according to critics such as Elisabeth Anne Leonard, who states that “[s]cience fiction is a genre which is continually evolving, and as it encompasses a wider range of writers and readers it will reach a point where writing from or about a racial minority is neither subversive nor unusual but rather one of the traits which makes it a powerful literature of change.”¹³⁷ The parallels were not lost on Jemisin, who spoke to Lila Shapiro: “The trilogy was not only a commentary on the history of structural oppression and contemporary race politics, she said, but also a critique of fantasy and science-fiction culture itself.”¹³⁸ The release of the *Broken Earth Trilogy* intersected with a crucial moment within the politics of science fiction, as a “conservative lobby group” called the Sad Puppies attempted to derail the Hugo Awards for several years to prioritise white male authors over more diverse nominees, whom they viewed as symbols of “literary affirmative action”, in an

¹³⁶ Jemisin 2010

¹³⁷ Leonard 2003, 262

¹³⁸ Shapiro 2018

act of “overt racism.”¹³⁹ Jemisin won Best Novel for three consecutive years with her *Broken Earth Trilogy*, disproving the Sad Puppies, and demonstrating that “[c]learly, people of all colors do indeed want to see black heroes remaking the world in their own image.”¹⁴⁰

Conclusion

N. K. Jemisin’s *Broken Earth Trilogy* demonstrates that liberation from cyclical collective trauma can be imagined for oppressed groups through the Afrofuturist aesthetic mode. Jemisin disrupts senses of scale and time, allowing the geological and the personal to play out in the same space. Whilst the process after which orogenes are named—orogeny, the slow formation of mountains—takes place over millions of years, orogenes have the power to overhaul geological processes within seconds. The narratological style mirrors the incoherence of trauma, and brings the past, present and future into direct conversation and blurs the boundaries between the three. The conclusion of the trilogy sees the future of The Stillness in the hands of mother and daughter Essun and Nassun. Jemisin’s female protagonists subvert reader expectations in the same way that Octavia E. Butler’s do: “Though Butler’s heroines are dangerous and powerful women, their goal is not power. They are heroines not because they conquer the world, but because they conquer the very notion of tyranny.”¹⁴¹ However, Jemisin’s female protagonists move beyond this: they long for revenge as well as justice, and they feel rage. This is itself a transgressive act, as the caricature of the “angry black woman” is weaponised by white society and works to undermine and dehumanise black women when expressing their feelings and opinions. Ytasha L. Womack states that “Afrofuturism is a free space for women, a door ajar, arms wide open, a literal and figurative space for black women to be themselves.”¹⁴² For the orogenes’ liberated future to be the responsibility of an “angry” black mother and daughter is politically significant.

The *Broken Earth Trilogy* suggests a liberated future for orogenes. Nassun reclaims the previously inaccessible technology of “tuning” by blending magic and orogeny in order to forge a pathway to freedom in a new society, free from the oppressive ways of thinking of the past. For orogenes, freedom was equated to abolition. The Stillness had rebuilt after each

¹³⁹ Dowdall 2020, 149

¹⁴⁰ Lavender and Yaszek 2020, 2

¹⁴¹ Salvaggio 1984, 81

¹⁴² Womack 2013, 100-101

Fifth Season, and each time the oppression and vilification of orogenes had renewed, leading Essun and Nassun to believe that only the collapse of The Stillness would bring true liberation. The destruction of the oppressive structures which had upheld and perpetuated the trauma against orogenes was necessary to imagine a liberated future. This abolitionist approach reflects many intersectional feminist ideas of social restructuring, such as those of Angela Y. Davis and Audre Lorde. However, Jemisin's message moves beyond the allegorical and allows for the imagining of different liberated futures possible without the abolition of societal structures. The transgressive use of time and scale allows the reader to take the imagined future out of the trilogy and transplant it into varying contemporary situations. The *Broken Earth Trilogy* demonstrates one example of a liberated future crafted through a period of disruption, and shows the reader how to make "real" changes in order to imagine a "real" possible future.

Elissa Marder states that "[e]ven though we do not 'recover' from our traumatic past, nor can we 'cure' it, 'overcome' it, or even fully understand it, we can and we must listen to it and survive it by listening to its effects as they are transmitted to us through the voices of its witnesses and survivors."¹⁴³ Similarly, Afrofuturist art does not naively seek to provide a healing process for all who employ it, but rather provides readers and creators with the tools to imagine liberated and healed futures. Surviving and coping with collective trauma are important steps on a larger journey towards the future.

Afrofuturism is no longer "sought in unlikely places, constellated from far-flung points."¹⁴⁴ The aesthetic is gaining popularity and attention, with Ryan Coogler's superhero film *Black Panther* (2018) and Beyoncé Knowles-Carter's music film/visual album *Black Is King* (2020) being striking examples of twenty-first century Afrofuturist projects. The two films are visually and creatively rooted in African diasporic art, and have played a significant role in bringing the Afrofuturist aesthetic closer into popular culture. Afrofuturism prioritises the imagination, and as such, the power of the Afrofuturist aesthetic form lies in its ability to transcend the art and encourage "real" healing and future thought. For Afrofuturists, "reality" is insignificant, as the real is the imagined, and liberated futures are attainable from within the self.

¹⁴³ Marder 2006, 4

¹⁴⁴ Dery 1994, 182

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