

The World as the Whole: Culture, Ecology and Holistic Worldbuilding in N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy

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Abstract

The thesis analyses the relationship between ecology and social and cultural dynamics in the imagined world of *The Broken Earth* trilogy by N.K. Jemisin. It believes their interconnection is ecocritically relevant for how people engage with environmental crises like climate change. The thesis coins the term holistic worldbuilding for the representations of these interconnected dynamics, which are relevant for how people engage with environmental crises like climate change. Holistic worldbuilding emphasises the interaction and interrelation between human culture and nature, and rejects conflict as the only element that drives a narrative. It adds to ecocritical thought in that it argues for solidarity and empathy not just between human culture and nature, but between human cultures, too. The thesis then analyses the relationship between the people and their planet, and between different cultural groups. Through close reading, it focuses on ecological elements of the imagined world and cultural lore that informs people's lives, arguing that each shapes the other. Continuing its close reading, the thesis also analyses oppressive power structures and the cultural dynamics that keep these in place, and how these are tied to the environmental circumstances of the imagined world. Finally, the thesis reviews narrative techniques that the trilogy uses that contribute to its holistic worldbuilding. Using Jemisin's use of worldbuilding, this thesis argues that *The Broken Earth* trilogy can inspire a rethinking of how humans can engage and coexist with their environment differently.

Introduction

Right now is a very important time to connect with the ecological part of our lives and how our human culture relates to the nature around us because of our ecological problems on Earth. Fictional narratives may not provide the answers to these problems, but they do provide opportunities to imagine other viewpoints. Hubert Zapf argues in his book *Literature as Cultural Ecology* that art and literature are not just reflections of knowledge that already exists, but that they should also be considered as “explorative forms of cultural knowledge and creativity in their own right” (17). He builds on Julian Steward’s term “cultural ecology,” which he uses to illustrate the significant role the natural environment has in shaping human culture (77). Narratives also allow people to connect to their environment. Markku Lethimäki argues that the reason why narratives can afford access to the natural world is because they are “the principal way in which our species organizes its understanding of time”: humans give meaning to the world around them and how they perceive it through narrative (134). Lethimäki argues that therefore, rather than passively consuming fictional narratives, readers will want to evaluate them and bring them “into relation with the larger context or their own experience and understanding” (120-121).

Following Lethimäki’s statement, the portrayal of ecological and cultural environments can help readers connect narratives to their own lives. Using familiar elements in the physical world and the characters helps readers make connections to their own world. Although worlds in speculative fiction worlds often differ significantly from that of the reader, and fantastical elements may remain opaque and mysterious, as long as other elements are recognisable, understandable and believable, readers will still be able to immerse themselves and connect the narrative to their own. Narratives in which human characters interact with the nonhuman environment will then have the potential to inspire readers to reflect on how they interact with their environment as well. As a result such stories are able to contribute to environmental

debates, particularly about how cultural views mediate people's relationship to the natural world.

Worldbuilding, the act of creating the imagined world that the reader can relate to, is central to this thesis. To understand worldbuilding in an ecocritical light, so that it may reflect critically on the environmental issues in imagined worlds, this thesis will build on Ursula Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction". Here she describes what I will call holistic worldbuilding; an approach that emphasises the interaction and interrelation between human culture and nature, and rejects conflict as the only element that drives a narrative. Le Guin writes that "a book holds words. Words hold things. They bear meanings. A novel is a medicine bundle, holding things in a particular, powerful relation one another and to us. One relationship among elements in the novel may well be that of conflict, but the reduction of narrative to conflict is absurd" (153). Holistic worldbuilding stresses the prominence of nature in people's lives, and argues that human culture and nature are parts of one whole. If nature is considered as such, it should then be possible to extend our empathy and solidarity to the natural world, and interact with it in such a way that is beneficial for both.

N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy can be read as an instance of a literary work that engages in holistic worldbuilding, as the geological elements of the planet play a major role in the people's lives. The planet is called Father Earth, who according to cultural lore causes earthquakes to try and kill humanity. Everyone lives in constant fear of and tries to prepare for a potential Fifth Season, an extended period of time during which environmental living circumstances become increasingly hazardous. People called orogenes are able to manipulate energy in the form of heat, and can as a result also manipulate the earthquakes Father Earth causes. Because of their connection to Father Earth, however, orogenes are hated and feared by people without orogenic powers, the stills. The novels thus create an imagined world where the people are concerned with the soil under their feet; it establishes a very

physical relationship between the planet and who and what lives on it. This has a huge impact on how society has been structured: from the way people are taught to grow their food to their cultural stories that inform their customs to the division of labour between the cultural castes in each community. The imagined world thus has, at a geological level, a huge impact on how its inhabitants developed their culture, and can be argued to be one of the actants that drives the narrative forward.

The novels feature an interesting way of storytelling: Essun's life is narrated to herself by Hoa, a Stone Eater. They are powerful and dangerous beings that are able to take on the appearance of humans, and are able to travel through the Earth. Hoa not only narrates different stages of Essun's life, he also describes the lives of others that have impacted Essun's: Schaffa, her Guardian at the Fulcrum; Nassun, Essun's daughter and Hoa's own life before he became a Stone Eater, thousands of years ago. The fact that Hoa is narrating to Essun is slowly but surely revealed throughout the trilogy. The novels' use of various different perspectives adds to its complexity considering the environment from different viewpoints. Jemisin's trilogy follows the Fulcrum-trained orogene Damaya/Syenite/Essun, who are gradually revealed to be the same person at different stages of her life. Ultimately, Essun takes on the quest to retrieve the Moon into its orbit around the Earth, to restore equilibrium and appease Father Earth's anger at the loss of the Moon – his child. Though this succeeds, in the process Essun become a Stone Eater herself. In order to help her retain the essence of the person she was, Hoa tells her the story of her own life.

In this thesis I will research in what ways ecology and the social and cultural dynamics of the imagined world in Jemisin's trilogy are entangled with each other. In addition, I aim to show how the trilogy is ecocritically relevant in that it provides opportunities to rethink how humans can engage with larger societal issues such as climate change. In its most basic form, I understand worldbuilding here as the process of creating an imagined world. This world may

emerge through a variety of narrative strategies, such as descriptions of the landscape, excerpts from letters or cultural stories, or characters' words, actions and thoughts. Narratives like *The Broken Earth* trilogy may contribute to larger social discussions about what nature or the environment means to people culturally, and its role in people's everyday lives. This would call for a closer consideration of how cultural groups of people define themselves in relation to their environment, which influences how they see and treat nature.

Due to its recent publication, there are very few scholarly analyses of the trilogy in the academic literature. "Repairing the Broken Earth: N.K. Jemisin on race and environment in transitions" by Alastair Iles explores the trilogy's potential to raise awareness for climate change, and argues that the social aspect sustainability has been neglected in favor of the technical. Iles emphasizes the connection between racial (in)justice and environmental sustainability, and compares it to our current system of global industrial civilisation. Additionally, he stresses that the books ask the question "of whether Earth should not be recognized as having its own rights" (13), by giving it agency and again comparing it to examples of countries that acknowledge and respect Earth's existential rights by law. He concludes that the novels can inspire ideas about how to treat our own planet and stop climate change based on principles of recognition, humility, renewal and redistribution. "Science Fiction and the Climate Crisis" by Brent Ryan Bellamy looks at climate change and fiction more generally, briefly discussing several science fiction novels that engage with environmental disasters. He argues that overcoming the obstacles that are at the origin of triggering our climate crisis is "just as much an imaginative project as it is a practical one" (418). Science fiction narratives, Bellamy writes, are a great way to imagine how changing our behaviour now may positively impact our planet's environmental future.

I hope that Jemisin's trilogy stimulates a rethinking of human culture's impact on and relationship with nature, and vice versa. I argue that it can inspire more attention for ecology

in worldbuilding in speculative fiction narratives, and I hope this thesis will add to existing research on the relation between ecocriticism and worldbuilding. Like Iles, I argue for a rethinking of how human culture positions itself in relation to its environment, and like Bellamy, I hope that discussing works of fiction that engage with this theme raises a greater awareness of the potential for imaginary worlds to explore and inspire environmental change.

In Chapter 1, I will outline the theoretical background and the relevant theory for my analysis. I combine theory on worldbuilding and ecocriticism with Le Guin's Carrier Bag Theory into the approach I call holistic worldbuilding, which is then used in the close reading analysis. In Chapter 2 I will analyse the relationship and the conflict between the planet Father Earth and the people that live on it. Specifically, I will address the physical, geological aspect of the setting and how cultural lore is interwoven with that environment. In addition, I will discuss how that cultural lore involves personifying the planet, and what that means for the relationship between the people and Father Earth. In Chapter 3, I will continue my close reading, this time focusing on the conflict between the people themselves. I discuss orogenes' inferior place in society, and how this is an example of a society that has let themselves become a part of what Le Guin calls a killer story. I also engage with how oppressive societal structures play a role in the trilogy more generally. In Chapter 4 I will look at other narratological techniques and elements that the trilogy uses to build its imagined world. Finally, in the conclusion I will reflect on the close reading analysis and conclude that the relationships between different people are interrelated to their relationship with the environment. Ultimately I hope that this thesis will show the importance of the relationship between nature and culture, and how speculative fiction can highlight the impact they have on each other.

Chapter 1: Holistic worldbuilding

Ecocriticism

Literary works are forms of cultural production that derive from their developments in cultural history, writes Zapf in his work *Literature as Cultural Ecology*. Culture, however, has not usually been considered relevant related to the concept of environmental sustainability. Zapf explains that though ecology, economy and society have been considered the three main components of sustainability, culture has been largely ignored (17). Cultural ecology stresses the importance of the natural environment on the ways human culture has evolved. It concerns itself with how environmental conditions influence “technologies and forms of production but also on the values and mythologies of cultures” (77). Literature as cultural works is thus related to the environment it is created in, which is why it is so suitable to function as a medium to explore this very relationship between human culture and nature. If humans are considered natural beings living in their natural environment, then narrative fiction will always be “the product of human engagements with the natural world,” argues Lethimäki (136).

Human culture and nature are each their own distinct areas, yet they are also part of each other. How humans interact with nonhuman nature has always been the focal point of ecocritical studies, Ursula Heise writes in her essay “Globality, Difference and the International Turn in Ecocriticism”. How has the ecological environment shaped human culture, and how has human culture shaped how this environment is viewed and treated in return (638)? These questions are central to this thesis. Lethimäki, too, argues that ecocriticism has to do with studying “the relationship between literature and the physical environment” (122). In times of environmental crisis because nature has been mistreated, its meaning and position in human culture should be critically investigated – not to distance or alienate culture from nature, but to re-assess how the two can coexist optimally. Heise stresses

that rather than an opposite of culture, nature “separate from the human” has been a cultural system of its own from the start (“Martian Ecologies,” 449). Heise offers the perspective that environmental problems are not necessarily problems of people’s surroundings, but social issues: people’s “history, their living conditions, their relations to the world and reality, their social, cultural and political situations” (450). This implies that the position of nature in contemporary human culture is created by people. It also means should be possible to change the way people relate to nature for the better. Greg Garrard agrees, and illustrates that ecological problems only become problems because of assuming a certain perspective. He uses the example of a weed, which he says is “not a wrong kind of plant, only the wrong kind in the wrong place” (5-6). Ecocriticism thus deals with a situation where nature as a concept has been culturally constructed by humans, but also exists in the world separate from human constructs.

In order to treat nature well it may then be necessary to adopt an attitude of solidarity, according to Val Plumwood. In order to acknowledge other-than-human nature fully, Plumwood argues that there should be a way to avoid always defining nonhuman nature in terms that inevitably relate it back to “the human as conceptual centre” (202). By practicing solidarity with nature, it is possible to respect and support it without doing this. Importantly, the differences between human and nonhuman nature must be recognised; solidarity should not be confused with identity, argues Plumwood (202). This does not mean that humans do not have continuity with and are not dependent on nature, but in order to practice solidarity it is necessary to affirm the differences as well as the difference between taking a position with the other compared to positioning as the other. It is important to understand that various human societies have put humans in positions of privileged authority that oppress nonhuman nature. This has defined nonhuman nature in ways that closely resemble dynamics of oppression within “human dominance orders” (204). Solidarity based on unity or sameness is

thus not appropriate because it does not acknowledge these differences that have led to the power imbalances Plumwood speaks of.

Solidarity is a relevant concept also because it makes oppression visible, as well as the kind of oppression that is taking place. Ronnie Zoe Hawkins elaborates on Iris Young's concepts of oppression: often oppression is not the result of direct pressure by one or a few tyrants. Rather, oppression is mostly structural in nature, and causes lie in "unquestioned norms, habits, and symbols, in the assumptions underlying institutional rules and the collective consequences of following those rules" (184). This is why awareness is the first and most important step; oppression manifests unconsciously. Hawkins explains that the small actions of a large collective of individuals daily contributes to the maintaining and reproducing of oppressive structures, but that these individuals do not realise or think they are doing so (184). Since practices of solidarity are based on acknowledgement and visibility of oppressed groups it should be effective in combatting unknowingly upholding the oppressive structures that are currently in place.

Worldbuilding in speculative fiction

The environment and human culture's relation to it thus seem crucial to investigate as part of developing more solidarity with nature. However, the world or setting has often been downplayed in favour of analysing the plot or characters in narratives, writes Mark Wolf (1). Recently narratologists have started paying more attention to studying worldbuilding (Herman, David; Wolf, Mark J. P.; Zaidi, Leah). Imagined worlds can be sites of possibilities, combining the known and unknown – creating a place that may make readers more aware of the world they inhabit themselves (7). As Erin James has argued in her book *The Storyworld Accord: Econarratology and Postcolonial Narratives*, though fictional narratives may not solve environmental problems they can nonetheless provide "respect for comparison,

difference, and subjectivity,” which is in turn able to open the way to insightful and well-informed discourse on environments and the policies that regulate them (208). In addition to a greater awareness of people’s physical environment, Leah Zaidi argues that different perspectives on the systems behind the appearance of everyday life in imagined worlds allow readers to reflect on their own predominant political or cultural constructions. Deconstructing these kind of systems through narrativity could potentially even inspire ideas of social change (20). Zapf agrees, and adds that imaginative literature does not just express or represent the ideologies of present-day constructions of power and discourse, but that it has the potential to break out of these structures: socially in resisting “modern consumer society”, and ecologically in resisting the “ideological dominance and discursive appropriation of other-than-human-nature” (66-67).

There is no one definition for worldbuilding as each narrative will apply its own unique use and understanding of creating an imagined world, but this thesis will follow Zaidi’s interpretation. She defines worldbuilding as the construction process of a “complete and plausible imaginary world that serves as a context for a story” (17). Creating imagined worlds means that these worlds will operate on certain rules dependent on the world’s context, which in turn allows for imagining a reality that extends beyond the narrative. This is what creates the potential for understanding the systems and rules that drive these imagined worlds, says Zaidi (18). She contends that in speculative fiction the world is more explicitly and extensively described, which as a result gives a more accurate overview of the imagined world’s context in relation to the narrative (20). Worldbuilding does not only refer to the narrator describing the landscape; it can also involve characters’ speech, their actions and the ways they relate to their environmental surroundings. When these things are made part of the narrative, the setting is specifically made present. In the case of Jemisin’s novels, the physical environment of Earth seems to have been shaped into a place that is decidedly unfriendly

where human life is concerned; regular earthquakes, tsunamis, and volcanic outbursts followed by poisonous gas and ashfall make it a hazardous place to live. Precisely because the environment is so dangerous, it majorly influences the lives and actions of the narrative's characters, as well as how they relate to their Earth. The construction of this imagined world and the relation between its context and the actors in the narrative will be analysed in more detail later.

Speculative fiction is known for its emphasis on worldbuilding; Brian Aldiss argues that speculative fiction's "greatest successes" are those that involve the relation of humans to their "changing surroundings and abilities" (29). Speculative fiction thus explores the possibilities inherent in the changing relation between the human and the environment, which makes it particularly suited to reimagine the world. Moreover, it offers "imaginative spaces for reflection on fundamental issues regarding our place in relation to earth," argues Pak (8). Pak refers specifically to narratives that involve planetary adaptation in order to create environmental situations that are suitable to support human life, but his argument can also be applied to worldbuilding in speculative fiction more generally. The fact that worldbuilding has been forgotten in narratology for a long time is also related to that speculative fiction as a genre has been academically neglected. This thesis will show that both are increasingly relevant in a time of environmental crisis and climate change.

Definitions of science fiction and fantasy have been difficult to establish due to the genres' overlap and creative literary potential. Indeed, Chris Pak argues that the genre of science fiction can be characterised as a "search for a definition" (6). Leah Zaidi writes that science fiction can be categorised as a subset of speculative fiction, and defines it as a genre that "embraces alternative realities" (16). Carl Malmgren defines science fiction as having to do with "the known and the unknown," while fantasy deals with "the real and unreal" (275). These terms themselves remain necessarily vague; science fiction narratives set in for

example different solar systems or yet undiscovered galaxies could very well be argued to be unreal as well. Because of their overlap, Malmgren combines the two genres into what he calls science fantasy. Science fantasy then works with the potential of impossibilities that fantasy offers, while using science fiction's "systematic and methodical ways of apprehending, comprehending, and appropriating the physical world" (275).

Jemisin's trilogy *The Broken Earth* can arguably be classified as science fantasy; it explores impossible and fantastical powers called orogeny that allow people to manipulate energy in the form of heat. Orogenes work particularly with the energy of the Earth, which means that they are able to do things such as moving tectonic plates or stopping the outburst of a volcano. Conventionally, the worlds of fantasy novels do not or do not fully adhere to natural laws or "scientific epistemology," argues Malmgren. Science fiction narratives on the other hand, though also usually introducing one or more impossible factors, do follow scientific logic (261). *The Broken Earth* trilogy, once it has established the fantastical element of orogeny, systematically follows the natural laws of the world, and hence falls into the intersection of these two genres called science fantasy. By utilising aspects from both science fiction and fantasy, Jemisin's trilogy offers new ways of portraying the relationship between people and the environment they live in.

Holistic Worldbuilding and the Carrier Bag Theory

This thesis builds on Ursula Le Guin's ideas in her essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" to analyse the relationship between human culture and nature in *The Broken Earth* trilogy. Le Guin's essay helps to understand worldbuilding in an ecocritical way, as she argues for a kind of worldbuilding that is holistic in nature. In holistic worldbuilding the interactions between nature and culture are central to the narrative, and it endeavours to rethink the position conflict takes in a story. This helps to redefine what culture and nature

mean in human society. Le Guin argues that predominantly, stories have been arrow narratives: a story that follows a hero on its straight path towards his goal driven by conflict. The narrative starts at a beginning point, and like an arrow, should hit its mark in a straight line. In addition, conflict is central to the narrative, just like the Hero protagonist himself – the story will not be of any worth if the narrative does not revolve around him as an all-important figure. Le Guin illustrates these three arrow rules with the example of prehistoric hunters that fight and kill a mammoth. The hunt was dangerous, someone was killed, but the heroic man prevailed in the end and brought home meat. Though people of that time will have chiefly relied on vegetables, seeds, fruits and grains, and on gathering rather than hunting, the hunting story is the kind of tale that is exciting and memorable. It contains action, and a Hero. Specifically, a very powerful Hero that presses all those that listen to his tale into his service; they become secondary to him. Notably, Le Guin uses a masculine pronoun for the Hero, which indicates the predominance of male heroes in arrow narratives. Indeed, her rejection of the arrow narrative with its conflict makes her an outsider, but her gender also plays a role: “That's right, they said. What you are is a woman. Possibly not human at all, certainly defective. Now be quiet while we go on telling the Story of the Ascent of Man the Hero” (151). If the important Hero protagonist is a man who says that this is a violent killer story where powerful men flex their strength, then it undoubtedly will be if no one opposes him. And even if someone were to oppose him, if that someone is a woman their voice will promptly be dismissed. Unfortunately, Le Guin says, people have let themselves become part of this killer story to the extent that they no longer question it. As a result, culture as a whole started to be explained as “originating from and elaborating upon the use of long, hard objects for sticking, bashing, and killing” (151).

Le Guin writes that this made her reconsider her position within culture – she did not feel that human culture should only be based around violence and conflict. The Carrier Bag

Theory of human evolution, however, provided a more complex view and understanding of human culture. Many theorists believe that one of the earliest cultural inventions must have been a bag, carrier or container: they could for example be used to take things home in, or store for later use. This shape of a sack or a bag is also what Le Guin believes to be the best and most fitting shape for a narrative. She applies the Carrier Bag evolution theory to creating stories: by holding numerous things, various words and meanings that have different relationships to each other, it is possible to create a complex and layered story. Moreover, a Hero is no longer a Hero when carried around in a bag; he has to share his place and is no longer able to occupy a solitary pedestal (153). This draws attention away from the Hero to other elements in a narrative. Though conflict may be one of these elements, it does not have to be the only thing that drives the narrative. Conflict, just like the protagonist, are merely part of a larger whole. Le Guin seems to argue that this larger whole should be an important part of the story; this provides the opportunity to explore how people relate to the larger whole, the world, around them. Instead of focusing on the hero whose path is often one of destruction, be it nature or people or both, looking at how a variety of people function within larger cultures and societies will show the ways in which they try to live *with* their environment.

This is important because, Ursula Heise writes in “The Hitchhiker’s Guide to Ecocriticism,” if nature is seen as something to be conquered and dominated, people will “manipulate it technologically and exploit it economically” (507). This results in nature being viewed only as merchandise, which alienates people from the nature they live in and depletes human life of “the significance it had derived from living in and with nature”. Moreover, it will ultimately lead to a slow but sure destruction of everything people subsist on (507). If nature is considered only in terms of human profit, and not respected and acknowledged as both different from and similar to human culture, it hurts nature’s value and those that dwell in it. Heise’s emphasis on nature as an environment that humans live in and depend on

invokes Plumwood's practices of solidarity with nonhuman nature, and the need for a consideration of elements besides that of the solitary human hero.

The straight arrow story is problematic as it ignores what Rob Nixon calls "slow violence": the at times imperceptible destruction of the planet that occurs gradually over time, a "delayed destruction" that is often not considered violence at all (2). Violence is generally thought to be a singular event or action that happens very quickly, and is often "explosive and spectacular" which makes it highly visible. Things like climate change happen slowly over time, which has resulted in an underrepresentation of their urgency culturally and politically (2-3). It is not visible, sensational, and there is no clear end or beginning that the Hero can conquer. That is because it touches the lives of many people very gradually. Nixon writes that the main victims of slow violence concerning the changing environment are the poor. He illustrates this with the example of Lawrence Summer's proposal, then president of the World Bank, to export the toxic waste of richer nations and countries to Africa, a very poor continent. This would relieve the pressure richer countries were facing from environmentalist activists about garbage dumps and other industrially produced waste. Nixon shows with this that Africa's ecosystems were by capitalist standards considered disposable, as well as the people who dwelled in it (4).

These kind of slow violence structures can in turn promote other kinds of violence, like domestic abuse or racism, says Nixon (10). It is both unsurprising and understandable that this should happen in cultures where the environment has been made vulnerable. It threatens the livelihood of the people that live there, which gives rise to frustration. This frustration may then exacerbate into violence against socially more vulnerable groups, like women. Women in Kenya were also disadvantaged by environmental degradation in other ways, writes Nixon: after colonists stole their land and individualised and masculinised property, women remained the main workers of their land. Doing so became increasingly difficult, however, because of

things such as soil erosion and deforestation. Women were the ones who had to “walk the extra miles to fetch water and firewood,” and women were the ones who now had to manage the now poorer soil (140). In addition, people may also start to feel the need for a scapegoat in order to release some of their frustration. This can be seen in *The Broken Earth* trilogy as well; in order for certain elite groups to thrive, others, in this case the orogenes, must be oppressed, and regular people who experience fear because of uncertain and threatening environmental circumstances revert to racism to blame orogenes for their situation.

In order to address the slow degradation of the environment it is evident that nature should be approached from a holistic standpoint from which everything is connected to everything else. Violence, poverty and oppression that are implicitly or explicitly part of a culture have a big influence on the state of the environment, even though cause and effect may overlap, intersect and not always have one clear source, as Nixon has outlined. The concept of holistic worldbuilding acknowledges the link between culture and nature, considering the effect cultural elements have on environmental circumstances and vice versa. It follows Zapf’s convictions in his essay “Literary Ecology and the Ethics of Texts” that human culture should not be considered separate from “ecological processes and natural energy cycles”. Instead, he argues that human culture is interdependent with nature, while simultaneously recognised to have “relative independence and self-reflexive dynamics” as a cultural process (851). As I will demonstrate in the next chapter, *The Broken Earth* trilogy’s approach to worldbuilding stresses this element, and shows that nature and human culture are interrelated with each other rather than being binary oppositions.

Chapter 2: The People versus the Planet

Jemisin highlights the role of the environment in human culture by creating situations of tension and conflict. In her trilogy, these can be broken down into two major conflicts: the conflict between the Earth and humans, and the conflict between people of different cultural groups. The following two chapters will analyse how ecological and cultural aspects are interwoven through world-building in the trilogy, and how this ultimately encourages a rethinking of the relationship between nature and culture. The novel brings up important questions about how to live sustainably; not only environmentally sound, but socially and culturally sound as well. By considering the various elements that make up a culture, such as language, customs, religion, and cultural stories or lore, as well as the ways in which political and other culturally important systems have been formed it is possible to obtain a better grasp of how a culture views and interacts with its ecological environment. Combined with a consideration for the culture's environmental conditions, such as climate, infrastructure and other geological factors, this analysis offers a holistic approach to worldbuilding. It will consider the social dynamics between different cultural groups, and what the relation of these is to their physical environment.

Geological setting of the imagined world

In order for the reader to fully understand the environmental context the narratives take place in, the geological setting of the planet is established in several ways. One of these is by including a map (see figure 1, page 21), which acts as a visual aid and also gives a concrete overview of the setting as a whole, the latter of which is a feature of holistic worldbuilding. The continent lies across three tectonic plate boundaries. Two are named; the Minimal Plate and the Maximal Plate. On both the east and west coast there are several islands, and in the south a larger separate piece is called the Antartics. The continent is divided into three main

parts: in the North there are the Arctics, followed by the Nomidlats in the middle. The Merz desert separates the Nomidlats from the Somidlats, and between these two regions the capital Yumenes can be found. The presence of the map stresses the importance of the environment as physical space in which the narrative takes place: here the reader can see exactly where people have settled in accordance with the environment they find themselves in. However, though there are different elements of the world represented, the information is still rather limited, and therefore as a whole does not contribute that much to the holistic worldbuilding this thesis concerns itself with.

In addition to the map, Hoa's narrative voice illustrates a rich and detailed physical landscape to help ground the reader in the physical context the narrative takes place in. These descriptions are again characteristic of holistic worldbuilding; instead of solely concentrating on a single hero, the trilogy pays attention to a variety of elements of which the larger whole is made up. Hoa spends time on the infrastructure, architecture, and political systems. This also contributes to the reader's understanding of how the imagined world came to be, rather than appearing out of nowhere. Hoa explains that though large, Yumenes is not unusual because of its size. There are other large cities situated along the equator, but Yumenes is exceptional because of its continued stability – it has existed for twenty-seven centuries. As a result, the city's architectural features like its walls, buildings, lanterns and balconies are built “not for safety, not for comfort, not even for beauty, but for bravery” (Fifth, 2). Everywhere else cities and towns have been built for survival, and as such the buildings have to last even through earthquakes or other environmental crises. In Yumenes, there are delicate mosaics, thin-walled buildings and rather than cobblestone that is easy to replace, it boasts smooth roads of asphalt. Yumenes is also where meetings of the leaders of the Empire take place and where the Emperor is kept. When Hoa is describing the setting the narrative takes place in he thus includes the infrastructural elements of large and small cities, and establishes where the

political power is situated, and why. The Empire was able to grow as it did because its Seasonal laws, the rules of stonelore, proved people survived the Fifth Seasons. The laws' planning took into account things such as architecture, food storage, agricultural layout, labour division by use-castes, education, finance and defensive strategies. The Nomidlats and Somidlats regions voluntarily joined the Empire so that they could profit from these successful survival laws as well. People thus also adapted to their environment politically to optimise their chances of survival. The political background and infrastructure are very clearly laid out as results from the environmental situation the people of the Stillness find themselves in, and show that in addition to smaller scale events the trilogy also takes the time and effort to illustrate the imagined world on a larger scale.

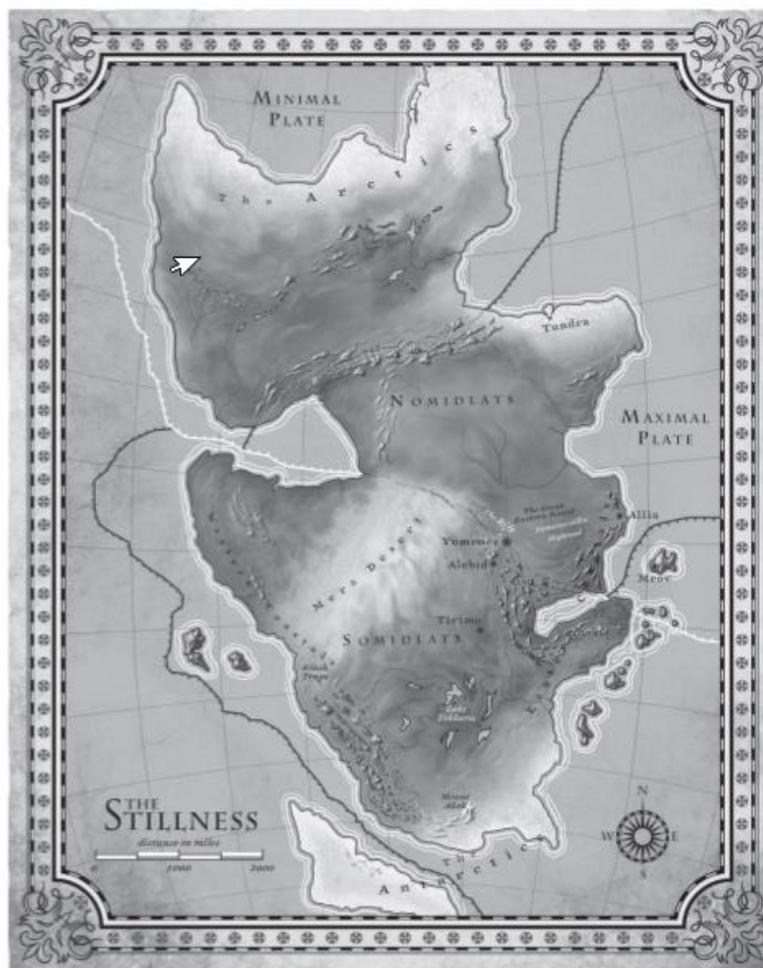


Fig 1. Map of the Stillness from: Jemisin, N.K. *The Fifth Season*. Orbit Books, 2015.

The position of Stonelore in society

In the trilogy, the geological setting is the foundation the culture of the Stillness is based on. Stonelore is the biggest and most elaborate example in the trilogy of how people have adapted to their environment culturally: stonelore contains the Stillness' cultural tales and rules. This section will look at how the environmental and ecological aspects of the trilogy's imagined world have shaped its culture, and how culture has framed and shaped the environment in return. The high amount of tectonic activity is explained by calling the planet Father Earth, who is effectively personified as an angry, vengeful entity that besides awe and anger inspires mostly fear. Father Earth seeks to destroy all human life, and it is because of his wrath that there is an increased amount of tectonic movement, causing earthquakes, volcanic eruptions and tsunamis. In addition to these, sometimes an environmental disaster evolves into circumstances that create widespread alterations in nature for at least six months, per designation of the Old Sanze Empire. In an appendix at the end of the novels, there is a catalogue of these events that were recorded prior to and since the Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation, which is the ruling Empire. These are what people call a Fifth Season or a Season for short. In this way the cultural tales explain the environmental situation people live in, and give cultural meaning to natural events.

Stonelore also provides an overview of how environmental circumstances have led to the current situation, which carries an unsettling familiarity to today's environmental issues such as climate change. According to the stories, there was a time where Father Earth actually did his best to provide an as suitable as possible environment for life to thrive. For example, he created the four seasons of winter, spring, summer and autumn so that life would be able to evolve in predictable and even cycles. Though he did not create life itself, he was "pleased and fascinated" by it (Fifth, 379). Yet as time passed, people started to abuse the planet. They poisoned his waters, killed much of all the other life and drilled through the Earth's crust. On

top of all these things, the orogenes committed the unforgivable sin of destroying Father Earth's only child. The lore remains vague on what this only child was, but it is later revealed that this was in fact the Moon; it was slung into space, out of its orbit around the Earth. In return, Father Earth's surface cracked into pieces, killing almost all life in this first and worst Fifth Season, called the Shattering. Through luck and chance few humans survived. Though the catalyst of Father Earth's wrath was because of the loss of the Moon, everything that happened before is exactly what Heise is concerned about in "The Hitchhiker's Guide to Ecocriticism": the exploitation and destruction of the planet will lead to eventual degradation of people's environment, which will in turn hurt them. In the trilogy, too, the environment has lost part of its value for those who dwell in it, albeit more in the sense of loss of their safety and standard of living. And though orogenes are blamed for the Shattering, stonelore stories suggest that everyone had a part in abusing the planet environmentally. In a way this story serves as a warning to the reader for what happens when the planet continues to be treated poorly: not only the Earth's resentment, but also loss of life and loss of the environment's value as habitable space.

Another way in which stonelore has manifested the Stillness' culture is in its societal subgroupings. Depending on which subgrouping someone belongs to, it determines their place in society and their chances as survival. Stonelore has instructed the way Communities or Comms, which the novels define in their glossary of terms as "the smallest socio-political unit of the Imperial governance system" (Fifth, 459), are structured. Comms are the building blocks of society, and their structure is determined by the environment from the ground up. Comms work with use-castes, which determine the role and work a person will perform in their Comm. Following the imagined world's stonelore, this makes sense: this way it is easier to assign specific groups of people specific tasks. Strongbacks, Resistant, Breeders, Innovators, and Leadership are the seven use-castes are most common in the Empire. Each

has to do with the survival and safety of the Comm: Strongbacks perform surveillance, Resistants take on health and hygiene related tasks, Breeders regulate a healthy and appropriately sized Comm, Innovators are inventors and intellectuals, and Leadership make sure that all these tasks within the Comm are running smoothly. During a Season, the desirability of certain use-castes can differ wildly. Each use-caste has their regular tasks, but during a Season there are added responsibilities. The usefulness of these determines this desirability. Medical knowledge is for example valued much more highly during a Season than physical prowess; Strongbacks are usually the first ones to be kicked out by a Comm. People that lose their home to natural disasters or because they are forced to leave their Comm become Commless. This is especially dangerous during a Season, because it means they will have no shelter, food or medical care. The environmental circumstances therefore not only dictate the role and tasks someone has to perform in a Comm, but also how secure their position is in society.

Father Earth takes a position in people's language, as well. Since language is one of the major ways in which people express themselves, the fact that Father Earth here, too, is part of it proves again the immensity of his presence in people's daily lives. Though common curse words exist, most foul language is related to the environment. Examples of curse words are "rust," "ruster," "fire-under-Earth," "Earthfires," "rusting Earth," "Evil Earth" and "Earth damn it" (Fifth, 72; 290; 21; 88; 108; 126; 56). Ruster refers to the fact that Tablet Three, one of the tablets that contains the cultural lore and rules people live by, says: "Trust wood, trust stone, but metal rusts" (Fifth, 171). Syenite at one point comments that "[n]o one puts metal gates on anything they actually want to keep secure," in a manner that makes it clear this is common knowledge (Fifth, 135). Aside from rust, acid rain common to Fifth Seasons will dissolve metal, and earthquakes will warp it out of shape. These references show that as far as holistic worldbuilding is concerned, the language and curse words have been very carefully

shaped to align with the natural environment people find themselves in. As for other cultural elements such as religious beliefs, there does not seem to be a dominant or widespread religion. When Alabaster, Essun's former mentor from the Fulcrum, tries to explain to Essun that the stories about Father Earth are real and that he is alive, she says that those stories only exist to explain "what's wrong with the world," and here she makes a reference to religion: "Like those weird cults that crop up from time to time. I heard of one that asks an old man in the sky to keep them alive every time they go to sleep. People need to believe there's more to the world than there is" (Obelisk, 165-166). When other religious groups emerge, they are branded as strange cults, indicating their position as unimportant. From Essun's comment it thus seems that though most people do not believe in Father Earth, he remains the dominant cultural lore that dictates people's lives, since cultural practices like language and religion are shaped by his existence.

Stonelore thus asserts itself in many ways as the main factor that structures society, and can be seen as the rules that govern the society of the imagined world. The rules and customs of stonelore are described in extensively and in great detail. As Zaidi has argued, these details should also make it possible to investigate the systems that drive the imagined world more critically, and allow the reader to reflect on the systems present in their own world (20). For example, stonelore is not the same everywhere. Though everyone knows the stories, in bigger and wealthier cities official stonelore is paid less attention. Instead, people like to listen to poplorists, who tell stories only for the sake of entertainment instead of using it as a way to warn or prepare people for natural crises. Because of their wealth people have more free time to do so; in smaller and poorer Comms everyone has to help with farming the land. The variations in stonelore stories depending on the size and wealth of a Comm is already an indication that unlike believed by most, stonelore is prone to change. It is also stonelore that rules all orogenes are dangerous and evil. In a conversation with Alabaster, Syenite says that

it is impossible to change stonelore. Stonelore earned its name because the first lore was written in stone, so that it “couldn’t be changed to suit fashion or politics,” and so that it wouldn’t decay (Fifth, 4). Yet Alabaster points out that stonelore changes all the time: stonelore is said to be recorded on three stone Tablets, but Alabaster says there are more than three. Besides,

“[t]here’s a reason Tablet Two is so damaged: someone, somewhere back in time, decided that it wasn’t important or was wrong, and didn’t bother to take care of it. Or maybe they even deliberately tried to obliterate it, which is why so many of the early copies are damaged in exactly the same way” (Fifth, 125).

When other old tablets were found in abandoned cities, they contained stonelore too – but it differed drastically from the current lore. This means that the cultural ideas that have shaped the current situation on the Stillness are just that: current, and shaped by human hands, not necessarily passed down for generations, and perhaps altered to put certain groups of people in a position of power and others in those of dependence. It also implies that if the cultural system can be reshaped, the environmental situation could be too.

Furthermore, stonelore may be used to entertain people with stories and cautionary tales, but it also provides instructions on how everyday efforts should always prepare for a potential Season. It could thus be said that Stonelore focuses on preventive measures and practical advice once disaster does happen. Yet it does not advise or teach people to understand the Earth and the ecological impacts of its tectonic activity; it only teaches them how to deal with it. Architecture should be centred around “the hanging frame, the center beam” for optimal stability during earthquakes (Fifth, 59), and warns that animals may suddenly evolve into species dangerous to humans because of environmental changes. During a Season, the gates are guarded, the market is closed “so that no one will hoard goods or fix prices” (Fifth, 46), and there is a curfew at dusk. People learn these things from a very young

age, and everyone follows the steps to the letter. This also means they follow the prescribed tasks at home like weaving, preserving foods, and mending clothes. Indeed, these rules are “simultaneously meant to be practical and to keep a large group of anxious people busy” (Fifth, 46). However, their goal is prevention and survival, not understanding and least of all, questioning. People are kept busy with handiwork so that they do not start to doubt the rules they are following. This means that the possibility of solidarity and empathy with nature is rather slim, as well: people are not encouraged to think outside of the stories stonelore gives them.

The personified planet

Relating to the planet Earth as an entity can be compared to James Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis. In his hypothesis, Lovelock challenges the idea that the world is not a series of random processes; rather, there is a purpose and the planet can be considered as an actant. Lovelock proposes that the Earth works as a system where conditions for life are made favourable by life itself (9). He thus sees the Earth as one big system. Lovelock defines Gaia as “a complex entity involving the Earth’s biosphere, atmosphere, oceans, and soil,” the whole of which acts as a feedback system that aims to create an environment optimal for life. By maintaining these kind of conditions in a relatively constant manner, the planet achieves homeostasis (10). In the trilogy it seems like Father Earth has done the same: he made the planet a habitable place for humans to live. However, his only child, the Moon, was flung into space and what consequently occurred could be seen as a kind of reverse Gaia: Father Earth starts persecuting humans as punishment. This means he has shifted the focus from providing a liveable habitat to a focus of doing the opposite.

Gaia may not be an accurate way to portray a planet; it simplifies nature’s complexity into one single person. It may also lead to the situation currently present in the Stillness,

where Father Earth is simply evil, angry and an enemy, and nothing more. He is, as Syenite describes at one point as the “hateful, waiting planet beneath their feet. A planet that wants nothing more than to destroy the life infesting its once-pristine surface” (Fifth, 146). The stories about Father Earth are only considered fantastical tales for children, and after generations people have gradually started to forget the reason Father Earth is so angry with them in the first place. If Father Earth is reduced to the role of the villain and is only associated with anger, there is no room for considering any complexity in his reasoning or his feelings. Though the planet has been personified, people do not necessarily consider Father Earth a live and complex being, and as such feel no empathy for him.

However, considering the planet a whole living, sentient being does open a path for people to have a relationship with their planet, and this may inspire sympathy, empathy and solidarity. This possibility is explored in the trilogy as well: there is a parallel between Essun’s desperate quest to find her daughter Nassun and kill her husband Jija, and Father Earth’s outrage at his child being taken away. Essun is able to relate to and empathise with Father Earth as an alive entity because of this similarity: her answer to the question “What does any living thing want, facing an enemy so cruel that it stole away a child?” is, just like Father Earth’s, “*Vengeance*” (Obelisk, 207). Nassun, too, understands the Earth’s anger related to her own: as an orogene, Nassun has been feared and hated, and at every turn she has been met with violence. Her anger at the injustice of everything having been taken from her resonates with Father Earth’s anger at the theft of his silver or magic, the thing that sustains his life, and his child. When Nassun travels to the Earth’s core and sees the magic around Father Earth, the “stuff underneath orogeny, which is made by things that live or once lived,” she understands that this is “because *a planet* is a living breathing thing” (Stone, 242). When people before the Shattering succeeded in harnessing magic, they soon wanted more than what their own lives, and all the magic that had accumulated on the surface over time, could

provide. Yet when they took to mining magic from the Earth's core they did not realise that the fact that there was so much magic present there meant the Earth was a live being, too. Therefore, in their failure to recognise the Earth as alive, people understood it only as something to exploit. Had they understood the Earth in terms they could relate to, they may have also realised taking magic without permission would equal slowly destroying the planet's heart. Nassun realises that though it may not speak in words, the Earth has its own way of communicating, such as using reverberations. Though it may differ from humans in that way, it is still capable of feeling and its existence should have been respected, just like orogenes' should have been. The trilogy suggests imagining the Earth as an entity that, just like humans, is able to feel pain and hurt, albeit in different ways, and it shows that characters do feel empathy for Father Earth when they imagine him like that. This way, the Earth's complexity and its simplified personification are two visions that can exist alongside each other, informing rather than negating each other.

Chapter 3: The Orogenes versus the stills

Orogenes' place in society

As shown above, the natural environment largely dictates the relationship between the people's culture and their planet, and how they have adjusted their lives to survive. The following chapter will focus specifically on the cultural conflict between the orogenes and the stills. The orogenes' oppression is intertwined with both the geological setting and the way the Stillness has evolved culturally. It is also the real reason Old Sanze has managed to stay in power and the reason people have been able to survive for so long. In the Second Yumenescene Lore Council's Declaration on the Rights of the Orogenically Afflicted it is affirmed that Yumenes' and all of Old Sanze's position are "thoroughly identified with the physical integrity of the Stillness – for the obvious interest of long-term survival" (Obelisk, 258). The Declaration holds that in order to maintain the land, seismic equilibrium is of the utmost importance. Orogenes are able to control this seismic activity and therefore, "[a] blow at their bondage is a blow at the very planet" (258). According to the stories, the orogenes were originally to blame for the outrage of the planet and the ensuing increased tectonic activity. Yet they are also the ones that are able to manipulate this activity, and so they are vital to the safety of all of the continent. In order to make the orogenes do exactly what Old Sanze wants them to do they have been placed in a position of dependency on the Empire, and this has been done exactly because the Old Sanze is dependent on the orogenes' power.

Orogenes are those born with the ability to control the energy of the Earth. This means that aside from preventing and causing earthquakes, they can also control temperature. In and of itself this may seem more like a useful skill than a threat, but the hatred and fear of orogenes is deeply rooted in the Stillness' culture. If there is not enough energy around them or if they have been not taught how to access and use it properly, orogenes can hurt or kill others by accident if people are within what is called their torus, their zone of control.

Because of this, and because their powers are seen as related to the evil Father Earth, orogenes are feared, hated, and misunderstood by stills. There a lot of misconceptions about how orogeny really works by the larger public, and as a result there exist all kinds of myths about the orogenes' supposed monstrosity. In its most simple form, orogeny is a defence mechanism that unconsciously and automatically responds to potential threats. I would argue that this instinctive and innate reaction to protect themselves is both natural and understandable, as most people naturally tend to react in ways that they believe will protect them most. It is true that orogenes express this emotion in a different way, and that left untrained, their powers may be dangerous and unstable. But when properly exercised it is possible to control these powers, and even use them to protect others. Yet their abilities have been framed in such a way to make it look like a grotesque abnormality. Stills ignore the similarities between the orogenes and themselves, and hyperfocus on the one feature that sets them apart. As a result, orogenes are villainised.

This is no accident. The fact that orogenes are depicted as monsters is precisely why their oppression is seen as justified. Stonelore labels orogenes as dangerous, but this danger has also actively been championed by the political powers of the Stillness. An example of this can be seen in the Lore Council's Declaration; in order to keep orogenes enslaved, it declares them an "inferior and dependent species" (Obelisk, 258). Orogenes are officially not considered human per law, and this is an important element of the Stillness' worldbuilding: everything has been built on the orogenes' inferiority. If they really are so dangerous, it is only perfectly logical that they are brought to the training institution called the Fulcrum, where they are taught how to control and use their orogeny through brutally harsh education. It only follows that if they are dangerous beasts they must be subjected to violence so that they will not hurt 'normal' people. As Nixon has outlined in his theory of slow violence, there is a visible link between cultural instabilities and environmental pressures. The environmental

instabilities of the Stillness generate feelings of uncertainty about people's livelihood, and makes them feel frustrated and afraid. People will then look for a scapegoat they can blame. This kind of violence is directed to vulnerable groups; in the trilogy's case the orogenes. They have been legally made vulnerable because they have been declared nonhuman, and inferior to humans. This makes it easy to use orogenes for releasing frustration: there are no repercussions, and they may thus be treated however people like. Those in the positions of power have effectively created a group of people that functions as a scapegoat for the environmental situation and who simultaneously do the work to keep people safe from these environmental dangers to the best of their abilities. The fact that they do so under the threat of psychological and physical abuse and death is justified by the fact that they are not human anyway.

The killer story society

Going back to Le Guin's essay "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction" it can clearly be seen that this situation has created a version of the socio-cultural killer story. Those that have determined the cultural structure of the society of the Stillness are also the ones that narratively hold the power; in the sense that they determine how the scenario will unfold itself. Though not entirely full of hateful propaganda, Stonelore has a tight grip on people's daily lives, and Old Sanze does as well. They have determined, like the Hero, that this is violent killer story in which they are good and orogenes are bad. Anyone who opposes them is taken down immediately, because they threaten the power of the pedestal the Hero has managed to take for himself. Over time, a society preoccupied with surviving can fall prone to accepting this kind of story. Even those that suffer from this situation can start failing to really see what is being done to them. "[Y]ou can't change stonelore," Syenite says (Fifth, 124). She has spent every waking moment of her life with the idea that the law is the law: a rule that

makes her not a person. Culture, exactly like Le Guin has pointed out, has started to be explained as a violent dynamic in which racist ideologies allow the Hero to reign supreme.

To highlight the racist reality orogenes face, Plumwood's five features of dualism in her book in the superior-inferior dynamic can be applied to orogenes' position in society. She outlines these features in her book *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*. The first feature is backgrounding or denial, where the contributions of the inferior social class the superior social classes depend on are denied or played down. Though orogeny is essential for the survival of all people, it is not seen or acknowledged as such. Had their position been one where their skills were appreciated, people would have regarded them with gratitude instead of hatred. Secondly, hyperseparation enforces the differences between the inferior and superior class, to the extent where these differences are not a "difference of degree [...]" but a major difference in kind" (Plumwood, 50). Orogenes have been legally declared not human, and this cultural image is rooted so deeply that orogenes are for example believed not to feel cold like regular people do. The third feature is relational definition: here the inferior class is defined by their lacking some quality that the superior class possesses, or defined only by a quality that can be used by the superior class. Both of these again hold true for orogenes. They are legally different from "we of good and wholesome lineage" (Obelisk, 258), and they are defined as a person by the one abnormal quality they possess, the ability to manipulate heat. They exist only as tools; none of their other skills, interests, feelings or desires matter. The fourth feature overlaps with this – objectification or instrumentalism means the inferior class is regarded only as an object or resource to be used by the superior class. Lastly, stereotyping the inferior class means they are regarded as a homogenous group without acknowledging individual differences. All orogenes are regarded as dangerous and evil; an orogene cannot be a human being at the same time. When parents find out their child is an orogene, they believe the child must have been tricking them until then; that they are not really a child but a monster

in the body of a child. All these features have become deeply ingrained parts of the Stillness' culture, to the point where people's unconscious actions contribute to maintaining the status quo without questioning it.

Yet the social situation the trilogy uses as its backdrop also illustrates that this single perspective is a fabricated one. Garrard's argument that a weed is only a weed when it lives in the wrong place means the plan is only a weed in the eye of certain people. Orogenes are only dangerous and wrong because certain people have said so. The social constructs that society is built on only function because everyone believes in them. If people believe Father Earth is evil, then he *will* be evil. Father Earth has been given a specific label similar to what Garrard believes has been done to nature as a concept: it is manmade. The same thing has been done with those associated with Father Earth; orogenes' innate inferiority is something that has been meticulously crafted over time. This becomes explicit in a comment made by a past emperor shortly before the Fulcrum was founded:

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

The perspective that orogenes are only a dangerous complication also rules that anyone who opposes this view is silenced. This is only one perspective, however, and Essun encounters several alternatives to the dominant societal structure that demonises orogenes. In these other instances orogenes are valued for their ability to keep a Community safe from earthquakes, or they are acknowledged as a practical solution to surviving a Fifth Season. Here orogenes are put in positions of power and leadership, and they prove to be both capable and reliable. *The*

Broken Earth trilogy outlines the narrow-minded and harmful ideologies that rule the continent, but also offers glimpses of different possible ways of existing as a society.

Oppressor and oppressed

Clearly, the social and political power structures have heavily influenced the dynamic between stills and orogenes. The current state of conflict on the Stillness has taken a lot of work to create, and it requires the combination of ignorance and fear. To start, the general population is kept ignorant of what orogenic powers really are. The fact that strange myths about orogenes exist already proves that there is little known about their powers by the larger society, and the stills' fear of the unknown makes them wary and hostile towards orogenes. Yet this all starts with the fear of the oppressors themselves. Hoa said that "there are none so frightened, or so strange in their fear, as conquerors. They conjure phantoms endlessly, terrified that their victims will someday do back what was done to them" (Stone, 210). This fear comes from the insecurity that conquerors live with: they dread "the day when they are shown to be, not superior, but simply lucky" (Stone, 210). Legalising the Empire's superiority over orogenes is another example that gives those in power assurance, as it affirms what they want to believe and negates what they are afraid of. This way they can keep themselves wilfully ignorant: they close their eyes to everything they fear, and look only to what they want to believe is true. And, in order to bring those beliefs to fruition, those in power must make the larger public experience a similar kind of fear. The environmental pressures have created the perfect opportunity to do this. People are not interested in living with the environment. They want to survive it. There is no room in their minds for a holistic society in which culture and nature coexist peacefully. And those in positions of power take advantage of that, with lack of information and cultivating a society that functions on feeling afraid.

Orogenes are being kept ignorant to contribute to the oppressive scheme, as well. The Fulcrum is another instance where as much as possible knowledge about orogeny is kept in the dark. The Fulcrum teaches their orogenes to direct their awareness down into the Earth, and pull from that heat the required energy to perform their orogeny. Since the heat deep down in the planet is so extreme it can be borrowed to be converted into orogenic power. Yet there are many other ways to gather ambient energy – the Fulcrum’s teaching methods exist only because it prevents orogenes from directing their awareness anywhere else besides their immediate surroundings. It also directs attention away from what Essun describes as a kind of tension: “An energy, shiny and streaming. Potential. Intention” (Obelisk, 101). Orogeny is not only what Alabaster calls “energy distribution” (Obelisk, 203), it is also something else: the force of life. Nassun calls it silver, and Essun learns that in previous civilisations it was called magic. Here the trilogy addresses the fantastical aspect of orogeny, and Alabaster acknowledges that orogenic powers do not make sense: “I’ve told you before that what we do isn’t logical. To make the earth move we put something of ourselves into the system and make completely unrelated things come out” (Obelisk, 101). The fact that there is no word for the magical substance suggests not only that the Fulcrum do not seek to understand it, but that they actively prevent orogenes from trying to understand it as well. This lack of access of unlocking more of their power means that orogenes will be limited in their abilities, which in turn weakens their chances for rising against their oppressors.

This kind of distraction benefits the Empire in that it keeps the orogenes in their place. By keeping their attention on the ground rather than somewhere else, and their minds preoccupied with surviving day to day, orogenes will not be able to use their collective power to rebel. The obvious reasoning is because immediate survival has everything to do with the ground beneath people’s feet, not the sky. In order for Imperial orogenes to control earthquakes their attention must be focused on the surface. But more than that, if orogenes’

attention is free to wander they might find new and other ways to exercise their power that the Fulcrum cannot control. Essun meets people who use orogeny in different ways than she has ever thought of or realised were even possible, and there are of course the Obelisks. Hoa describes these as “huge and beautiful and a little terrifying: massive crystalline shards that hover amid the clouds, rotating slowly and drifting along incomprehensible flight paths” (Fifth, 8). Since they have never come close enough to Comms to pose a threat and all they do is drift high up in the sky no one really pays much attention to them. The general rules of stonelore dictate that any leftovers from ancient civilisations are likely dangerous and should be left alone, and so orogenes do not try to connect to it. Yet these Obelisks can act as amplifiers for orogeny provided the orogene that connects to them is powerful enough to wield that amount of power. Logically, the Empire would want to prevent orogenes from becoming so powerful they could destroy entire regions, because this would mean they could no longer be oppressed. Furthermore, orogenes might gain the power to take revenge on those who mistreated them. Thus, orogenes are stopped from revolting by keeping them busy and weighed down with surviving and distracting them with directing their focus to the earth beneath them.

Using orogenes as band-aids for the environmental problems is a temporary solution. Rather than dealing with Father Earth’s rage at the root cause, orogenes function as fuel for the continued conflict between Father Earth and the people. Those in power are not interested in solving the conflict; they need to keep it going so they can keep their subgrouped society under control. After all, if orogenes are so dangerous it begs the question: why are they allowed to exist at all? The rather simple answer is because Old Sanze needs them. To survive, but also specifically so that it does not have to address the original conflict between Father Earth and the people. Orogenes are absolutely essential to the existence and the power of the Empire, and so they cannot even be given the choice to opt out. Schaffa tells Nassun

that orogenes “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” (Stone, 178). The whole situation rather resembles concentrating on recycling rather than stopping the initial waste output caused by environmental pollution. And in this case the recyclables also keeps the initial issue going, which lets those in power keep that power. Orogenes thus function as temporary bandaids that will redirect attention away from the root cause, the conflict with Father Earth. The Empire knowingly does this so that they can continue to rule over the Stillness.

The things Old Sanze is doing are not random experiments that turned into unexpected successes. What the Empire is doing is effective; and it has worked before. Hoa’s background slowly reveals that Syl Anagist, the place he is originally from, has similar to the oppression of the orogenes been built on a system of exploitation. Hoa reveals that these systems only work because of the artificially created racial stereotypes and divides – because to the rules, “there is no greater threat than having no one left to oppress” (Stone, 334). By forcing people into cultural subgroupings, Syl Anagist was able to create reasons for conflict between them. Highlighting the differences and denying or minimising similarities brings about stereotyping, cultural bullying, and racism. It can lead to scenarios Hoa describes, where certain groups of people are eventually deemed “not *as* human as everyone else. Finally: not human at all” (Stone, 210). And when a whole culture is built, raised and educated on these assumptions, they become part of the key foundations for how this culture will identify itself. It may very well influence people’s understanding of relationships to anything that is different from their own specific cultural group; any non-human culture that differs from theirs may be found inferior and thus unimportant. As a result, these other cultures may be trampled upon, hunted or used for the glory, survival or power of this supposedly superior culture. After all, Hoa says, “*someone* must suffer, if the rest are to enjoy luxury” (Stone, 334). The luxuries of the

Stillness may be different, but the concept is the same. By separating stills and orogenes into two different groups there is a potential for conflict, and conflict justifies oppression. The suffering of orogenes means that the rest of humanity is safe.

The Broken Earth trilogy gives a complex and layered overview of its imagined world as a whole, even if the narrative is largely led by the conflicts in this imagined world. Though these two conflicts are central to the narrative, they are not the only things that drive the story. The development of the Stillness' culture can be traced back through history, and explained because of the cultural elements that triggered certain events. This attention to both fast and slow action is a clear feature of holistic worldbuilding. There is no straight arrow story in which one singular hero saves everyone: each subgroup in the Stillness has its role, and each is thus important in all of the Stillness' cultural system. In fact, by using examples of people who believe themselves to be the heroes that get to decide how the world works and the ensuing violent conflicts the trilogy illustrates just how dangerous heroes on pedestals can be. There is no singular journey, either: in fact, Essun's journey changes direction all the time. First her goal is to live a quiet life in Tirimo, then her quest is to find her daughter and kill her husband, which changes to building a new life in a different Comm where she ultimately takes up the task to bring back the Moon. This adaptability captures beautifully the way people will adjust their lives to their situation and setting. Le Guin's Carrier Bag theory defies the linearity that is the staple of many narratives, and Jemisin's trilogy does exactly that as well. Holistic worldbuilding does not mean to turn away from conflict: it means to recognise conflict as part of the whole. And by embracing conflict as part of the narrative it is possible to look at its sources, and how these can be improved to ultimately create a culture that practices solidarity and respect.

Chapter 4: Narrative techniques

The way the changing points of view in the trilogy are all linked to each other by Hoa's narrative voices shows the interrelatedness between the characters, and defies the straight arrow script of cultural and racial divide. It also suggests, no matter the differences in beliefs, that each person is connected to others, and that everyone is part of the same community at the root. In each book, there are chapters from three characters' point of view. In the first book, these are Damaya, Syenite and Essun. In the second book the large majority of the chapters are from Nassun and Essun's points of view. Schaffa features in this book as well, but he only narrates one chapter. In the third and last book, the points of view alternate between Essun, Nassun and Hoa. In addition to these changing points of view, there are a number of interludes spread throughout the first and second book. Interestingly, none of the characters narrate from the first person perspective. Essun, the main character of the trilogy, is narrated by addressing her as "you" by a narrator who remains unidentified for a long time. In the last novel, it is revealed that this narrator was Hoa, telling Essun's life story to herself. By doing this Jemisin presents a variety of perspectives, as well as perspectives from people that grow, change and shift. Yet Hoa insinuates that even though the various perspectives may be conflicting, or uncomfortable, they are still connected to each other:

"After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you. Damaya was herself *and* the family that rejected her *and* the people of the Fulcrum who chiselled her to a fine point. Syenite was Alabaster *and* Innon *and* the people of poor lost Allia and Meov. Now you are Tirimo *and* the ash-strewn road's walkers *and* your dead children...and also the living one who remains"
(Stone, 1).

Here Hoa applies holistic worldbuilding in the sense that all people are connected, and that each of them are, in their own way, part of each other. It suggests a planetary community in

which everyone is included. This goes against the subgrouping that led to much of the conflict in the first place, and thus also directly goes against the hero's power as single individual above the rest.

The trilogy uses its narrative voice to create holistic worldbuilding in that it presents a variety of different perspectives that each have a different understanding of the world around them. Like Zaidi and Zapf argued, multiple and different perspectives on the social, cultural and political systems that everyday life has been built on can deconstruct these systems and potentially inspire social change. This is the case for the reader, who reads chapters through several different characters' eyes, and in this manner is presented a variety of different opinions. Some examples of these are Alabaster, who wants radical change by bringing the moon back. Essun begrudgingly joins him in this, though she is mostly preoccupied with getting her daughter back. Nassun, the girl in question, wants to save Schaffa and plans to turn everyone into Stone Eaters to do so. The characters themselves are also given the opportunity to imagine other viewpoints. Nassun/Syenite has only ever been raised with the Fulcrum's ideas, but once she meets Alabaster he opens her eyes to all these new ideas of which the end goal is social change for the orogenes. And in order to acquire this, the relationship with the planet must change, because in order for Father Earth to finally relent his attack the moon must be brought back. As Wolf has said, characters and plot are often paid more attention than the environmental setting. In *The Broken Earth* trilogy, however, the plot and the characters in the trilogy are crucial to the narrative – but their cruciality lies in their relationship with the planet. It is through the characters' eyes and the plot that presenting different perspectives on the environmental setting are possible. Precisely because these perspectives clash with each other at times, characters are encouraged to reflect on what they believe. Though everyone's views on the world may differ, new and other perspectives are also what can ultimately inspire people to create and invent different ways to coexist with the world around them.

Since Hoa is the narrator of all the different points of view, the manner of storytelling is shaped by him as a person. It could be said that because he narrates everyone's lives, he holds quite a lot of power: he gets to decide what is true, what he chooses to say, what he skips over or what he elaborates on. Yet, though he is the main narrator, the way in which he narrates has been carefully so as not to be make Hoa into Le Guin's understanding of a straight-arrow narrative's hero. At times he is shown to doubt himself: "Hmm. No. I'm telling this wrong" (Stone, 1), or he stresses that he does not know everything. When he talks of Nassun, at one time he says that though he can imagine or speculate about what she thought, felt and did, he can not "*know*" (Stone, 1). Hoa says that he aims to tell everything as accurately as possible, while still having his own agenda and beliefs. The fact alone that he acknowledges that he is telling Essun her life's story in her mind and in her voice, and that by addressing her as "you" he tells her what to think, feel and know, already breaks the hero's narrative. Hoa admits that it is rude, even selfish, to assume Essun's perspective. His reason to do this anyway is that when he speaks as just himself, "it's difficult to feel like part of you. It is lonelier," and he asks Essun to let him continue (Obelisk, 280). In straight-arrow narratives, the hero is decidedly uninterested in the side characters. Other people are only part of the story so that it can progress exactly the way the hero wants it to. What Hoa does is the opposite – he cares about Essun, and emphasises how important their bond is to him. Instead of making Hoa the hero that decides the characters' narratives for them, the connection between them is highlighted.

Other narrative elements of note are that the first and second books contain short interludes in which Hoa speaks about subjects that are not directly related to one character's point of view. These interludes contribute to illustrating both the physical and cultural landscape of the imagined world. In one of these, for example, Hoa highlights the absence of islands and celestial objects in people's lives in the Stillness. These absences again have to do

with the environmental circumstances people live in: islands do exist, and some are even inhabited. Yet they usually form near breaks in the earth, which are prone to shakes, or on top of hot spots. Islands' existences therefore tend to be short-lived, and most people would never consider even going near them. The only continent people know and speak of is the Stillness. Though other continents may exist, faring out to sea is simply too dangerous, and travelling around the world is not possible. As for celestial objects; they exist, but for survival purposes people's attention is on the ground beneath them, not the sky above. Since the Moon has been missing for so long, they do not notice its absence. When Essun learns of the Moon, she does not know the word or its appearance. By focusing on the presence as well as absence of cartographical features that are part of the imagined world, the reader gets a more complete idea of what has influenced the world to become what it is in the narrative.

In addition to these interludes, there are notes from a variety of fields after each chapter: stonelore, letter exchanges, laws, political declarations, and so forth. These show how the cultural landscape has been built as a response to the dangerous environment, but also reveal the corruption of power in politics and academia. Some of the notes are explicit in this, others only imply. For example, in a note from research on the orogenes' sessapinae, the Seventh University adds their "appreciation to the Fulcrum for cadaver donation" (Fifth, 343). The fact that this many Fulcrum orogenes died implies that the Fulcrum is not merely a learning institution, and it says something about the indifference of an orogene's deceased body and the apparent dangers Fulcrum orogenes face every day during training. Several letter exchanges reveal that when someone researched orogenes' roles in incidents where natural disasters were prevented, they found that orogenes had many more times saved entire regions or Comms than was officially recorded. Orogenes often did this by sacrificing themselves, or they were killed afterwards. The scale of the potential disasters was so big that this meant that Fifth Seasons happened much more often than was commonly believed, and the findings

stressed the importance of orogenes for the maintaining of people's safety on a much more frequent basis than people were told. Yet when this researcher asked for the research to be published or continued funding, they were denied. A friend of theirs advised them to abandon the research entirely for their own safety: the funding comes from Sanze's old families, who will do everything to protect their legacy and their position of power: "You cannot go to people like that and ask them to fund a research project that makes heroes of roggas! You just can't. They'll faint, and when they wake up, they'll have you killed," (Stone, 286). These snippets of information show how prejudice and corruption steer researchers very firmly in certain directions that benefit those in power. Here it can clearly be seen again that the powerful want culture to be understood as the killer story, and that anything going against this idea will be silenced.

Conclusion

Jemisin has crafted a world in which the conflict between the Earth and its people has affected the conflict between orogenes and stills. People's natural environment has shaped their culture, and the cultural practices in the Stillness have an effect on nature. Additionally, the cultural developments in reaction to this unique environment have resulted in a racist and oppressive society where one cultural group is exploited. By making its imagined world of such great importance to the narrative, the trilogy's worldbuilding draws attention to the environment and the relationship between it and human culture. In the trilogy, the environment has become an actant as Father Earth, which raises awareness of the fact that human understandings and definitions of nature are always a human-made cultural construction. And, by engaging with the larger power structures that govern the imagined world, the novels suggest that the Stillness is in need of a redefinition of how its society is built up and governed, and consequently how this society understands the planet it lives on.

The trilogy stresses that how people position themselves to each other will also affect how they position themselves to the environment. Old Sanze is ruled by a handful of people whose power comes at the expense of others, and they have taken on a position of the Hero, whose egotism and obsession with victory through violence dictates the narrative. The trilogy shows that when people seize power by taking advantage of environmental pressures or instabilities, like the earthquakes and the Fifth Seasons, society continues to live in fear and ignorance, which means they continue to be at war with the Earth and amongst themselves. As a result, those in power that profit from these conflicts will continue to thrive at the cost of others. The message thus seems to be that their wilful ignorance results in racism and oppression, and a continued environmental crisis. The trilogy can also be read as arguing that how people treat others has a lot to do with how they treat the physical world around them, and that it would do them well to rethink their actions and attitude.

One difficulty in analysing the trilogy were the multiple detailed perspectives. By presenting a lot of different perspectives, the trilogy tries to do justice to the imagined world's complexity. Its attention to both details and the overview of the planet as a larger whole align with holistic worldbuilding, as well as the variety of different perspectives on the relationship between the Earth and those who dwell on it. Because there were so many actants involved, each with their own detailed background and motivations, it made it more difficult to focus on events on a broader scale for the sake of this thesis' argument. This is why I concentrated on the two conflicts between the planet versus the people and the orogenes versus the stills, but also because I wanted to stress that holistic worldbuilding does not dismiss, avoid or ignore conflict – in fact, it should be paid close attention because it can reveal, as I have argued here, underlying reasons, cultural patterns and power structures that can have negative consequences for society and their environment. By engaging with conflict it is possible to see where it came from in the first place, and from that place of engagement and understanding people can create better alternatives.

On a literary level, these kind of narratives are of utmost importance, especially during these times of environmental crisis. Stories are powerful mediums, and they can reach people in ways that data statistics or academic literature cannot. Narratives' creative aspects stimulate the readers' imagination, especially when they are presented through various differing views as is done in Jemisin's trilogy. Not only does the trilogy stress the presence of the planet, making readers more aware of the environment, it also emphasises the role of culture in environmental sustainability. As Zapf has said, literature is a product of cultural history. The trilogy has shown that the Stillness' history repeats itself, and as such narratives can inform people about the past in order to understand, and perhaps change, the present. The novels' concern with sustainability on not only an ecological, but also on a cultural level provokes

new narratological insights into what literature can mean to people – how it can address and engage with these important issues in creative ways.

Moreover, on a societal level this trilogy contributes to discussions about how people can coexist with their environment and that environmental crises are very complex, with many other aspects involved. Greed, ignorance and racism and the obsession with power at the cost of others have informed most of the conflicts that led to the Stillness as it is now. These are not so different from today's society and its obsession with arrow-narratives that ignore or dismiss the slow violence of climate change. It is impossible to simplify the environmental crisis into a single quest. The planet's wellbeing is irrevocably entwined with the wellbeing of the people that dwell on it. I believe the efforts to stop climate change should be extended to questioning and engaging with the interrelatedness between climate change and things such as oppression, racism, capitalism, and power structures generally, because I believe that without addressing these stopping climate change is impossible. The trilogy connects these social and ecological elements, but the questions and problems it seeks to address are difficult and all-encompassing. Though the novels end with a hopeful future for the orogenes' position in society and an improved relationship with Father Earth, the actual process of improving the relationships between cultural groups remains unresolved. The novels do present Comms where orogenes and stills collaborate, but on a larger scale the possibility of such instances seems uncertain. All in all, the trilogy leaves the reader with the promise of social change that may end the oppressive cycle now that the environmental circumstances are no longer so unstable, and in turn these societal improvements may affect the position of the environment in the Stillness' culture positively.

Le Guin's use of the Carrier Bag Theory goes against the single hero narrative, and holds that what is really the foundation of human culture is empathy and cooperation, with other people and with the environment. This is exactly what *The Broken Earth* trilogy engages

with. By exploring what Father Earth means culturally, the novels bring up questions about how people define their environment, and what those definitions mean for their culture. The term holistic worldbuilding contributes to ecocritical thought in that it stresses solidarity, cooperation and co-existing not only between human culture and nature, but between human cultures. I believe this is ultimately the key to extending that solidarity and cooperation to the environment and the planet. By working together, without heroes and pedestals, it is possible to change the relationship with the environment for the better. I believe that this message holds true in our current environmental crisis, too. The perspective of holistic worldbuilding may be further developed by for example expanding on theory on worldbuilding in speculative fiction. Additionally, the trilogy could be analysed in more depth considering the Fifth Seasons as natural disasters in more detail. Generally, I hope this paper inspires other analyses of worldbuilding in speculative fiction with an emphasis on ecocritical thought.

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