# Estranging Allegory through Worldbuilding in the Works of N.K. Jemisin

# Estranging Allegory through Worldbuilding in the Works of N.K. Jemisin

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## Abstract

N.K. Jemisin has become an important voice in the genres of science fiction, fantasy, and speculative fiction writers, using her storyworlds to reflect on the world through a post-colonial lens that reveals and critiques issues of race, racism, white supremacy, and other aspects of destructive whiteness. Science fiction and fantasy are literatures of estrangement, and they use that framework to interrogate complicated ideas and issues. The worldbuilding of these genres is essential to this process, providing the mechanism to create unfamiliar conditions and circumstances that facilitate estrangement and defamiliarization. Worldbuilding is a collaborative process between the author and the reader, with the author's worldbuilding informing how the reader subsequently recreates the imagined world. Building on previous scholarship that explores the allegorical nature of Jemisin's works and defamiliarization in her writing, I propose that a key aspect of Jemisin's worldbuilding is that she takes the critical elements of the allegory or theme and builds them each into the storyworld independent of each other. Estranging the allegory in the storyworld this way creates space between the elements in the reader's worldbuilding that reinforces defamiliarization, and can circumvent alienating associations from the real-world context. Ultimately, reconciling the estranged allegory may increase understanding of and empathy for experiences outside of their own in the reader. This thesis examines how the themes in two of Jemisin's novels, *The Fifth Season* and *The City We Became,* are estranged and defamiliarized through the worldbuilding, with an interest in how the key elements of the thematic allegory are

estranged from one another and defamiliarized independently in the text, and how the level of estrangement of the storyworld affects how this dynamic.

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# Chapter I.

## Introduction: Breaking the Pattern

*A break in the pattern. A snarl in the weft. There are things you should be noticing, here.*

— N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

Science fiction and fantasy are genres that imagine the world differently. A critical mechanism used in these genres is the process of making the familiar strange in order to call attention to it – cognitive estrangement or defamiliarization, respectively. By virtue of their non-realistic settings, a fundamental feature these genres share and rely on is worldbuilding. Building imaginary worlds facilitates the defamiliarization and estrangement that are characteristic of the genres. Primary World ideas, issues, situations, or experiences can be presented in estranged and/or defamiliarized ways. Allegorizing the issues, themes, or questions that motivate the work is a fairly common method for science fiction and fantasy to interrogate those themes, which provides a way for the reader to gain a greater understanding of or different perspective on the issue.

Worldbuilding, or creating the world and landscape of the story, is done by both the author and the reader, and choices made by the author in how they create and present the world can shape or guide how the reader subsequently builds the world in their imagination. An obvious interpretation of this is that the reader experiences the world and story that the author writes, but the process is more nuanced than that. The author can never provide *every* detail of a world, so the reader must fill in the gaps to create a

cohesive world, a process known as world gestalt. The worldbuilding syuzhet – how the worldbuilding is arranged by the author – guides the worldbuilding of the reader. Where the gaps or silences in the author's worldbuilding are, and what is available and consistent within the architecture and logic of the storyworld can shape how the reader fills those gaps, which can inform how the reader creates their mental image of the storyworld and their experience of it.

In her works of science fiction and fantasy, N.K. Jemisin is interrogating big, complicated ideas and themes: structural oppression, racism, colonialism, white supremacy. While science fiction and fantasy will often use allegory and unfamiliar settings to make the familiar strange and reflect on ideas or structures that have become habituated, and invisible through that habituation, Jemisin integrates both the allegory and its context into her worldbuilding, defamiliarizing each in turn and estranging them from each other. This dual estrangement and defamiliarization creates space between the allegorical elements, and that space guides how the reader incorporates them into their worldbuilding.

Estranging the elements of the themes or allegories, while keeping the pieces present in the worldbuilding, and defamiliarizing them breaks the patterns and associations the reader might expect from a more realistic representation or setting. Worldbuilding in this manner can both create spaces that avoid alienating associations and make connections that might not otherwise exist, both of which facilitate the reader imagining the world differently. A non-estranged allegory, or one where the allegorical context or Primary World association is not independently integrated into and defamiliarized in the storyworld, is more likely to be connected to that context in the

reader's worldbuilding. If those associations are alienating, then making this connection risks undermining the defamiliarization of the allegory. Disconnecting the allegory and the allegorical context within the storyworld has the potential to sidestep defensive or alienating reactions from the reader. The motivating questions of works of science fiction and fantasy in general, and N.K. Jemisin's writing specifically, are often ones that are charged or stigmatized by their Primary World context or associations. One of the strengths of science fiction and fantasy is the estranged setting in which to interact with these ideas. There is tension between calling attention to a thing, and being able to productively imagine it differently though, especially when the alienating elements are still in direct proximity to it. An allegory that is recognizably an allegory can defamiliarize the allegorical subject, but that recognition can create a barrier to the ways a reader or audience learns from a piece of media. Therefore, to best facilitate the reader imagining the world differently, that reconnection to the allegorical context is best done after it has been successfully reimagined.

In this thesis, I argue that the way N.K. Jemisin estranges the key allegorical elements, building each into the storyworld independently and defamiliarizing them in tandem, creates and maintains distance between those elements for the reader. The defamiliarization is therefore better able to sidestep alienating factors and barriers to empathy, so when the elements are subsequently reconciled, the reader may have a better or more complex understanding of them for having avoided the alienating factors. Previous scholarship has explored what the allegories in Jemisin's storyworlds reveal about the Primary World, and how defamiliarizing ideas or allegories in those storyworlds can help the reader imagine them differently, particularly in *The Fifth Season*

and The Broken Earth trilogy. As yet though, the fact that Jemisin's storyworlds hold and defamiliarize both the allegory and the allegorical context has not been addressed, a subject that I take up here. I use the theory of world gestalt to explore how the authorial worldbuilding can guide the reader to create or collapse the distance between the allegorical elements and how the level of estrangement of the storyworld affects this dynamic.

In this thesis, I explore how simultaneously estranging and defamiliarizing the thematic allegory works in two of N.K. Jemisin's novels, *The Fifth Season* and *The City We Became*. Each of these novels is the first work in their respective series, and therefore each does a great deal of the worldbuilding to establish the storyworlds and the motivating themes. *The Fifth Season* is set in a fully secondary world, and *The City We Became* in an overlaid primary world, allowing for comparison between how estranging the allegory works in storyworlds with different levels of estrangement. Chapters Two and Three lay out the background and context for estrangement and defamiliarization in science fiction and fantasy, how fiction can affect the reader, and worldbuilding. Chapter Four explores how the worldbuilding of *The Fifth Season* estranges and defamiliarizes structural oppression, the legacy of slavery, and race. Chapter Five examines this dynamic in *The City We Became,* where the proximity of the storyworld to the Primary World allows for non-allegorized expressions of the estranged allegory of destructive whiteness to exist in the same storyworld in a way that encourages reconciliation of the defamiliarized elements with their real-world analogues.

# Chapter II.

## Background

Literature – perhaps especially fiction – is a means to reflect and interrogate the world. The genres of science fiction and fantasy come from a literary tradition of imagining the world differently, of asking "what if" questions that shape the realities of the stories and can thereby reflect back on the world of the reader. These genres can be particularly effective at this because of the distance they place between the reader than the Primary World[1] context by building strange new worlds in which to ask those questions. This distance creates an estrangement that can provide space to take a new perspective from which to consider those questions. Fiction affords the reader a place where they can learn and model social interactions, and this can in turn promote empathy and other pro-social behaviors. Science fiction, fantasy, and other worldbuilding genres can further foster learning through reading because the narrative structures and strategies of the genre can be used to provide perspective that is harder to achieve from fiction set in worlds closer to the reader's own.

[1] A note on terminology: Vocabulary around primary and secondary worlds can get a little muddy. A "secondary world" is generally accepted to be a fully differentiated world from the reader's. Suvin used "zero world" to refer to the real world, but a lot of scholarship uses "Primary World" for this, which can be used to refer to both the real world and fiction set in the "real" world. This becomes further complicated in genres like science fiction and "low" fantasy, where the world is built out from a real-world setting, but not complete differentiated as a full secondary world. Because fantasy relies more on the Primary/secondary world distinction, and the theorists this analysis relies on mostly use the terminology Primary and secondary worlds, this thesis will use "Primary World" to refer to the world of the author and reader, "primary world" for narratives set in the Primary World, "secondary world" for narratives set in worlds meaningfully or fully different from the Primary World, and "incomplete secondary world" or "overlaid world" (Wolf 28) to refer to worlds set in between primary and secondary worlds.

## Estrangement in Science Fiction and Fantasy

The genres of science fiction and fantasy enjoy an oddly close but distant relationship. Popularly, they are linked, almost always being grouped together in stores and libraries. There is more distance between them in the critical literature of each genre, owing in part to the fact that from very early on in the scholarship of science fiction, one of the founding thinkers on science fiction, Darko Suvin, committed to an outright schism between the two from a critical standpoint (21), establishing a precedent that has eroded over time, but to some extent endures still. While the language differs between genres, both use estrangement and defamiliarization in similar ways to reflect back on the Primary World.

Science fiction has historically been difficult to define as a genre. One of the most enduring and influential attempts came from Suvin in his *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979). Like many of the more rigid definitions of science fiction, Suvin's excludes as much as it includes, exudes a certain amount of disdain for "lower" – or merely popular – science fiction, an attitude that extended to fantasy and contributed to the schism between the genres in science fiction scholarship. But in trying to define science fiction, he laid out a theory that would become fundamental to science fiction scholarship: cognitive estrangement.

To establish his theory of cognitive estrangement, Suvin draws heavily on the concepts of *ostranenie* from Viktor Shklovsky and *verfremdung* from Bertolt Brecht. Shklovsky's *ostranenie* means "making strange" (4) but is typically translated as "defamiliarization." In his 1965 essay "Art as Technique," Shklovsky proposes *ostranenie* as an artistic process – or set of processes, as the specific mechanics are less

important than the effect on the reader – by which the artist makes the familiar strange in order to make the audience see what has been normalized or "automatic" to the point where the audience has become functionally blind to it in its usual context. Brecht's *verfremdung*, as laid out in "A Short Organum for the Theatre," is translated in the Willet edition of *Brecht on Theatre* (1964) as "alienation," but has key similarities to Shklovsky's *ostranenie*. Brecht claims that "a representation that alienates is one which allows us to recognize its subject, but at the same time makes it seem unfamiliar" (192). This alienation is "a barrier to empathy," but the distance that it creates allows the audience "to transform [themselves] from general passive acceptance to a corresponding state of suspicious inquiry" (192). Both Shklovsky and Brecht are fundamentally interested in the audience's perception, with the defamiliarizing or alienating effects as means to force the audience to reexamine things that they take for granted or have become habituated to and therefore do not question.

In *Metamorphoses,* Suvin synthesizes these two concepts to form what he calls cognitive estrangement, which he identifies as the "formal framework" of science fiction (19). Cognitive estrangement, at its most fundamental, is a function of literature or art that makes the subject unfamiliar in a way that causes the audience to reflect on their own world. As with Brecht and Shklovsky, an important part of Suvin's cognitive estrangement is in how the world, story, or construct reflects back on the Primary World, or the world of the reader and author. The estrangement of "cognitive estrangement" is an effect on the reader, creating a layer of remove from their environment that allows them to reflect on it more clearly. "SF is in fact a specifically roundabout way of commenting on the author's collective context – often resulting in a surprisingly concrete and sharp-

sighted comment at that. Even where SF suggests – sometimes strongly – a flight from that context, this is an optical illusion and epistemological trick" (101). Ultimately, the reflection on the author or reader's society, one made from the clearer vantage point afforded by fiction, is the important takeaway. Cognitive estrangement is what makes that vantage point accessible.

The actual mechanics of cognitive estrangement are more complicated and meant to be more specific to science fiction as a genre. According to Suvin's model, "naturalistic" – or sometimes "realistic" – fiction is fiction that is set in the real, Primary, or "zero" world, the empirical world that the author and reader share (31). Estranged fiction is the counter to naturalistic fiction, where the world is noticeably different from that of the reader. The cognitive aspect refers to the logical consistency of the world, but also its connection to the Primary World. Science fiction is set in a world that is markedly different from the Primary World, but *not* set in an entirely novel or unconnected "secondary" world; the progression from the Primary World to the science fictional world makes sense within the context of the novel. The storyworld[2] is differentiated from the world of the reader through the "novum," a concept that Suvin introduces as the novelty or innovation that shapes the world of the work of science fiction. According to Suvin, the novum is "cognitive" in nature, which is to say it has a logical scientific consistency with the world of the author and audience (80). The novum, along with the world that arises from it, is unfamiliar to the reader but treated as commonplace in the text. This naturalization of the novum and world is what brings the estrangement into focus, the

[2] The fictional world within which the narrative takes place. "Diegetic world" or "constructed world" are sometimes also used. Diegetic world is useful when referring to the world as the characters of the story would experience it, rather than how the audience experiences it.

unfamiliar setting causing the reader to reflect on the strangeness highlighted by the novum.

By and large, scholars of science fiction have embraced Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement as a framework of science fiction. In *Critical Theory and Science Fiction* (2000), Carl Freedman calls in "not only fundamentally sound, but indispensable" (17). Nevertheless, many have identified pieces of Suvin's theory to clarify or expand on for a more comprehensive view of cognitive estrangement. The concept of cognition is one of these areas, as maintaining a logical consistency with the real world can be limiting to the scope of the genre and can potentially even retroactively disqualify works of science fiction as scientific discovery advances. Freedman proposed reframing "cognitive" as a "cognitive effect." Rather than the novum being cognitive relative to the real world, the attitude of the text toward the fictional world determines whether it is cognitive or not. This reframe captures a broader range of science fiction as "cognitive" science that motivates the narrative does not need to be consistent with real world science, as long as it is internally logical and consistent.

There is also a complicating element of works in translation in relation to Suvin's definition of cognitive estrangement with its antecedents. The lack of clarity around these translations opens the door to the complexity within the term cognitive estrangement itself. In "Things Made Strange," Simon Spiegel picks up on this complexity around the translations of *verfremdung* and *ostranenie* and uses that as a means to identify distinctions between estrangement, alienation, and naturalization within the framework of science fiction and cognitive estrangement. *Ostranenie* is consistently translated as "defamiliarization," but *verfremdung* can be translated from German as "estrangement,"

"alienation," or "defamiliarization" (Spiegel 369), and elements of each of those ideas can be located within the theory of cognitive estrangement. For both *ostranenie* and *verfremdung*, Suvin chooses to retranslate them as "estrangement" rather than "defamiliarization" or "alienation" (Suvin 19). Spiegel proposes to clarify these ideas internal to Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement. He suggests using "defamiliarization" in the way Shklovsky does, "the formal-rhetorical act of making the familiar strange" (376); "naturalization" as "normalizing the alien" within the framework of the story (376), so that the world is familiarized and not treated as marvelous or strange; "diegetic estrangement" for making the familiar strange within the context of the story; and "estrangement" as the effect on the audience (376). Spiegel proposes that "estrangement can be achieved in two ways, by means of defamiliarization or by diegetic estrangement" (376).

Suvin's definition of cognitive estrangement also continues to be refined and expanded to be inclusive of more fields of study, especially in the "softer" sciences. In her article "Beyond Suvin: Rethinking Cognitive Estrangement," Simona Bartolotta considers what amending Suvin's theory of cognitive estrangement so that it is more in line with the cognitive sciences could bring to the study of science fiction. Building off Freedman's reframing of cognition as a cognitive effect and integrating elements from Heidegger's conception of aesthetic defamiliarization, she suggests re-envisioning cognition to include "the ensemble of mental processes and phenomena associated with perception, knowledge, memory, language use, emotion, and so forth" (53). Bartolotta proposes that considering cognitive estrangement as a "representational estrangement" (58) offers an additional perspective on what science fiction "can reveal about the ways

in which human beings use art and narrative to express, elaborate on, and even create or otherwise affect aspects of their experience of being-in-the-world" (58).

Fantasy has traditionally not been considered a literature of cognitive estrangement. In *Metamorphoses*, Suvin went so far as to exclude fantasy from cognitive estrangement, because in his view, fantasy, myth, and folktales are estranged but noncognitive. In estranged fiction, "cognition differentiates [science fiction] not only from myth, but also from the folk (fairy) tale and the fantasy" (20). Because Suvin uses cognition to mean logically consistent and connected to the empirical world of the author and reader, he disqualifies fantasy from the broader effect of cognitive estrangement. Suvin's classification of fantasy is more academic than practical, addressing fantasy as a concept more than a genre and defining it fairly narrowly as ghost, horror, Gothic, or weird tales (21). Even in *Metamorphoses* though, the question of cognition is not so clear cut as to fully justify this exclusion. Suvin claims that it is not only the hard sciences that can be used to reflect back the world, but the "soft" sciences as well, anthropology, sociology, etc. "These 'soft sciences' can therefore most probably better serve as a basis for SF than the 'hard' natural sciences; and they have in fact been the basis of all better works in SF" (84). This allows for a much broader range of what the worlds of science fiction look like, with the novum potentially being less empirical. Bartolotta picks up on this potential of the "soft sciences" to propose her relational estrangement, and a similar rationale could be extended to fantasy.

While science fiction and fantasy authors often point to the porous nature of the boundaries between the genres, much of the scholarship on science fiction follows Suvin's lead and cognitive estrangement remains the purview of science fiction. In some

cases, this is done with deliberate consideration, but there is also a generally benign erasure that comes from the scholarship around science fiction and fantasy having significantly less connection than the popular genres do. Many scholars of science fiction followed Suvin's lead on separating fantasy from cognitive estrangement, but it is not a distinction that holds up to critical inquiry. In *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005), Fredric Jameson contemplates the distinction between science fiction and fantasy, but he wrestles with the potential for some fantasy to also be cognitively estranging. He allows that "this does not mean that distinctive contemporary fantasy texts cannot emit signals and vibrations comparable to those of the best SF" (68). In discussing how the fantasy of Ursula K. Le Guin integrates sociopolitical issues into the text, Jameson claims that she "triumphantly demonstrates that fantasy can also have critical and even demystificatory power" (67). He ultimately adheres to the role of cognitive estrangement being exclusively the purview of science fiction because he "feel[s] a deep reluctance to abandon these generic distinctions" (68), rather than because those generic distinctions are unassailable. In "Cognition as Ideology," China Miéville argues that the two genres "are, in fact, at some important and constitutive level, united" (231). Miéville goes on to establish that while the trappings and motivations of the genres may be distinct from each other, the ways in which they are united is the estranging effect both genres can have on the reader. He argues, "It is perfectly plausible, then, that SF and fantasy might still sometimes be usefully distinguished: but if so, it is not on the basis of cognition, not of some fundamental epistemological firewall, but as different ideological iterations of the 'estrangement' that, even in high Suvinianism, both sub-genres share" (243). If the

"epistemological firewall" between the genres is dismantled, then the estranging effect can have on the reader must be acknowledged.

The rigid characterizations of science fiction and fantasy, both within and between genres can create problems. Helen Young claims that, in the genre of fantasy, "scholarship by and large … values works deemed to have artistic merit" (3), creating a tension between works of critical acclaim and popular or market success. The same impulse plagues science fiction. "The best SF" Jameson says, and Suvin tosses anything that does not adhere to his standards of appropriately cognitively estranging onto the "*popular science* compost heap" (35, emphasis original). Fantasy is excluded from cognitive estrangement in part because not all fantasy is "cognitively estranging," but neither is all science fiction. This stance also tends to ignore the way defamiliarization is used in fantasy, and the way that parallels cognitive estrangement in science fiction.

Despite not usually using the *term* cognitive estrangement, works of fantasy often use "defamiliarization" as a functionally identical concept to cognitive estrangement. Scholarship on fantasy also considers how the allegorical or metaphorical aspects of fantasy affect the reader, and how that metaphor can reflect back on the real world. According to Ann Swinfen, "symbolism and allegory in fantasy leads to the purposes which fantasy seems to serve: the exploration of enhanced imaginative experience of the primary world itself" (10). One of the ways this exploration occurs is through defamiliarization. Swinfen takes as an example how J.R.R. Tolkien's "belief in the transcendent power of fantasy" (9) aligns with Percy Shelley's views of poetic inspiration from "A Defense of Poetry." As Shelley believes poetry does, for Tolkien fantasy "compels us to feel that which we perceive, and to imagine that which we know. It

creates anew the universe, after it has been annihilated in our minds by the recurrence of impressions blunted by reiteration" (Shelley). In fantasy there can be a greater emphasis on revealing the wonder of the world than is found in Brecht, Shklovsky, or Suvin, but by estranging or defamiliarizing the familiar, the audience perceives the subject in a new or different way. Defamiliarization, while never claimed as anything like a formal framework, takes on a critical role in fantasy, especially in the case of postcolonial fantasy, where a fundamental piece of how post-colonial narratives are structured relies on questioning and subverting established perspectives.[3]

## Estrangement as a Critical Technique in SFF

Science fiction and fantasy both have a history of centering and reflecting a white, Western, European gaze. In *Colonialism and the Emergence of Science Fiction* (2012), John Rieder argues that the conditions of colonialism were necessary for the emergence of the genre of science fiction. He observes, "The history, ideology, and discourses of colonialism dovetail with the crucial, double perspective that runs throughout the genre: on one hand, the wondrous exploration of the new and the marvelous encounter with the strange, but on the other, the post-apocalyptic vision of a world gone disastrously wrong" (33). Despite the futuristic settings and technological advancements, the colonial gaze permeates the genre, especially in classic science fiction, playing out fantasies of the colonizer in alien or exotic settings. Similarly, fantasy, or at least Western fantasy, centers a European mythology and worldview. In *Race and Popular Fantasy: Habits of*

[3] Which is not to discount the critical nature of allegory in older works of fantasy. Tolkein, often considered the father of the modern fantasy genre, was clearly interested in how this mechanism worked in fantasy, but the growing diversity of voices in the genre of fantasy is increasingly using the genre as a means of interrogating the world rather than creating escapist wonders.

*Whiteness* (2016), Helen Young discusses how the origins of fantasy caused it to form and ingrain "habits of Whiteness early in the life of the genre-culture" (10),[4] and that the conventions of the genre reinforced those habits over the course of its history.

Like any habits, the habits of whiteness and colonialism in fantasy and science fiction can be broken, but breaking them requires an acknowledgement that they exist, and the sustained and deliberate effort to do so. Young uses "habits" particularly to emphasize the point that "acts of change *and* repetition require agency" (6), and in *Postcolonialism and Science Fiction* (2011), Jessica Langer argues that creators of postcolonial media must actively participate in that process (8). These genres are particularly well equipped to tackle that work, as through cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization they have mechanisms to question and reflect critically on the world and the conventions and assumptions of the genre. As Rieder notes, "the invention of other worlds very often originates in a satirical impulse to turn things upside down and inside out" (4). What arises from this impulse to subvert and invert the habits of the genre is a growing collection of postcolonial works of science fiction and fantasy, that "utilizes these same generic conventions in a radically different way: to explore the ways in which Western scientific discourse, both in terms of technology and in terms of culture (both real cultural effects and effects on cultural production), has interacted with colonialism and the cultural production of colonized peoples" (Langer 9).

Though both fields are emerging, postcolonial science fiction and the scholarship around it is better established than postcolonial fantasy. This may in part be because the "cognitive" nature of science fiction lends itself more readily to what Brecht would have

[4] Young uses "genre-culture" to signify both the habits and behaviors in the literature, and in the culture around the genre, including publishing, fan culture, access, etc. (5).

called “suspicious inquiry” (192). Young also suggests that “the nostalgic overtones of Fantasy – or better, its overarching habit of referencing the past as opposed to the future” (118) may discourage BIPOC, particularly indigenous, authors from wanting to engage with the genre. Nevertheless, there is an increasing diversity in the field, and more authors are taking up the mantle of postcolonial fantasy and speculative fiction.

In addition to Young, one of the scholars who has tackled postcolonial fantasy has been Sami Schalk, with her *Bodyminds Reimagined*. While Schalk uses “‘defamiliarization’ to refer to the way speculative fiction texts make the familiar social concepts of (dis)ability, race, gender, and sexuality unfamiliar in order to encourage readers to question the meanings and boundaries of these categories” (114), her definition of defamiliarization is drawn explicitly from Suvin’s cognitive estrangement and Shklovsky’s *ostranenie*. Schalk is primarily interested in how disabilities and the experiences of disabled persons can be defamiliarized, and particularly how that can challenge and reframe the reader’s assumptions about the bodyminds in question.

More broadly, defamiliarization in fantasy can create distance between the issue or allegory and the Primary World context that allows the reader to reframe or reconsider it. Defamiliarization can work on any scale, from an individual to societal or cultural. Distancing the defamiliarized issue from its Primary World origins allows a different context to be built around it, one that requires the reader to engage with the defamiliarized issue outside of their usual associations, assumptions, and biases. Science fiction and fantasy, with their non-realistic (estranged) settings, have particular flexibility to accomplish this defamiliarization as they have the ability to fully remove the issue from the Primary World, and even break the Primary World issues into pieces that can be

further estranged from their origins, as will be discussed further in chapters Four and Five.

## Fiction and the Reader

The psychology of how fiction works to affect the reader has been a popular subject of study. A lot of the scholarship, especially early inquiries, focused on straight literary fiction set in primary worlds. More recently, there has been a shift towards looking at these effects in genre fiction like science fiction and fantasy. The growing body of work on the effects of reading fiction suggests that it can increase empathy for others (Bal and Veltkamp; Oatley), and comprehension of social situations (Mar et al.; Tamir et al.). It can also shift attitudes, broaden the worldview, and expand the reader's concept of self to align with characters they identify with (Slater et al.; Broom et al.). Many of the same effects seen in literary fiction can be found in science fiction and fantasy as well, but the constructed worlds of science fiction and fantasy also afford a rich ground to examine how the narrative structures and worldbuilding interact with the experience of the reader.

Reading fiction is believed to create a space or mental circumstance where the reader can model, practice, and experiment with social interactions and behaviors. In the study "Bookworms Versus Nerds," Mar et al. found that reading fiction is positively correlated with social ability, and that being transported by, or absorbed in, a story predicted higher empathy scores from the participants than non-narrative forms of writing. They proposed that the cognitive processes around understanding characters were the same as understanding humans in the Primary World. In the subsequent article "The Function of Fiction Is the Abstraction and Simulation of Social Experience," Mar

and Oatley proposed that the function of narrative fiction is to simulate social interactions and experiences, and that the reader gains social knowledge through the simulation of the narrative in their imagination. They also suggest that the narrative aspect of story may be more critical to this mechanism than strictly adhering to “fiction” as a genre, as the way humans understand and relate to the world is through story.

Becoming absorbed in a narrative is part of what fosters learning in readers. Dan Johnson picks up on the idea of absorption in a story predicting empathy in his article "Transportation into a Story Increases Empathy, Prosocial Behavior, and Perceptual Bias toward Fearful Expressions." Johnson was interested in whether the empathetic feeling elicited by being transported into narrative translated into real-world behaviors. He found that after reading a story designed to elicit compassion for the characters, participants who reported higher rates of transportation exhibited more affective empathy, helpful behavior, and a bias towards perceiving fearful expressions. He concluded that “reading narrative fiction allows one to learn about our social world and as a result fosters empathic growth and prosocial behavior” (154). In his 2016 article “Fiction: Simulation of Social Worlds,” Keith Oatley suggested that reading increases expertise in the subject matter of the work; so, where non-fiction increases knowledge about facts, fiction increases expertise about people and social interactions (624).

Identifying with fictional characters, which is a form of narrative transportation, can also lead to an expansion of the reader’s concept of self, and the beliefs that they hold. In “Temporarily Expanding the Boundaries of the Self,” Slater et al. proposed that humans seek out stories to expand the limits of the self. They posited that maintaining the personal and social self can be exhausting and that story gives a temporary release from

this tension. They also suggested that expanding the self-concept through story provides an opportunity to experiment with different social identity. A related study from Shedlosky-Shoemaker et al., "Self-Expansion through Fictional Characters," interrogated how similarity of a character to the reader's self and ideal self impacted the self-concept. They found that perceived similarity of the character to the reader's self leads to self-reported cognitive overlap between the self and the character, and similarity of the character to the reader's ideal self increases self-expansion. Transportation into the narrative increased both measures, but neither cognitive overlap nor self-expansion were dependent on it.

The effect of absorption and identifying with characters has been shown to be true in science fiction and fantasy contexts as well as straight fiction. In their article "Becoming King in the North," Broom et al. built on the idea of cognitive overlap between the character and the audience by studying the effects of transportation with a focus on characters from HBO's *Game of Thrones*. Through neuroimaging, they saw that neural responses when thinking about characters from *Game of Thrones* resembled the responses when thinking about the self or close friends, with greater overlap between the characters and the self. The neural responses between the self and the characters were more similar in people who "regularly mentally simulate narrative experiences from the first-person psychological perspective of characters within the story" (547). They suggest that the more immersed the audience gets in first-person experience of the character, the more likely they are to access that knowledge about that character's self-concept and identity.

The shape of the story – the worldbuilding, narrative structures, metaphor employed, etc. – also have an impact on how the reader is affected by the story. Cognitive narratology is a theoretical framework that puts the psychological effects of reading into conversation with the literary structures rather than simply looking at the effect that reading has on the reader. Through cognitive narratology, "the structures of storytelling are put into dialogue with our understanding of the functions of the human mind" (Polvinen 67). Cognitive narratology connects worldbuilding and other narrative structures and strategies to the way that the reader experiences and learns about the world. Scholarship in this field interacts with a broad range of media and tends to look more often at science fiction and fantasy than other fields of inquiry, perhaps because of the opportunity presented by allegory in the genre, but also because worldbuilding strategies are often more prominently and deliberately used, expanding the field of narrative structures available for inquiry.

In science fiction and fantasy, the structure of the world can be used to make sense of the metaphor or theme that drives the narrative. In her article, "Sense-making and Wonder," Merja Polvinen connects cognitive narratology to both how science fiction literalizes both metaphor and the structures of narrative. She argues that the act of imagining and making sense of storyworlds – a process she refers to as enactive cognition – "offers a way of approaching self-reflective phenomena without separating those from the processes of imagining the fictional world" (78). Polvinen is particularly interested in this in the context of tackling "imagined impossibilities," or literalized metaphors and story structures. There is an additional broader implication that enactive cognition allows for the reader to make sense of the metaphors and literary constructs within the context of

the storyworld, and perhaps apply that understanding to the Primary World origins of the metaphor.

Introducing science fiction and fantasy into the conversation of the effects of reading inevitably brings cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization into the picture. At their most fundamental level, cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization are about the effect that the writing or story has –or is intended to have – on the reader. Miéville, when considering Freedman's cognitive effect, observes that "[t]his reformulated approach to the specificity of SF, in terms of a written-and-read text, means considering SF not in terms of a text's relationship to its own supposed 'cognitive logic' but as *something done with language by someone to someone*" (235, emphasis original). When viewed through the lens of cognitive narratology, it opens the questions of how do the narrative structures and strategies encourage estrangement?

Science fiction and fantasy rely on worldbuilding to establish the estranged settings and situations that are fundamental to the genres; and, perhaps more critically, to set up and affect the cognitive estrangement or defamiliarization. Because worldbuilding and estrangement are so closely linked, there is a lot of potential for inquiry into how the structures of worldbuilding can be put into dialogue with cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization. How does manipulating the structures and strategies of worldbuilding affect how the reader interacts with and learns about the storyworld and the Primary World? The reader must actively participate in worldbuilding, but in a sense, because that participation is guided by the worldbuilding of the author, much like cognitive estrangement, it is "*something done with language by someone to someone*" (Miéville 235), and therefore the way that the storyworld is structured can have an impact on how

the reader experiences the world, how the storyworld is estranged from the world of the reader, and how the themes and allegories in the text are defamiliarized.

## Chapter III.

## Worldbuilding in Science Fiction and Fantasy

Worldbuilding[5] in science fiction and fantasy, as well as creating strange new places to set the narrative in, offers an avenue for exploring strange new ideas. As discussed earlier, this characteristic is fundamental to science fiction and fantasy as genres and may be part of why worldbuilding is so intimately connected to them. Where works of science fiction and fantasy are often written to explore an idea or thought experiment, the novelty of the storyworld is one of the things that facilitates that exploration. The unfamiliar setting, context, and mechanics of the world estranges the audience from their preconceived notions, associations, and biases. Removing the idea from the social, political, or physical constraints of the Primary World allows the writer ask, and sometimes try to answer, the question "what if?" in a context not bound by the rules, relationships, history, or context of the Primary World. Familiar social concepts can be removed from their Primary World associations and stigmas, and placed into different contexts and relationships that allow for new and different interpretations. Worldbuilding is a key factor in creating the defamiliarization and estrangement for which these genres are known, and in fact it makes it possible for the text to ask those "what if" questions through the lens of defamiliarization.

[5] A note on terminology: There is no real consensus, either popularly or academically, on whether to use "world building," "world-building," or "worldbuilding." For this thesis, I will be using "worldbuilding," unless quoting a passage that uses a different construction.

"Worldbuilding" in fiction is, at its most basic, the process of constructing the elements of a piece of media that create the context within which the narrative occurs. While "constructing" may suggest a physical process, in the case of media, especially written media, worldbuilding is a mental process: the construction of an imagined world, how the world works, and what makes it work that way. The physical elements of a world are perhaps the most obvious, the geography, climate, weather patterns. Somewhat less concrete are the more conceptual elements of worldbuilding: culture, sociopolitical dynamics, economic systems, religion, systems of magic and/or science. These elements are related to and influenced by the physical elements, but connect more closely to the society within which the narrative takes place. Then there are the almost wholly ephemeral aspects of worldbuilding, what the world *feels* like, which can be influenced by the physical and conceptual elements, but also by the stylistic choices the author makes about how to convey the world and narrative. This aspect is unique in that it may be either diegetic, non-diegetic, or both. Together these elements set the scene and inform the context of the world.

All fiction must do some level of worldbuilding to set the scope, expectations, rules, and context of the storyworld. Whether the narrative is set in New York City in 1965, Alpha Centauri in 2508, or The Stillness in the Season of the Yellow Seas (Jemisin, *Season* 455), the author must set up the context for the story they are telling. Just because 1965 New York existed in the reader's world, does not mean every reader will be familiar with it. But when the story is not located in the world of the reader, or in a world the reader is familiar with, the worldbuilding has to do more work to establish the rules, mechanics, culture, and atmosphere of the world than if the storyworld hews closely to

that of the reader. More of the worldbuilding must be explicit and intentional rather than implicit. As a result, science fiction, fantasy, and related genres are inherently and critically linked to worldbuilding in a way that literary fiction is not. Taylor points out in her work on fantasy worldbuilding that worldbuilding is so ingrained in the literature of fantasy, that few writings on fantasy worlds fail to mention the worldbuilding when discussing works in those genres (17). Taylor's focus is fantasy, but a similar observation can be made about science fiction. These imagined worlds arise from the way they differentiate from the Primary World and are defined by that, for all that they reflect back on the Primary World.

Worlds in science fiction and fantasy are often delineated by the degree of difference between the "real world" – that of the reader and the author – and the storyworld. They can range from primary worlds that faithfully reflect the world of the reader in almost every respect to completely secondary worlds that have "nothing vaguely resembling Earth, no familiarity at all" (Jemisin, "8. Immersing" 6:30), and everything in between. Fiction set in a primary world close in nature to the Primary World can rely on the familiar and the known to supplement its worldbuilding. In science fiction, these worlds have key differences that set them apart, making them strange and unknown in some way, but they are usually still recognizably related to or built from the Primary World. These sorts of partial or incomplete secondary worlds are not the sole purview of science fiction, and may be home to urban fantasy, magical realism, or speculative fiction as easily as a technologically driven narrative. Stories located in the familiar, but with an aura of the strange or fantastic: a space station orbiting the moon after an ecological disaster; New York City, but invaded by eldritch, Lovecraftian

horrors. A fully secondary world, in contrast, is one completely novel to and removed from that of the reader. In these storyworlds, the reader is much more likely to find the truly alien and the wildly fantastic. Fantasy and more far-flung science fiction lives here[6]. Secondary worldbuilding is of a necessity much more complex, as the further a storyworld deviates from the real world, the less can be taken for granted as familiar or known, and therefore there is a greater opportunity for estrangement and defamiliarization.

## Authorial vs Readerly Worldbuilding

The relationship between authorial and readerly worldbuilding is an important and interesting one, especially when considering cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization as "*something done with language by someone to someone*" (Miéville 235). Worldbuilding in the zeitgeist is often associated with the writing process, with many how-to guides being tailored to aspiring writers (Taylor 19; Wolf 18), so it is easy to consider worldbuilding as the purview of the author, and it is that. However, there is a similar creation of the world that the reader must do as they experience the narrative. In their article "A Practical Application of Critical World-Building," Taylor and Ekman frame the process of worldbuilding as: "Fictional worlds have to be built, constructed by their creators and recreated in the minds of the audience" (15). The audience recreating the storyworld is as much an act of worldbuilding as the author's initial creation. The worldbuilding of the reader is guided and framed by the worldbuilding of the author,

[6] The term "secondary world" is generally attributed to Tolkien's use of it in "On Fairy Stories," and so is usually more closely linked to works of fantasy and speculative fiction, though it certainly applies to some science fiction as well.

making it interestingly collaborative, but it is also an active process. How the author frames their worldbuilding and how much they guide the reader's worldbuilding can have a big impact on the reader's worldbuilding and experience of the storyworld.

Taylor and Ekman identify aspects or types of worldbuilding: authorial, readerly, and critical. Authorial worldbuilding "covers the activity of creating the world from scratch" (18-9). This is often approached from a creative writing perspective but can encompass critical analysis of the author as a worldbuilder as well (Taylor 19). Readerly worldbuilding refers to how the reader constructs the world of the narrative in their imagination. According to Taylor and Ekman, readerly worldbuilding "includes the cognitive and philosophical processes involved in taking the visual, textual, auditory, or other descriptions of a fictional world and turning them into a mental object with an ontological presence of its own" (19). Critical worldbuilding assumes that a critic brings different lenses to the reading, and is "the examination, analysis and interpretation of the interplay between a world's elements and its entirety, as well as between the world and its generic and other intertexts, and a critical and theoretical context" (Taylor and Ekman 19). A simplified interpretation could be to say that there are two types of worldbuilding, authorial and readerly, with critical worldbuilding as a subset of readerly, but that the audience brings different lenses and levels of analysis depending on motivation, background, and intent.

Authorial and readerly worldbuilding work hand-in-hand to create the storyworld, especially in how the audience experiences the work. Fabula and syuzhet are narrative concepts that frame the relationship between the storytelling and the story that the audience experiences. The fabula of a narrative is the "pattern which perceivers of

narrative create though assumptions and inferences" (Bordwell 49), and the syuzhet is "the actual arrangement and presentation of the fabula" (Bordwell 50). The syuzhet – the way the story is arranged and presented to the audience – informs how they build and experience the fabula – the story. Fabula and syuzhet are usually applied to narrative and story, but Mark Wolf suggests that they can be applied to worldbuilding as well, so that how the worldbuilding is presented and arranged can encourage the audience to build their versions of the world in certain configurations (52).

The author is arranging the worldbuilding, and the reader is using that arrangement to create their version of the storyworld. According to Taylor and Ekman, "the act of world-building is the combining of elements into a whole through deduction, inference, and interpretation. Such combining must be done with the recognition that worlds are built through webs of connections and interpretations between elements, but also that there will be blanks in the worlds where this information is missing" (16). But this information does not *remain* missing. The author provides the building blocks for the world, but they cannot provide every detail; the audience must supply what is left unsaid themselves.

Wolf builds on the theories of gestalt psychology and narrative gestalt to call this process "world gestalt." Gestalt psychology suggests that humans fill gaps in information to create a cohesive whole or pattern. Per Wolf, "the gestalt principles … have to do with how the human perceptual system organizes sensory input holistically, automatically filling in gaps, so that the whole contains percepts that are not present in the individual parts from which it is composed" (51). In narrative gestalt, the audience can understand that something happened off the page or screen occurred based on the narrative cues

around it, without actually witnessing it (Wolf 51). For example, a montage may quickly progress a movie or play through a span of time without necessarily showing every moment in between, and the audience understands that passage of time and plot advancement without having to witness ever moment. In world gestalt, "a structure or configuration of details together implies the existence of an imaginary world and causes the audience to automatically fill in the missing pieces of that world, based on the details that are given" (52). Wolf's example of narrative gestalt is that if a character is depicted driving away in one scene and arriving in the next, the journey can be inferred. In some ways world gestalt is subtler, but to extend Wolf's example, the road and landscape can also be inferred or even imagined by the audience based on what the audience knows about the world. Perhaps the driver went from the beach to the mountains, and the audience could imagine a scenic drive turned treacherous as it wove along the cliffs. Especially if the details are important to the experience of the imaginary world or narrative, the audience will generate them for themselves. In this way, the audience creates a coherent and continuous storyworld, by supplementing what is provided by the text so that there are no obvious holes or breaks in their experience of the world as they have constructed it in their mind.

The distinctions of types of worldbuilding are useful in examining each aspect of worldbuilding in and of itself, but also in how they interact. How the author frames the world and where they create or leave gaps – or do not leave gaps – for the audience to fill themselves can inform how the audience might then put together the world, and how particular constructions could cause them to interact with and reinterpret the themes of the text. This can be a useful tool in works of science fiction and fantasy, where the

imagined worlds are often interrogating ideas and/or questions in estranged storyworlds. The way that those ideas are worked into the fabric of the world can contribute to how the audience subsequently interacts with them in the text, as well as how that might encourage them to reframe their interpretations outside of the text.

Defamiliarization and cognitive estrangement are meant to make the reader see and question Primary World structures to which they have become habituated. Schalk's exploration of disability in speculative fiction provides a good example of how defamiliarization can reframe the reader's understanding of a Primary World issue. In each of the works she examines, characters have a physical or neurological condition that in the Primary World carries a stigma and assumption of "disability." But in the storyworlds these characters occupy, their conditions are less stereotypically "disabling," defamiliarizing the condition, complicating the view of it, and challenging the stereotypes the audience may bring to the work. The authors do not leave space for the Primary World discourse around disability, and so the reader must construct the storyworld without it. As Schalk says, "by representing realist disabilities in nonrealist contexts, these fantasy texts push readers to understand disability from the perspective of the main character, not from [their] preconceived notions and stereotypes" (119). By defamiliarizing them in the text, the storyworld disrupts these preconceived notions and allows the reader to recontextualize their understanding of the disability, particularly within the text, but possibly also in the Primary World.

## The Worldbuilding of N.K. Jemisin

N.K. Jemisin is aware of the potential of science fiction and fantasy to estrange ideas and narrative elements through worldbuilding. In her Masterclass on worldbuilding

in fantasy, she says of the difference between worldbuilding in science fiction and fantasy compared to more realistic fiction:

> If you're writing something set in another world and you want people to engage just with the ideas or just with the characters in that setting, then you take them away from the real world on purpose. You're doing that as a means of detaching your reader from their own personal experiences to some degree. … [I]n a way, it's sort of an imagination cleanser, and that way you can draw people into ideas or allegories for the real world that take them away from their own personal experiences. (Jemisin, "Elements" 2:14-3:03)

Jemisin's works often engage with the types of ideas and allegories that can carry emotional or personal reactions for the reader. Her philosophy of worldbuilding suggests that at least part of the motivation for her worldbuilding is to create those estranging spaces to draw the reader into the ideas and allegories. If the reader can take as given that Jemisin *is* using her worldbuilding to estrange, the question shifts to *how* she is doing so, what is distinct about how she integrates the ideas and themes into her worldbuilding, and how that shapes or influences the worldbuilding of the reader.

Jemisin breaks worldbuilding down into macro-worldbuilding and micro-worldbuilding, starting at a macro level and working towards more granularity. Macro-worldbuilding, which relates closely to world-architecture, is the physical worldbuilding. According to Jemisin, "macro-worldbuilding is the creation of the physical environment in which [the] culture developed, [the] characters emerged from, [the] story takes place" ("Macro-worldbuilding" 0:25-0:35). Macro-worldbuilding is the environment, the weather, the geography, the ecology of the fictional world. These all then go one to influence the creation of the people and culture, which is the part of the process that Jemisin calls micro-worldbuilding ("Micro-worldbuilding: Culture" 0:30-0:35). For Jemisin, this starts at the level of creating the species that inhabits the fictional world, and

then narrows in scale until she reaches the level of the individual characters. Within this is captured the elements that create the cultural setting: religion, racialization, acculturation, practices of science and/or magic, etc.

Jemisin also identifies the need for an "element X" in science fiction and fantasy worldbuilding. Jemisin's "element X" is the thing that is different or unique about the world being built that shapes the world and culture of the narrative ("Macro-worldbuilding" 9:56); it is functionally the novum broadened beyond the sphere of science and technology, and inclusive of how it would work in fantasy as well as science fiction. In *The Fifth Season*, for example, element X is that the Stillness "is a highly seismically active world, a world that is so seismically active that it … experiences seismic winters on a regular basis" ("Macro-worldbuilding" 10:40-10:50), a condition that affects every aspect of life on that world, from the ecology of the flora and fauna to the cultures that develop in response to an unstable environment. "Element X" can be anything, from a piece of tech that changes how society developed, to magic existing, to setting the story on an entirely different world; but once introduced into the worldbuilding, it shapes the world and culture that develops from that point onward.

The motivating themes and ideas of Jemisin's works are often complex social issues that can relate to the personal histories of the reader and/or trigger emotional reactions in the context of non-estranged setting. *The Broken Earth* trilogy, for example, is deeply interested in structural oppression and the legacy of slavery. *The Great Cities* duology is built on white supremacy. How the ideas are integrated into the elements of the worldbuilding contributes to how they are estranged in the reader's worldbuilding. Jemisin is asking her reader to engage with these ideas, but doing so in a genre that

removes them from those potentially emotional responses. Jemisin's worldbuilding also integrates these ideas into the story in ways that encourage the reader to build the world in particular ways, which affects how they engage with the estranged themes and ideas. Some of the characteristics of Jemisin's worldbuilding that contribute to this is that there are recognizable themes, but the Primary World themes are often broken into component parts in the narrative and while all the relevant elements of the real-world idea are present in the story, they are dissociated from each other in how they are integrated into the narrative. The case studies that follow are interested in how the authorial worldbuilding shapes, as well as disrupts and reconstructs, the readerly worldbuilding in N.K. Jemisin's novels around the themes and ideas that she has integrated into the worldbuilding, and how that might encourage the reader to reframe preconceived interpretations of the social concepts at the center of her worldbuilding.

## Chapter IV.

## Estranging Allegory through Worldbuilding in *The Fifth Season*

*But here is a man who will matter a great deal. You can imagine how he looks, for now.*

— N.K. Jemisin, *The Fifth Season*

While science fiction and fantasy use cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization as tools to imagine the world differently, often through allegory, N.K. Jemisin is doing a bit more and estranging the allegory itself within the text. Breaking the elements of the allegory apart and integrating them into the worldbuilding or narrative estranges the pieces from each other, and those pieces can be further defamiliarized to the reader. Where defamiliarization encourages the reader to imagine the idea differently, estranging the allegory in concert with defamiliarizing it creates a cognitive distance between the elements that can be maintained by the worldbuilding, and sets up a reconciliation of the estranged elements that can foster a deeper or more humanized understanding of the allegorical origins.

Because of the congruent evolution of the scholarship around cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization, the terminology can get a little fuzzy. Most of the scholarship that engages with estrangement and defamiliarization in Jemisin's work uses defamiliarization as the primary term. In this analysis, "estrangement" will be used to refer to how narrative elements are distanced from one another, primarily within the text. "Alienation" will be used to refer to how elements of the Primary or storyworld disrupts

or hinders empathy or understanding. “Defamiliarization” will adhere to the critical definition and be used to refer to making the familiar strange, representing something in the text (an idea, character, theme, etc.) outside of the context that it would have in the Primary World. In fantasy literature, the term defamiliarization usually also captures the way that making the familiar strange encourages the reader to reframe the defamiliarized element. It is hard to fully disconnect defamiliarization from the effect on the reader because of how it is used in fantasy literature, so that will be an element of how the is used here. But in an effort towards clarity, “cognitive estrangement” or “cognitive effect” may be used to acknowledge where this dynamic is actively connecting the estranged allegory back to a Primary World structure in order to reflect critically on it.

Most of the literature on N.K. Jemisin’s novels agrees that she uses defamiliarization as a strategy to interrogate the motivating themes of her works. Even where the language of cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization is not actively used, there is a general consensus about the allegorical nature of her works, especially in *The Fifth Season* and The Broken Earth trilogy it is part of where the allegory of the legacy of slavery is widely agreed upon. But while these works agree that the legacy of slavery is a racialized experience in the Primary World, as yet little attention has been paid to the fact that both the legacy of slavery and race, the Primary World context for the allegory, are integrated into and defamiliarized through the worldbuilding. I seek to address this, and further contend that it is important that the estranged elements of the allegory – race and the legacy of slavery – are held in tandem in the worldbuilding, as actively integrating both pieces of the allegory into the storyworld independently creates and maintains a disconnect that estranges the pieces of the allegory from one another. Because the

allegorical elements are actively estranged from their alienating associations, this estrangement can reinforce the defamiliarization and facilitate the social modeling and empathy building that is believed to be how people learn through reading fiction.

## The Introductions of Alabaster

Individual characters and motivations start blurring – and even crossing – the line from worldbuilding into narrative, but the manner in which N.K. Jemisin introduces characters in *The Fifth Season* provides a model for how the worldbuilding estranges the themes at play in the novel. Because of the non-linear timeline of the story, there are a handful of characters that are introduced multiple times throughout the course of the story; and it is not always clear when it is the same character across encounters. At different points in the novel, characters use different names, are different ages, and appear or present differently. Ultimately those disparate identities must be reconciled across the different representations to create a complete picture of the character. This is true of Essun/Syenite/Damaya as the main POV character at different points of her life, as well as a number of other central characters. Kim Wickham provides a comprehensive discussion of how the fracturing and reconciling of Essun's identity fosters a greater understanding of Essun and therefore the legacy of slavery in the reader, focusing on how the second person voice is both estranging and intimate. She notes that through "the complex use of focalizers Jemisin mirrors the identity work Essun herself must undergo and, ultimately, when the pieces come together and the journey is complete, the reader has both empathized with and participated in Essun's journey" (399). The worldbuilding of a science fiction or fantasy storyworld can facilitate a similar reframing of the themes and allegories they are interrogating, and Jemisin's worlds often do. The introductions of

Alabaster provide a particularly clear model of how the worldbuilding in the novel can reframe the themes for the reader by breaking them down, estranging the pieces, then reconstructing them to create the opportunity for greater insight. With Essun, the pieces of her history must be put together, but with Alabaster, the representations of him need to be reframed. As a character, Alabaster himself is fundamental to the worldbuilding (or breaking, as the case may be) within the context of the novel, and his introductions are as much worldbuilding for *The Fifth Season* as they are building character. The way that Alabaster is introduced, re-introduced, and then those introductions are reconciled causes the reader to reframe the character, and parallels the way that Jemisin is reframing the themes and ideas of the novel in her worldbuilding, and modeling the way the reader may subsequently reframe those ideas in other contexts. Alabaster's introduction is a particularly good model of this because the reader is actively invited to create preconceived notions of the character, that are then challenged and reframed by experience and better understanding.

The first time the reader is introduced to Alabaster is in the prologue of *The Fifth Season*, and it is explicitly as "context," and context "writ continentally" (1), which is to say context for how the world works. Alabaster literally changes the shape, atmosphere, mechanics, and sociopolitical structure of the world in this passage, tearing open a geological rift that sets in motion a climate catastrophe on a global scale, and setting the stage for the narrative. He makes literal, or textual, the act of worldbuilding, and his motivations align with the underlying ideological questions of the book, setting up the thematic world for the readers as well as the physical one.

Interestingly, in the prologue Alabaster is neither named nor described, but intentionally anonymized. He is introduced simply as "a man who will matter a great deal" (4). Alabaster's name being withheld here could be overlooked – it should not be, anonymizing him here sets up the eventual reframing in a way that is much less impactful if he is named – but it is in keeping with the tone and practice of the rest of the chapter. The only people named in the prologue are Uche and Essun, and only Uche, Essun's son who is killed before the start of the novel, is named the very first time the reader is introduced to the idea of him. Not naming Alabaster here feels noteworthy because he has been identified as important, but that can just as easily be put down to being part of the style and the story tale vibe the prologue creates. But not *describing* Alabaster here is a departure from Jemisin's established norm, even as it manifests in the prologue.

Jemisin is consistently detailed in providing physical descriptions for her characters, including Alabaster in subsequent introductions. Her character descriptions almost always provide enough detail for the reader to imagine at least a rough outline of the person, relevant racial and cultural markers to place them within the structure of society in the Stillness, as well as individual detail depending on narrative importance. Characters that are more important to the story obviously get more attention and detail, but even characters passing briefly through the narrative receive a basic level of detail not provided to Alabaster in the prologue. And unlike the naming, the lack of description is not characteristic of the prologue. Five characters of note are introduced in the prologue and "seen" in the narrative[7]: Uche, Essun, Alabaster, Antimony, and Hoa[8]. Jemisin

[7] A handful of characters are named but are not properly introduced or described until later in the novel.
[8] Hoa is also an outlier here. He does, technically, emerge in the prologue, and the description of his physical form is on the lighter side. However, he is not imputed with the same level of importance, so much

describes Uche and Essun, the only two of these five named in the passage, in great detail; Essun particularly, who is described as:

> forty-two years old. She's like most women of the midlats: tall when she stands, straight-backed and long-necked, with hips that easily bore two children and breasts that easily fed them, and broad, limber hands. Strong-looking, well-fleshed; such things are valued in the Stillness. Her hair hangs round her face in ropy fused locks, each perhaps as big around as her pinky finger, black fading to brown at the tips. Her skin is unpleasantly ocher-brown by some standards and unpleasantly olive-pale by others. (10)

Essun is the main POV character, and so it is understandable that she is described with this level of detail, but even Uche, a character already dead when introduced into the narrative receives a similar treatment: "he was almost three years old. He was small for his age, big-eyed and button-nosed, precocious, with a sweet smile" (10), and his familial ties to Essun allow for further detail to be inferred: his hair and skin are likely derivative of Essun's. The reader can build a picture of these characters based on the details provided, Essun particularly. Hoa and Antimony are less well fleshed out, but each is provided a rough outline, and Antimony's description sets up some of the basic characteristics of her people.[9]

Alabaster, on the other hand, is described in none of this detail. The reader is invited, instructed even, to "imagine how he looks" (4). The text of this passage gives the reader very little to go on, and even that is ambiguous. There is something reminiscent here of Toni Morrison's "Recitatif," a short story which centers two girls who grow up together, one of them black and the other white. Which girl is of which race is never

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as to almost be an afterthought. Interestingly, Hoa is one of the characters that goes through several textual reframings, though that process occurs mostly in books two and three of the series.

[9] Antimony is a stone eater, a different group of sentient beings that inhabit the Stillness who can most concisely be described as living statues. Stone eaters fill an almost mythological role in the Stillness, existing as legend that most people will never encounter and may not believe exist.

named in the text, and the cultural signifiers could be read to interpret it in either direction, especially when the reader's biases and preconceived notions factor in. The single physical detail suggested about Alabaster is that he has crow's feet around his eyes, revealed by smiling. Even this, the reader is asked to *imagine* rather than being told. "Imagine that his face aches from smiling. He's been smiling for hours: teeth clenched, lips drawn back, eyes crinkled so the crow's feet show" (5). Of course, the crow's feet may imply age, but this tiniest of physical details is connected more closely to his mental and emotional state than his age or physical condition. The passage continues, "There is an art to smiling in a way that others will believe. It is always important to include the eyes; otherwise, people will know you hate them" (5). His smiling is not from emotion – or not happiness certainly – but rather is a socialized survival mechanism, one that barely masks his rage and pain. The reader might infer from this that Alabaster is black or a person of color, as, especially in the US, internalized racism can cause (usually white) people to perceive people of color as "threats," and they may dissemble or code switch to appear less threatening. Similarly, Alabaster is a slave and the product of slavery, feeling alignment with "his fellow slaves" (6), a condition which could suggest to the reader, based on the context of modern western society, that Alabaster is black. But slavery in science fiction and fantasy need not follow historical racial lines – the reader will discover shortly that in the Stillness it does not. On the other hand, Antimony "treats him as though he represents his whole species" (6), which is to say humanity, which through a Eurocentric lens is often shorthand for white (Young 58). That is all the reader knows about this man in the prologue: a suggestion of race that can be interpreted through the lens of internalized bias, and crow's feet that hint at age but leaves it ambiguous.

The reader not only *can* impose upon him any form or physical trappings they want to imagine, they *must*, in fact they are told explicitly to do so. In circumstances where physical descriptions are not provided, it is not unusual for readers to project themselves or elements of their identity onto characters (Oatley 132), or falling into Helen Young's "habits of whiteness," assume the character is the societal "standard," which in Western culture is taken to be white, cishet men. Even sometimes when physical traits *are* provided, an audience may read the character as aligning with their expectation of character and identity (Young 40).[10] It is reasonable to expect then that when given free rein to imagine what this "man who will matter a great deal" looks like, the reader will put some amount of themselves and their internalized biases into the imagining. What and who does the reader picture when imagining a man who will matter a great deal?

Except, the reader can only "imagine what he looks like, for now," (4). *For now*, which suggests, even outright tells the reader, that they will not always be able to imagine him with such freedom; eventually they will be introduced to this man with a similar level of detail that the rest of the characters receive. When invited to "imagine what he is thinking" as well, the reader is cautioned that "this might be wrong, mere conjecture" (4), an apt warning that could be applied to his physical imagining as well. "For now" is the warning that the reader might be wrong in how they imagine Alabaster, subtler though it is. Their impressions and imaginings will possibly be confirmed, but most likely be

[10] This can occur in ways that both increase or decrease representation. Fandoms often introduce theories or ships that are not explicitly in the narrative, but increase representation of underrepresented groups, and cosplay can increase the participation and visibility of underrepresented groups (Womack 14). On the other side of it though, they may gatekeep against marginalized identities or generate outcry when media representation does not adhere to the white male standards they think that it should (Young 33).

corrected, perhaps even broken and reformed, and they will need to reconcile those two images.

Because, of course, Alabaster *is* introduced again in the narrative, twice in fact. The second time Alabaster is introduced it is in the same manner as basically every character in the novel is introduced: relatively detailed physical description, no great emphasis on his importance, inflected through the lens of the POV character. When Syenite (who was Damaya and will become Essun) meets Alabaster, he is rumpled, irritable, unfriendly, "obviously not well-bred, either: that hair, and skin so black it's almost blue, and he's small. Her height, that is, which is tall for either women or men—but he's lean, not at all broad or intimidating" (71). He is a person, and arguably one of only relative importance. An orogene, if a strong and talented one, in a system that oppresses and enslaves orogenes. While Alabaster is about to enter the narrative as a significant character, in many societal ways he is being coded as a man of no great importance: small, slight, low class, with little influence or agency.

Rather critically, *this* is the reader's actual introduction to Alabaster *as* Alabaster. Previously, they were introduced to "a man who would matter a great deal" (4). The narrative does not make the connection between the two yet. As the narrative progresses, the reader gets to know and grow to like Alabaster through Syenite's eyes. Certainly, Alabaster's strength in orogeny, deep anger at the system that keeps him, and his people enslaved, and tendency towards violent revolt suggests he could be the man from the prologue, but that relationship is obscured by the more immediate story, one that is grounded in Syenite's timeline and before the world is broken.

These two imaginings of Alabaster are finally reconciled near the very end of the novel, with his third introduction. This one is a re-introduction, really: Alabaster and Essun meet again at the end of the world, the same characters they have been throughout the course of the novel, recognizing and acknowledging *all* of the characters they have been throughout the course of their lives. Time and experience have changed them, and they both contain the multitudes of their former selves. Essun, herself having to reconcile hard truths about Alabaster and her past in this moment of reconnection, realizes and names that Alabaster is the one who caused the rift, who broke the world (448). Concurrently, the reader realizes that this is the man who would matter a great deal. And he *has* mattered a great deal, on both a grand, worldbuilding scale, and on a personal level, to Essun and the reader alike. On some level, Essun, and the observant reader, knew that Alabaster was responsible for breaking the world and causing the Season, but they have not had to confront the reality of that fact. "You don't want to understand, but you do. You don't want to believe, but really, you have all along" (448). Wickham contends that, while the use of the second person is "both distancing and intimate" (396), the reader understands and cannot be "you the reader" (397). But using the second person conflates the reader's perspective with Essun's. This second person limited voice aligns the reader with Essun, which encourages the reader to identify with Essun, especially in moments like this where the character and reader are sharing the same experience. By making Alabaster's role in causing the Season explicit, neither Essun nor the reader can conveniently ignore that knowledge and must reconcile the Alabaster they have come to know and (perhaps) love with the man who is responsible for a global climate disaster, that has intentionally caused a great deal of suffering and death.

The reader has to revisit how they imagined the man from the prologue. Perhaps they can avoid scrutinizing the man they originally envisioned, or questioning the assumptions and biases that imagining may have betrayed, but they can no longer imagine him as they will, without guidelines or informed description. They must imagine Alabaster, and by this point the reader knows a great deal about him, not only what he looks like, but the rage and grief that drive him, his loves and losses, his biting intelligence and impotent fury at a broken system. Jemisin has guided the reader in imagining Alabaster as a complicated and human character, and to that they add the affirmed knowledge that he is responsible for the Season, an act that ultimately is not surprising considering everything else the reader knows about him by now. What's more, upon re-reading *The Fifth Season*, the reader will always imagine Alabaster in the prologue, that anonymous, cipher of a man has context and history that informs the imagining of him and allows a deeper understanding of him and his actions. The anonymous man from the prologue may elicit some amount of empathy for his obvious pain, or he may as easily be interpreted more monstrously, since as Regina Lee points out, "In creating the Yumenescene Rift, Alabaster has stepped into the archetype the orogene occupies in the imperial imagination. In beginning a climactic and geological upheaval that will last thousands of years (8, 274), Alabaster becomes the Fifth Season, taking up the rogue orogene Misalem's defamed mantle at last" (335). Alabaster becomes the dangerous and monstrous threat the Stillness believed him to be all along. But knowing his story humanizes Alabaster in a way that anonymous and uncertain empathy cannot compare to, and undercuts the archetypal narrative around the volatile and evil orogene, in the same way that knowing the reason Misalem rebelled was vengeance for

his murdered family (Jemisin, *Season* 418) recontextualizes the origin myth the Guardians use to condition and control the orogenes.

Recontextualizing Alabaster this way demonstrates how the worldbuilding in N.K. Jemisin's works encourage the reader to reframe the critical ideas of the text. There is a big, complicated idea that when engaged with outside of the storyworld may cause a person to bring their own biases or (mis)interpretations to the issue: Alabaster is the man who caused the Season. The idea is broken into component pieces that are present in the text: the broken world, the man responsible, Alabaster as a complex but relatable human character. But these pieces are estranged from each other: Syenite's Alabaster is angry and bitter at the world that oppresses and enslaves him, his children, and his people, but the world is not yet broken; Syenite's Alabaster is also a loving father and partner who finds something to live for; the man who starts the Season has nothing to live for, and just wants it all to *end* (6). The reader may connect these characters: Syenite's Alabaster is orogenically strong and has arcane knowing, he is angry and has rebelled against the system before – but it is abstract, not confirmed, and can be ignored. Until ultimately those estranged pieces are reconciled into a more complicated whole that reframes the reader's understanding of each of the component parts in context with one another: Alabaster *is* the man who started the Season, but the reader now has an intimate and complete view of him as a character, as well as the context for how and why he took such drastic action. That deeper understanding of the character as a whole allows the reader to bypass the preconceptions that they initially brought to the character – or subject.

## When Structural Oppression Is for Everyone

This reframing of Alabaster models the way that the themes of *The Fifth Season* are estranged and reframed through the worldbuilding. Alabaster is estranged from himself, the alienating actions held separately from the humanizing experiences of him until the reader knows and understands him, at which point the two pieces of him can be reconciled. This mechanism presents in the themes and worldbuilding of *The Fifth Season* through the treatment of structural oppression and race. The central theme of the novel is structural oppression, and the legacy of slavery. But in the worldbuilding, the allegory of the legacy of slavery and race, the allegorical context, are estranged from one another, and are defamiliarized from their Primary World contexts. This estranged and defamiliarized experience of them may ultimately allow the reader to gain a better understanding of the themes that can later be reconciled within their Primary World contexts.

The experience of orogenes is an allegory for the experiences of marginalized people living under oppressive social and political structures, the most obvious parallel being black Americans living with the legacy of slavery. In the growing body of literature around *The Fifth Season*, there are a number of works that make this connection between orogenes and the legacy of American slavery or the experience of slavery, and the intersections that has with the Anthropocene, climate change and climate justice (Burg; Iles): gender (Warren): and identity formation (Wickham). As Hannah Warren points out in her discussion of the marginalizing and othering of Essun as both a woman and an orogene, "On both macroscopic and microscopic levels, *The Fifth Season* emphasizes the rhetorical implications of othering: hatred of orogenes permeates the Stillness, informing

law, social interactions, and familial ties" (338). The socio-political structures of the Stillness enforce and iterate the allegory of a legacy of slavery. Warren and Wickham, especially, are focused on Essun as an individual, but necessarily discuss the system that oppresses her. Regina Lee (2023) takes a broader view and considers how seismology and orogeny are used to defamiliarize the legacy of slavery from more of a worldbuilding perspective. Lee is also examining this dynamic specifically from the perspective of defamiliarization in the tradition of science fiction and fantasy and is interested in how "it amplifies an important but volatile idea by transmutation through a distancing mechanism" (338).

Interestingly, these analyses tend to gloss over the role of race in *The Fifth Season*, other than to note that it is important context to the legacy of slavery in the Primary World. But race and ethnicity, while not connected to orogeny, is a visible and socio-politically relevant element of the storyworld. I propose that an important piece of how the legacy of slavery is allegorized and defamiliarized in *The Fifth Season* is that race is part of the social fabric of the Stillness. Race being present and visible in the worldbuilding but unconnected to the allegory, even defamiliarized, itself enforces the distancing mechanisms of defamiliarization and allegory, and increases the potential for understanding and empathy building by maintaining distance between the allegory and its context, and the associations and biases that context might bring with it from the Primary World.

Examples of the ways the legacy of slavery is allegorized by orogeny occur throughout the novel at both an individual and structural level. Orogenes are feared and

considered dangerous for simply existing. Sometimes they can pass for "stills"[11], as Essun is doing prior to the start of *The Fifth Season*. But they are not tolerated to live openly in most comms[12], and when discovered are either taken away to the Fulcrum[13] (if they are children), chased out of town, or killed. When a character is accounting what happened to his orogene sister when they were children, he says, "The usual … Somebody realized what she was, told a bunch of other somebodies, and they came and took her in the night" (51). The usual. A story repeated over and over, that Essun lived, having been taken away to the Fulcrum as a child. A fate she feared for her children. An experience that carries a history of lynchings, segregation, of hate and bias for being born a certain way. Orogenes are not even seen as human, with the same rights, freedoms, and protections as those that society considers human. "Officially speaking, [orogenes are] not human, either. (Per the Second Yumenescene Lore Council's *Declaration on the Rights of the Orogenically Afflicted*, a thousand-ish years ago)" (234). The dehumanization of orogenes is created and enforced by the culture and laws of society. And considering the critical role that orogenes play in stabilizing the highly seismically active world they live in, it is not a stretch to infer that orogenes have been dehumanized and oppressed for the value of their labor, rather than valued as people. Lee discusses this in detail in her analysis of the node maintainers,

> The stark injustices attendant on orogene life, however, reach an apex of expression in them. The node maintainers have had their conscious minds severed from their capacity to control earthquakes, a reduction even from the orogene's slippery status, past animal, and into the thing itself. The true secret behind the Sanzed Empire's stability and power, these orogene children are harvested by the Fulcrum to power a network that keeps the

[11] Humans who are not orogenes.
[12] Communities in the Stillness, usually a town or city.
[13] An order that trains and deploys orogenes on imperial business. Outside of the Fulcrum, practicing orogeny is illegal.

> continent seismically calm, their consciousness and humanity amputated to become a technology of quiet earth. (337)

As Lee notes, the node maintainers been stripped down to basic utility, purely what use or labor they can provide the Yumescene Empire. While they are the most extreme case of this dehumanization, even orogenes who have not had their consciousness and the illusion of agency stripped away are of value only for their utility. In fact, leaving more controlled or tractable orogenes their consciousness is not a nod to their humanity, but to the value of orogeny wielded with intention and skill rather than pure instinct. A fact Alabaster confronts Syenite with when they go to a node station, "The only reason they don't do this to all of us is because we're more versatile, more useful if we control ourselves" (143). More useful, but not more human. This condition of people stolen from their homes, dehumanized, and often abused, whose humanity and life can be stripped away for the value of the labor they provide resonates strongly with the way that black people were treated in the system of American slavery. When it comes down to it, Fulcrum orogenes are slaves to the Yumescene Empire, whether they choose to recognize it from inside their servitude or not. Something Syenite must admit to herself, "Not that she hadn't known it before: that she is a slave, that all roggas are slaves, that the security and sense of self-worth the Fulcrum offers is wrapped in the chain of her right to live, and even the right to control her own body" (348). Their choice, such as it is, is to serve the Fulcrum or die; orogenes who cause problems, cannot control their orogeny, or underperform quietly disappear, either providing value to the empire or being excised from it.

The language around how orogenes are discussed is also very telling. Orogenes are derogatorily referred to as "roggas." "It's such an ugly word, harsh and guttural; the

sound of it is like a slap to the ear" (120). The structure of this word and the hard g's evoke a derogatory term for black people, which historically has been used in similar ways. It is a term that is weaponized against orogenes, as a slur and as a way that they internalize their oppression. "A dehumanizing word for someone who has been made into a thing" (140). Orogenes, particularly Fulcrum orogenes, often use it to think and refer to themselves, even knowing it is a slur and knowing it dehumanizes them. Alabaster uses it to call attention to an unjust system. But some orogenes, like Ykka and the "feral" – or free – orogenes of Castrima, have reclaimed the word, finding it empowering to use it to refer to themselves. As Warren notes, "Ykka employs the slur as a form of resistance, pushing against the oppressors who claim it as a stance of power. Castrima not only uses her powers but accepts her as a comm member" (351). And there is tension when these uses come into contact. Syenite hates that Alabaster's use of rogga makes her confront an unjust system; Essun finds Ykka's reclaimed use of rogga jarring, even as she thinks of herself as a rogga in the derogatory sense.

All these experiences would be understood to be racially coded in the Primary World, and these are just examples at the worldbuilding level: societal structures, culture, linguistic patterns; the individual experiences of Essun, Alabaster, and the other orogenes expand and reinforces this allegory. But what makes a person an orogene in *The Fifth Season* is not connected to race. The people of the Stillness have a structure in their brains called the sessapinae, which is sensitive to seismic activity. Orogenes have a well-developed sessapinae compared to the rest of the population, giving them the ability to feel ("sess") and manipulate seismic activity. (Jemisin, "Culture" 9:03-17) This ability can arise in any of the human races of the Stillness, and while many of the central

orogenes in the narrative are black or brown (Essun and her family, Alabaster, Ykka), orogenes throughout *The Fifth Season* (and the whole of the Broken Earth trilogy) range in color from Antarctic white to Sanzed bronze to Coaster ebony. Being an orogene is not considered a racialized trait in a Primary World context and is not connected to any particular physical phenotype.

With the focus on how orogeny is an allegory for American slavery, one disconnected from race as a phenotype, little attention has been paid to race or ethnicity existing in the Stillness other than to note that orogeny is not connected to a Primary World conception of race. Even Lee, who is engaging with the ideas of cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization skates over the racial dynamic in *The Fifth Season*. But race, or phenotype, has its own dynamic in the Stillness. The story of *The Fifth Season* is one "writ continentally" (1), on a continent that stretches across the span of the hemisphere, from the Arctics to the Antarctics. While race does not adhere to the same social dynamics it does in the Primary World, it is an important social factor in the Stillness. The Yumenescene Empire spans a large portion of the continent, influencing the laws, culture, cultural biases, and beauty standards within their sphere of influence. Their exploitation of orogenes has stabilized their Empire, prolonging and centering their influence on the culture and societies of the storyworld. This, and the ease of travel that comes with well-maintained imperial roads, fosters a society that has its own versions of biases and supremacies – mostly that center Sanzed people and culture – but it is actively and explicitly multi-racial. Because there is such an emphasis on physical description, this influence is particularly evident in beauty standards. Damaya thinks of one of her

fellow grits[14], "he's a handsome boy despite his obvious Arctic or Antarctic heritage" (198). This blond boy, who obviously has some white (Arctic or Antarctic) somewhere in his background, is handsome despite not adhering to Equatorial standards. Essun assesses a woman she meets on the road as, "what Sanzed women are supposed to look like, tall and strong and bronze and almost offensively healthy, with nice even features and wide hips, all of it crowned with a shock of gray ashblow hair that's almost like a pelt about her shoulders" (236). Handsome *despite*. What Sanzed women are *supposed to* look like. There is a racial order to the Stillness, one formed by its own history and culture, and racial phenotype can say a lot about how a person fits into or is assessed by that order.

Jemisin is consistent about describing the physical appearance of her characters, so the reader is aware of the race of everyone they are introduced to, orogene and still, as well as often the social and imperial implications of that race or appearance in the world of the Stillness. As a result, the reader must maintain race as part of their worldbuilding as they construct that world in their imaginations. Race is an important social factor in the Stillness, but it is defamiliarized from how the reader experiences it in the Primary World. In her discussion on the defamiliarization of race in speculative fiction generally, and Jemisin's *The Broken Kingdoms* specifically,[15] Schalk says,

> The defamiliarization of race here means readers cannot assume that characters who are physically described in ways we would associate with a particular realist racial category are treated in the same way as one would expect of treatment for those within that racial category in a realist setting. Racial signifiers that depend on phenotype and other visual markers thus become less critical to understanding social relations. (129)

[14] Orogene children in training at the Fulcrum.
[15] The second book in N.K. Jemisin's Inheritance trilogy.

Defamiliarizing race in the storyworld distances it from the associations of a realistic setting. In the case of *The Fifth Season*, racial signifiers are *not* "less critical to understanding social relations" (Schalk 129), though this may be true of, or at least downplayed in *The Broken Kingdoms*, where Oree Shoth, the POV character, is blind and so perceives race differently. The social relations indicated by racial signifiers in the Stillness are different from what they would be in the Primary World, are defamiliarized, but they are still important to understanding the sociopolitical dynamics of the storyworld of *The Fifth Season*. At the same time, racial signifiers are estranged from social relations surrounding structural oppression, which is itself defamiliarized by being connected to the non-racialized orogenes. Both of those dynamics must be integrated, separately, into the reader's understanding of the storyworld.

If the fabula/syuzhet paradigm can be zoomed out to apply to more than just narrative, as Wolf suggests in his discussion of world logic (53),[16] how the worldbuilding is arranged and presented can encourage the reader to build their versions of the storyworld in certain configurations. As much as the syuzhet can encourage "linear causal inferences," it can also "block or complicate the construction of causal relations" (Bordwell 51), disrupting established expectations or configurations. Estranging the allegorical elements can create this sort of disruption. Integrating the estranged elements separately into the worldbuilding, and defamiliarizing them independently from the Primary World context provides a way to guide the reader's worldbuilding. That these critical elements are present but estranged from one another in the imagined world creates gaps between them that can then be filled in by the reader's worldbuilding and the

[16] The logic behind how the storyworld works. Wolf asserts that this is part of the storyworld's fabula.

world gestalt that occurs as a part of that readerly worldbuilding to create a cohesive and wholistic world which maintains that cognitive distance. By breaking the elements of the theme apart and integrating them into the worldbuilding on their own, Jemisin creates the space for the reader to imagine the elements of themes differently, and to reframe their understanding of them.

How the world is constructed and what it includes can guide how the reader fills the spaces that estranging the allegory opens. According to Mark Wolf, outside of audiovisual cues in media, there are three ways that world gestalt occurs. First and most obvious is the "completion of narrative gestalt" (57) where elements or information from the narrative are combined to complete a cohesive understanding of the storyworld. A cohesive understanding of the world may also be created through "gap filling using Primary World defaults and gap filling using the secondary world defaults" (57).[17] Each of these relies on a knowledge base from either the Primary or storyworld to supply details that supplement the narrative. Gap filling with Primary World details is natural where it does not conflict with the mechanics of the secondary world and/or the secondary worldbuilding does not otherwise supply relevant information or world logic (54). Confounding this type of gap filling is particularly relevant to Jemisin's method of worldbuilding. Actively holding both structural oppression and race within the mental construct of the world of the Stillness they are creating means that the reader cannot default to, for example, connecting the experience of structural oppression to race as they often do in the Primary World. Rather they must use the information from the secondary to fill the gaps in the world structure. In the case of *The Fifth Season* this means the

[17] This last one largely relies on information from additional sources from appendices or supporting media that sometimes accompany imagined worlds and requires the reader to have familiarity with those details.

experience of the legacy of slavery can be understood through the lens and experience of orogenes, who could look like anyone; and the experience of race, while not quite value-neutral, is not organized or stigmatized in the same way it is in the Primary World. If race was not actively an element of the worldbuilding in *The Fifth Season*, with its own dynamic within the socio-political and cultural structure of the Stillness, one separate from the treatment of orogenes, the reader could supply context from the Primary World related to the legacy of slavery and connect it to race because "unless we are told otherwise, we … expect the secondary world's social, political, or economic structures will operate in a similar fashion as those that exist (or used to exist) in the Primary World" (Wolf 54). And in the Primary World, the experience of orogenes, one beset by structural oppression, explicit and implicit biases, and a legacy of slavery, is one closely tied to race, and the experiences of people of color.

Estranging the pieces of the allegory but keeping them all in the secondary world suggests that how the allegory is integrated into the worldbuilding could also frame how the reader experiences that allegory. Wickham says, "Throughout The Broken Earth trilogy, Jemisin asks the reader to experience and empathize with the traumas caused by slavery and the lasting effects that trauma has on those who experienced it as well as later generations" (408). But Jemisin is not only asking the reader to empathize with orogenes in the Stillness and through them the traumas and legacies of slavery. She is also removing the barriers to that empathy by keeping phenotypical race present in the worldbuilding. In the Primary World, race is deeply connected to conversations around structural oppression and the legacy of slavery, but because these can be polarizing issues – and polarizing in part because of their relationship to one another – the biases around

them can hinder the reader engaging with those issues outside of the effect of that polarization. Lee discusses the potential for defamiliarization to facilitate circumventing stigmatized or polarized reactions:

> As Robin DiAngelo's work on American racisms makes clear, part of white fragility manifests as a denial of the extent and duration of the country's history of slavery. But this is one arena that science-fictional defamiliarization can dominate: it amplifies an important but volatile idea by transmutation through a distancing mechanism. Thus, in both structure and content *The Fifth Season* works to counteract this racialized turning away. (338)

Counteracting this racialized turning away is important to build empathy. The ways that readers learn from and build empathy through reading rely on things like being more absorbed in a story (Mar et al.; Slater) and identifying with the characters (Broom et al.). Alienating associations, race related or otherwise, can create barriers to that. That the legacy of slavery is experienced through the orogenes rather than through a racialized context creates distance between the volatile ideas of the legacy of slavery and race, counteracting the alienating associations of race.

I contend that defamiliarization is not the only aspect of how the volatile ideas of race and the legacy of slavery are transmuted in *The Fifth Season*. Simply distancing the legacy of slavery from race may not be enough to effectively circumvent the alienating associations. If race is not part of the authorial worldbuilding in its own – and unconnected – right, the reader is freer to fill the gaps around the allegory in with their understanding of the Primary World context, which is to say a racialized context. If the reader is supplying a racialized context for the allegory, they may also connect Primary World biases to their understanding of it in the storyworld, making it harder to dismantle or disassociate those biases and empathize with the experiences of the orogenes. When the Primary World context itself is part of the worldbuilding or narrative apart from the

defamiliarized allegory, the secondary world mechanics and defaults may be more readily and easily used to fill in the gaps around the experience of the allegory, allowing the reader to stay more firmly located in the storyworld.

Reconciling the estranged allegory – putting the pieces back together and reframing them with new or deeper understanding – must happen off-page, if it happens at all, at least in the conditions present in *The Fifth Season*. But even absent that explicit reframing of the allegorized issue, estranging the allegory gives the reader conditions under which the alienating factors can be circumvented, and they can experience the allegory, and the storyworld, without those alienating features. That the worldbuilding for *The Fifth Season* holds not *just* an allegory for the legacy of slavery, but that race is part of the world as well, sets up this dynamic.

# Chapter V.

## *The City We Became* and Reconciling Estranged Allegory

*Here is this white woman, who is not a white woman at all but who has tried to manipulate mechanisms of power against Bronca just like the worst of them.*

— N.K. Jemisin, *The City We Became*

Estranging the elements of the themes and integrating those estranged components into the worldbuilding in defamiliarized forms is something N.K. Jemisin often employs in her writing, especially where her works have a distinct thematic center. She uses the genres of science fiction and fantasy not only to frame an allegory, but through her worldbuilding keeps the allegory in conversation with the pieces of the allegorical origin. That conversation can prime and perhaps even lead to a reframing or recontextualized understanding of the allegorical origins for the reader. It is difficult to reconnect the estranged allegory to its allegorical origin in a full secondary world through the narrative or worldbuilding without being able – or willing – to integrate Primary World context into the storyworld. On top of that, estranging the allegory successfully means that the Primary World associations are not readily available to use in the worldbuilding. This may facilitate a more thorough defamiliarization of the estranged allegory, but while this complete disconnect from the world of the reader can have benefits, especially where related to removing barriers to empathy and identification, it leaves the conscious reconciliation of the allegorical elements and the reflection on the

Primary World very much in the hands of the reader and the level of awareness and introspection the reader brings to their experience of the novel. In contrast, building a storyworld more connected to the Primary World allows for a more explicit reflection on the Primary World and Primary World phenomenon. This as much as anything might be why science fiction is connected to cognitive estrangement and fantasy is not: the reflection on and (re)connection to the Primary World is more visible and supported by the storyworld in science fiction rather than left to the interpretive power of the reader. The flip side of this is that the barriers to empathy and habituated invisibilities of the Primary World can be carried into a primary world more easily. Non-estranged allegory faces similar challenges in science fiction set in primary worlds that it does in fantasy set in secondary worlds: that it may not effectively bypass Primary World biases and associations. Estranging the allegory in a primary world can break those associations in order to defamiliarize the allegory, while also reflecting directly on them through their place in the worldbuilding.

*The City We Became* is an excellent example of how an allegory can be both estranged, defamiliarized, then reconnected to the allegorical origin in order to more effectively reflect and reframe the Primary World phenomenon. Setting the story in a primary world offers the opportunity to integrate not just the estranged allegory into the worldbuilding, but the allegorical origin in its Primary World form as well. While scholarship on *The City We Became* is still emerging, a lot has focused on how various aspects of racism and white supremacy are allegorized in the text. These interpretations are supported in the text, and undoubtedly future readings will add to this growing body of work, but focusing on only one aspect obscures the fact that *all* of these are present in

the text, in the same way that *all* of them are aspects of racism and a culture of white supremacy.

I contend that the allegory that Jemisin is working with is that culture itself, which for the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to as destructive whiteness.[18] In *The City We Became*, Jemisin estranges the implicit expressions of destructive whiteness and the way it operates, defamiliarizing and making visible the aspects of destructive whiteness that are generally more habituated and invisible. She also introduces destructive whiteness in the Primary World expressions of it, to be reckoned with in the context of the novel. Estranging the allegory, defamiliarizing the elements, and integrating Primary World expressions of the it places the allegorical origin outside of but adjacent to the allegorized expressions of it. The reader therefore has all the pieces to process and reconcile the estranged allegory in conversation with one another in the context of the storyworld. Moreover, because all of these are aspects of a single storyworld structure in *The City We Became*, whether expressly or allegorized, they must be reconciled as facets of a whole in order to fully understand the way that structure – "the Enemy" – is operating in the text. Reconciling the disparate expressions of destructive whiteness as pieces of a larger and more complicated systemic issue is necessary to recognize and address all the ways that it causes harm. Similarly, the reader is put into a position where they can better understand the connection of the allegorical context and Primary World expression by understanding the storyworld structure that encapsulates these elements.

[18] Destructive whiteness is used here as an umbrella term that encompasses behaviors and attitudes that cause racial harm including racism, white supremacy, and weaponized whiteness as well as less obvious forms such as gentrification and white privilege. This has the additional benefit of capturing the defamiliarized allegorical mechanism in *The City We Became*.

## Estranging Allegory in Overlaid Worlds

Along the spectrum of alternate worlds in science fiction and fantasy, *The City We Became* takes place in a primary world that has fantastic elements integrated into it rather than a fully secondary world. The titular *City* is New York City, and up to a point should be recognizable to a reader passingly familiar with New York City in the 2010-20s, and the conventions and mechanisms of the Primary World in that era. Where the New York of *The City We Became* differs from the New York of the Primary World is that in the storyworld, a reality-shaping magic exists in the power of abstract concepts, belief, and collective consciousness. When a city reaches a critical level of metaphysical weight or importance in the world, they are "born," becoming sentient, and manifesting a physical avatar in the form of a citizen who embodies the character of the city and wield the city's magic. *The City We Became* follows this process with New York City, who manifests a primary avatar for the whole city, as well as secondary avatars for each of the five boroughs. This awakening is opposed by "the Enemy," a nebulous adversary whose purpose is to stop New York City from being born as a sentient city, and ultimately to bring about the annihilation of the branch of reality New York City exists in.

"The Enemy" is itself a sentient city from another dimension that feels its existence is threatened by the cities of New York's reality awakening to sentience. The fundamental conflict between New York City and the Enemy, and the ways that the Enemy incurs upon and operates in New York City get at the central themes of *The City We Became*: destructive whiteness and the strength of a diverse and multi-cultural society. The Enemy is central to the expressions of destructive whiteness in the narrative, both allegorized and realistic. "The Enemy" is a white city, and that whiteness

encompasses both color (in simply the sense of hue and unassociated with race) and, to borrow a term from Helen Young, the habits of whiteness (10), specifically the habits of destructive whiteness, the ways that whiteness is weaponized, centered, and prioritized through culture and repetition. “Here is this white woman, who is not a white woman at all but who has tried to manipulate mechanisms of power against Bronca just like the worst of them” (258).[19] The Enemy is a white city, that is not a White city, but it is manipulating the mechanisms of destructive whiteness.

The fundamental nature of the Enemy is in direct conflict to that of New York City. Where New York is full of individuals with their own goals, desires, and motivations; a vibrant and diverse city full of noise, life, and chaos; R’lyeh, the city that is the Enemy, is static and resistant to change, uniform and without diversity – or even individuals – functioning more like a mushroom in the sense that all its creatures are extensions of the whole rather than individuals working towards a common cause. The two cities are “fundamentally inimical” (257),[20] and this antithetical nature is made especially apparent through the avatars of the two cities. The Enemy’s avatar is the Woman in White, singular, an extension of a monolith not meant to individuate. New York City has six avatars, one for each borough and a primary for the city as a whole. The avatars of New York have their own lives, opinions, desires, and agency. They do not always agree, or even particularly like each other; they represent a diversity of races and ethnicities, genders, ages, sexualities, economic securities, skill sets and knowledge bases. As Sulimma points out, “for R’lyeh urban cultural diversity is a threat” (578). New York is a hotbed of multiculturism, and the Enemy believes that this diversity threatens

[19] The avatar of the Bronx.
[20] A perspective that is held in both directions.

its existence. When new Great Cities are born they collapse the layers of reality,[21] creating spaces where all of the branching possibilities are true, but "the process of [a city's] creation … is the deaths of hundreds or thousands of other closely related universes" (Jemisin, *City* 306). R'lyeh proactively attacks cities on the verge of awakening to stop this process. It is worth noting that there are *many* Great Cities living in the storyworld, and while it may be true that when cities are born they collapse adjacent realities into a single dimension, R'lyeh remains, perhaps not actually at risk herself from the Great Cities awakening.

That the storyworld relies on a multiverse of dimensional branching generally leads the scholarship on *The City We Became* to consider it science fiction. The cognition or the science of *The City We Became* is a bit subjective though. If there is a novum in the Suvinian sense, it would be the sentience of the cities and the multiversal branching that creates infinite alternate worlds. But arguably the mechanics of the world adhere more closely to the fantastic. The city magic that the avatars of New York wield is best described as weaponizing metaphorical constructs, and relies heavily on thought, imagination, wishes, and desires. The Enemy is quite literally a thing out of horror stories, and horror is genre-bridging, so these eldritch monsters can be read as multidimensional invaders, or mythic monsters, depending on the proclivity of the reader. I highlight this not to exclude *The City We Became* from science fiction, or to shift it into or out of fantasy, but to note that – whether science fiction or fantasy – what actually is important for putting the estranged allegory in conversation with the allegorical origin,

[21] Cities in the world of *The City We Became* who have awakened and become sentient.

for creating a cognitive effect and reflecting on the habituated invisibilities of the Primary World, is the way the storyworld is constructed in relation to the Primary World.

Setting the story in a world adjacent to the Primary World provides both opportunities and disadvantages when compared to setting it in a full secondary world. Wolf refers to these types of worlds as "overlaid worlds", or worlds that exist in proximity to the Primary World (28) with fantastical elements are laid on top of known locations. In a world overlaid on the Primary World, like that of *The City We Became*, the author might be constrained by the mechanics of reality and the expectations of the reader, but they can also rely on the familiarity of the reader for the worldbuilding. The ways that the world of *The City We Became* differentiates from the world of the reader largely center on the sentience of the Great Cities, the city magic that is imbued in them, and the construction of the Enemy, itself a sentient city. Because the world of the Great Cities in (most) other ways adheres to the rules, history, socio-political dynamics, and other elements that would otherwise be considered macro- or micro-worldbuilding, these elements can not only be used to fill gaps in the worldbuilding through world gestalt, but can appear in the text as they occur in the Primary World. Which in the case of *The City We Became,* means that these examples of racism, of weaponized whiteness, of gentrification, of other forms of destructive whiteness, can be integrated into the narrative in their real-world incarnations, and acknowledged as such. If *The City We Became* had been set in a fully secondary world, with the same concept of cities awakening to sentience, opposed by another sentient city, just not New York, and not an overlaid world, this type of realistic representation would not be possible, or would feel heavy-handed. An allegory might fill the same function, but would lack the same direct

reference, and would rely on the reader interpreting the allegory to have a similar impact. Setting *The City We Became* in a primary world means that both the estranged allegory and the realistic representations of destructive whiteness are held within the storyworld.

Estranging the allegory is still a valuable way to guide the reader's worldbuilding and interaction with the allegory. It is a more delicate process in overlaid worlds because of the proximity to the Primary World though. Since the world is built out of the Primary World, those defaults are easier to assume. Anything that does not or should not adhere to Primary World defaults needs to be explicitly disconnected from them, as the Primary World and secondary world defaults merge under these conditions. The world logic in overlaid worlds will naturally support Primary World defaults being used to supplement the storyworld logic. Estranging the allegory in the storyworld confounds that dynamic, making it harder to unintentionally connect the Primary World context to the estranged allegory and creating space between the allegorical elements that facilitates defamiliarization.

An opportunity of overlaid worlds is that the estranged allegory and the Primary World context can all exist within the same storyworld. Connecting those estranged elements to their Primary World origins has the potential to collapse those gaps in a way that reframes or recontextualizes the allegory and its expression in the Primary World. The syuzhet of the worldbuilding becomes very important then, as to be most effective, the allegory must be estranged and defamiliarized *before* the reader fully connects it back to the Primary World expression of it in the storyworld. Not estranging the allegory, similar to in a full secondary world, risks not avoiding the biases and associations that could alienate the reader, which could then mitigate the eventual reframing of the

allegory or theme motivating the storyworld. But estranging and defamiliarizing the allegory and then connecting it to the context can reflect on the allegorical origin, having also potentially sidestepped alienating factors. Moreover, if all of these aspects are part of the same storyworld structure or mechanic, then they must be reconciled within the context of the storyworld for the reader to understand the storyworld structure.

Which I propose is how the framing of the Enemy interacts with destructive whiteness in *The City We Became*. There are three main elements of how destructive whiteness is integrated into the mechanics of the Enemy: the physical appearance of the Enemy and its manifestations in New York; the way that the Enemy operates directly on New York, which forms an allegory of the creeping, insidious ways that implicit forms of destructive whiteness can manifest, but disassociated from race; and the way that the Enemy operates indirectly through citizens and institutions of New York, through non-allegorized expressions of destructive whiteness. The first two make up the components of the estranged allegory, and the third is the Primary World representation of destructive whiteness. Recognizing the varied mechanisms and tactics of the Enemy, ultimately encourages the reader to consider all the strategies of the Enemy as facets of destructive whiteness.

The Enemy is a white city. Strictly in terms of physical appearance the city, its creatures, and manifestations are fundamentally associated with whiteness and the absence of color. The creatures that infiltrate New York from the Enemy's dimension are pale and colorless. They are "long, feathery white tendrils" (38) that infect people and objects in New York; or creatures that are "untinted white and ghostly and [seem] to waver a little as if [not] quite there" (218); or tentacles that are "enormous but

translucent" (173). The Woman in White, functionally the avatar of the city that is the Enemy, always presents as a woman dressed in white. She looks like a different person every time she appears, but she is always dressed in white, and her lack of color extends to skin and hair so pale that it almost feels unnatural. She is not a "white woman" in terms of race, exactly, so much as she is a woman who is unnaturally white, an unnaturalness compounded by the fact that one of the ways she manifests is by possessing a citizen of New York, and when she does, that person is leached of any color they might have had. When the Woman in White takes over the woman harassing Manny[22] and his roommate in Inwood Park, "the woman's clothing turns entirely white. The suit, the shoes, even the pantyhose. Her hair, too" (62). But while she often occupies a white woman, the Woman in White's whiteness is not explicitly tied to race. One of the times she appears to Aislyn[23], "there is a hint of epicanthic fold about her eyes, and exotic angles to her cheekbones and the spacing of her nose" (331). Aislyn reads her as "Russian, maybe" (331); but Aislyn, a white woman herself, and leaning into her racist conditioning, is predisposed to seeing the Woman in White as a racialized white, while an epicanthic fold is common in many peoples, including Russians, but especially people of Asian descent.

The Enemy is a white city: the dead-eyed white of monsters from the depths of the ocean that never see the sun; the atavistic, skittering colorlessness of a nest of silverfish; the brilliant, aching white of a too-bright LED screen. The whiteness of the Enemy is defamiliarizing the concept of Whiteness; its whiteness is a facet of the fundamental nature of the Enemy: that it is an eldritch horror. The first introductions and

[22] The avatar of Manhattan.
[23] The avatar of Staten Island.

incursions of the Enemy all manifest as monsters and nightmare creatures, establishing an expectation of the Enemy being a horrifying, science fiction-esque invader, a squamous thing out of a Lovecraftian nightmare. The Williamsburg Bridge is destroyed by "a titanic tentacle [that] curls up from the East River" (173). FDR Drive is infested by an explosion of "tendrils – … anemoneic and enormous" (41) that infect passing vehicles and cause massive traffic disruptions. The last bathroom in the women's room of the Bronx Arts Center becomes a tunnel to *elsewhere* (126). Only once the horrifying and monstrous nature is established and solidified are non-allegorized expressions of explicit destructive whiteness demonstrated to be a weapon in the Enemy's arsenal. At which point, the nature of the Enemy is revealed to be Lovecraftian in the sense of the man and his horrifyingly racist beliefs [24] as much as Lovecraftian in the sense of a purveyor of horror and nightmare.

The Enemy infiltrates New York by taking advantage of existing weaknesses in the fabric of New York's reality. Where it finds an individual or institution that resonates with it and its goals, it "infects" them with a piece of itself. These appear as translucent, white tendrils or feathers that attach to the person or institution. "Where the [Enemy] has touched him there is a thin, pale nub poking through his T-shirt … It's white, about the thickness of yarn" (94). The tendrils can be hard to see, even if the observer knows what they are looking for, occurring in different locations, and hiding behind the trappings of the everyday. Though as the Enemy gains strength and agency in New York, on some people and places the tendrils grow to the point of obscuring the infected person or thing beneath.

[24] This aspect of Lovecraft is discussed in the text of *The City We Became*, in case the reader is unfamiliar with Lovecraft's beliefs on racialized others.

This behavior mimics how internalized racism, white supremacy, and other biases work on an implicit level, but it is defamiliarized through the Enemy's connection to horror and monsters from another dimension. Similarly, gentrification, parasitic urbanism, predatory capitalism, and institutionalized racism are insidious expressions of destructive whiteness on a structural level that often get overlooked, especially from populations benefiting from rather than harmed by them. Such biases and behaviors and structures are often invisible to the individual if they have not done some self-education or examination, in the way that the carriers of the tendrils do not know they are infected by them. Internalized biases and structural inequities can also be invisible to larger parts of society if they are outside the experience of the observer, similar to how most New Yorkers in *The City We Became* do not see the incursions of the Enemy unless they have need to or are touched by the city's magic.

The Enemy's tendrils of infection spread through contact with people who are susceptible to the goals of the Enemy. "The guide-lines … don't control people, not precisely. They just… guide. Encourage preexisting inclinations" (331). The infected people are often unaware of their presence or the way the tendrils influence their behavior, and the tendrils spread through "benign" contact: a touch to the shoulder (Jemisin, *City* 93), or driving through an unexplained slowdown on the highway (41). But, as Manny observes, "if they touch a person, that person is then *compromised* in some fundamental, metaphysical, infectious way" (63). Compromised and infectious in the same way that implicit biases can be passed from person to person and down through generations through exposure to systemic racism or established patterns of belief is similarly invisible and habituated. Those behaviors are subsequently assumed to be the

norm, not examined critically, and ingrained in the structures of society. These implicit or unexamined biases may be passive (which is not to be confused with harmless), but like the tendrils of the Enemy, they provide a "toehold" to more violent or explicit expressions of destructive whiteness when triggered by something. In the case of *The City We Became*, this is usually the need, attention, or machinations of the Enemy, motivated by the Enemy's perceived threat to its reality, existence, and nature. In the Primary World, this sort of escalation is sometimes triggered by confronting or threatening the security and privilege that comes with structural white supremacy.

When the Enemy is operating through its intrusions into New York, the ways it operates present an allegorical representation of destructive whiteness. When the Enemy operates through citizens of New York that it has infected, their strategies and actions are often explicitly racist. The guide-lines which do not really control, "just… guide" (331) infect people who resonate with the nature and goals of the Enemy. When that prizes uniformity, order, and purity, it follows that that aligns with a worldview of racism and white supremacy, and that when acting in service of the Enemy, their actions would be recognizably racist.

This racism is made explicit in the text. A white woman in Inwood Park calls the cops on the avatar of Manhattan, or threatens to, for existing while black (60). The Alt Artistes, an alt-right "activist" group, doxxes the avatar of the Bronx and the female, BIPOC staff of the Bronx Arts Center she runs for "reverse racism" (i.e. refusing to exhibit their explicitly racist art) (244). Neo-Nazis and other men's rights organizations stage a white pride march on FDR Drive (379). The people and groups responsible for these incidents are from New York or the reality of New York rather than part of the

Enemy, and while they are infected by the Enemy, perhaps nudged towards particular targets, the influence of the Enemy is indirect, and the actors have agency of their own. These incidences of explicit destructive whiteness are so overtly recognizable that in the real world they would (or should) be immediately obvious to the reader as such. Even if they were not, they are often called out by the characters as racist. They are not allegories of racism, but realistic depictions of racism and white supremacy. And these acts of destructive Whiteness are as much a part of how the Enemy is attacking New York as the monsters it is manifesting.

That the Enemy is associated with whiteness, the defamiliarized destructive whiteness, and realistic representation of destructive whiteness means that to create a full picture of the Enemy and how it operates, those three elements must be reconciled as facets of the same structure. The whiteness of the Enemy defamiliarizes Whiteness. The Lovecraftian horror of the Enemy when it is acting directly on New York defamiliarizes the ways that destructive whiteness operates implicitly. These alone could effectively estrange the allegory of implicit destructive whiteness, creating space between the allegory and its Primary World origins that can be maintained by the reader's worldbuilding. But then there is the third facet of the Enemy: that the ways it influences citizens of New York's reality to operate on its behalf are explicitly racist, which is to say an element of the Primary World allegory. Reconciling all three of these are necessary for the reader to build an understanding of how the Enemy functions. The Woman in White is "not a white woman" (258); the Enemy is white, but not White; and yet it is "manipulat[ing] mechanisms of power … just like the worst of them" (258). It is

weaponizing Whiteness the way that destructive whiteness, implicit or explicit, does to center white privilege.

## Reconciling Allegory through Worldbuilding Syuzhet

The worldbuilding syuzhet of the Enemy, and the manner in which the way the Enemy works is revealed is important in setting up the cognitive estrangement. The allegory must first be estranged and defamiliarized before it can be connected to its Primary World context. In *The City We Became*, the Enemy is first presented as an eldritch horror: giant tentacles that destroy infrastructure, ethereal feathers or tendrils that infect and control people, mysterious gateways to other dimensions, an unnatural and unnaturally white woman. Neither is non-allegorized destructive whiteness immediately connected to the Enemy. Once the estranged allegory is established, the Enemy's use of non-allegorized destructive whiteness is made clear. All of these pieces are part of how the Enemy works. And it is important that this connection is made within the same storyworld structure that holds the estranged allegory because otherwise the explicit expressions of destructive whiteness could exist alongside the estranged allegory but not be reconciled with it. Whether the Enemy is guiding their actions or not, the characters that are explicitly racist are infected by the Enemy, their racism being why the Enemy is able to use them. If the Enemy is not responsible for or connected to the non-allegorized racism, then the estranged allegory of the implicit destructive whiteness and the explicit racism need not be reconciled as facets of the same mechanism, they can simply coexist within the storyworld.

Once the eldritch nature of the Enemy is established, there is a pattern throughout *The City We Became* as to how the non-allegorical destructive whiteness is connected

back to the Enemy. One of the avatars of New York is confronted by an act or instance of non-allegorized destructive whiteness, which could as easily happen absent supernatural intervention: Manny is confronted by a Karen in Inwood Park, the Alt Artistes come after the staff of the Bronx Arts Center, Brooklyn's family home is appropriated through bureaucratic machinations and sold out from under her. Any of these could happen under mundane circumstances, and neither the characters nor the reader have much reason to expect that they are motivated by the Enemy, at least at first. But that connection is subsequently revealed. The Woman in White takes over the Karen; the Alt Artistes reveal a piece of art that, while as racist as the rest of their offering, is also a portal into another dimension and an attack meant for Bronca; the company responsible for gentrification across the city, including Brooklyn's home being appropriated, the Better New York Foundation, is discovered to be a holding of the Enemy. It becomes clear that the Enemy is weaponizing both the supernatural and explicit means of destructive whiteness. The reader – and the avatars of New York, who discover these connections over the course of the novel with the reader – must therefore understand both in relation to one another to have a complete understanding of the Enemy and how it is operating in the storyworld.

Defamiliarization and cognitive estrangement are meant to be an effect on the audience, making the familiar strange with the goal of making the audience notice and reassess things to which they have become habituated. Implicit expressions of destructive whiteness are by their very nature things that have become habituated and invisible, and the connection between implicit and explicit destructive whiteness often gets obscured. Structural oppression, institutional racism, gentrification, white privilege, and a host of other less visible ways that destructive whiteness is expressed are harder to reflect on and

often harder to connect to racism and white supremacy, especially for a white audience. That defamiliarized whiteness, allegorized implicit destructive whiteness, and realistic destructive whiteness are all facets of how the Enemy works, connects the allegory back to the reality. Even the gaps created by the Lovecraftian nature of the Enemy eventually collapse, with the horror of the Lovecraftian monsters being connected to the racist and white supremacist beliefs and writings of H.P. Lovecraft. Where the reader's worldbuilding in *The Fifth* Season maintains cognitive distance between the estranged elements of the theme, in *The City We Became* the estranged elements are actively linked to the allegorical origin. Jemisin creates that space to estrange and defamiliarize the thematic allegory but uses the same storyworld architecture to connect it to the non-allegorized, non-defamiliarized expressions of the theme in the novel. That connection must be reconciled within the context of the storyworld, but doing so also reflects back on how those connections exist in the Primary World and primes a similar reconciliation of the sometimes less or invisible aspects of how destructive whiteness with the more visible elements of explicit racism.

In *The City We Became*, Jemisin shifts the narrative to center BIPOC and immigrant perspectives, as well as changing the way that destructive whiteness is used in the text relative to how it traditionally has been in science fiction. Marianna Hiles makes the compelling and insightful argument that in *The City We Became*, the way racism is used shifts to reflect critically on the harm that racism causes rather than being weaponized as a tool of white supremacy. Hiles is making this argument about science fiction and *The City We Became* because it includes realistic representations of racism, but conceptually and thematically, this argument can be extended to most or all of

Jemisin's work, whether science fiction or fantasy. Hiles argues that "racism in science fiction work has historically been weaponized as a tool of the oppressor. … As it functions in these stories, racism is meant to garner sympathy and create understanding in white audiences while deliberately othering and dehumanizing characters of color" (132). This position resonates with the colonial history of science fiction, the habitual centering of the white/colonial gaze, and the persistent racialization of the "other" found in science fiction and fantasy, all of which enforce the centering of whiteness and white supremacy, whether actively or subconsciously. In contrast, Hiles argues, contemporary writers are using racism in science fiction differently, "The refashioned purpose of this racism in the text is not to alienate but to expose and criticize the structures that uphold white supremacy" (133). Hiles is focused on the non-allegorized instances of destructive whiteness in the text, the ways the Enemy uses racism and white supremacy to its advantage, and the way that causes harm to the BIPOC characters at the center of the story. But the Enemy also allegorizes destructive whiteness, and the allegorical is being used to "expose and criticize the structures of white supremacy" (133) as well. Which is an important aspect, because it capitalizes on the strength of worldbuilding genres: using defamiliarization and cognitive estrangement to call attention to what has become invisible through habituation in the Primary World. So much of white supremacy and structural racism is obscured or invisible because it is habituated and endemic, especially to populations that are not directly experiencing them. Notably, these are the aspects that previous scholarship on allegory in *The City We Became* have generally focused on, things like gentrification (Sulimma), and parasitic urbanism and predatory capitalism

(Shaw). Allegorizing those habituated facets makes them more visible in ways that they are not always otherwise.

That *The City We Became* holds both allegorical and realistic representations of destructive whiteness, that the allegory is estranged, and that these representations exist in relation to the same storyworld structure, create conditions that are uniquely suited for reflecting critically on the structures and systems of destructive whiteness. Defamiliarizing the allegorical representations make visible the aspects the reader may have become attenuated to. Estranging the allegory mitigates potentially alienating associations and biases from the Primary World, and deepens the potential for empathy building and identification, which is especially relevant where racism and white supremacy in their Primary World guises can be reflected on directly but may create barriers to that empathy. Realistic representations of destructive whiteness, which are actively portrayed as harmful, can be integrated into the storyworld because it is set in a primary world. That the estranged aspects of destructive whiteness and the non-allegorized racism and white supremacy exist within the same story and storyworld structure connects the visible to the invisible, revealing them as facets of the same structure. Since there is a connection between the storyworld and the Primary World, understanding the relationship between the estranged allegory and the allegorical origin in the storyworld primes a reconciliation of the estranged allegory and its allegorical origin in the context of the Primary World as well.

# Chapter VI.

## Conclusion: The Power of Abstract Concepts

> *But he actually threw* concepts *at me. I had no idea your kind had advanced to using energized abstract macroconstructs in combat.*
>
> — N.K. Jemisin, *The City We Became*

Post-colonial science fiction and fantasy have begun to both critique and change the habits of the genres. The literary culture surrounding science fiction and fantasy has historically been dominated by a white, male perspective; and the conventions of the genres have upheld, and even relied on, colonialism and a Eurocentric lens. As more female and BIPOC authors write, get published, and achieve broader ranges of distribution and popularity, this has begun to change, and science fiction and fantasy have begun to critique and decenter the habits of whiteness that have become engrained in the genres. Science fiction and fantasy are particularly well-suited for this sort of deconstruction because of their fundamental relationship with cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization as a way to interrogate things that have become so familiar as to be invisible or unassailable, using their estranged settings to reflect critically on those topics or ideas. Science fiction and fantasy rely on worldbuilding to affect cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization, and how the author shapes the worldbuilding can inform how the reader experiences the cognitive estrangement or defamiliarization.

N.K. Jemisin has become an important voice in these genres, one who uses the strategies of the genre to subvert and interrogate complicated Primary World issues and

themes. Previous scholarship on Jemisin has explored how she allegorizes ideas in her storyworlds, as well as how defamiliarization in her storyworlds can prompt the reader to imagine them differently. Building on these discussions, I propose that a critical part of Jemisin's worldbuilding is that she integrates both the allegory and the allegorical context into her worldbuilding separate from one another, and independently defamiliarized, which complicates and reinforces how the cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization work in her storyworlds. Defamiliarizing the thematic elements forces the reader to imagine them differently, outside of the context of the Primary World, and in the stark relief that breaking the habituated invisibilities of their normal context provides. Integrating the key elements of the allegory or theme into the worldbuilding, and estranging those same elements from each other reinforces that defamiliarization by creating and maintaining space in the reader's worldbuilding between the elements, thereby minimizing the reader's ability or inclination to connect the allegory to Primary World associations that can hinder defamiliarization through their worldbuilding. Avoiding alienating associations can allow the reader tto engage more meaningfully with the themes, and therefore is a strategy writers in worldbuilding genres could use to advantage, as Jemisin does. Estranging the elements of the thematic allegory and defamiliarizing them independently within the narrative and the worldbuilding creates a more impactful effect on the reader. The two case studies in this thesis explore this dynamic in two of Jemisin's novels. *The Fifth Season*, which is interested in structural oppression and the legacy of slavery, and *The City We Became*, which centers the harmful and destructive nature of racism and white supremacy. In a Primary World context, race and racism often have alienating or stigmatized associations driven by

implicit biases that can keep people from engaging with them meaningfully. An estranged setting which defamiliarizes these ideas can promote better engagement with them. The more the alienating associations can be mitigated, the more completely and effectively the reader can imagine them differently.

Cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization are facets of the same critical mechanism: making the familiar strange so that Primary World phenomenon that have become habituated can be reflected on critically. It is not novel to suggest that both science fiction and fantasy can do the work of cognitive estrangement and/or defamiliarization, but a meaningful distinction in how worldbuilding fiction does this may be how a storyworld engages with the Primary World, i.e. whether the storyworld is fully secondary or if it is built out from the Primary World. The level of estrangement informs how complete the defamiliarization can be, or how directly it can tie back to the Primary World phenomenon it is defamiliarizing. There are benefits and drawbacks to each of these levels of estrangement, as can be seen demonstrated by the two case studies in this thesis. *The Fifth Season* is set in a fully secondary world, where everything is, or can be, different from how it works in the Primary World. Consequently, it can more completely defamiliarize race and the legacy of slavery because it avoids alienating associations from the Primary World, a defamiliarization that is enforced by estranging the allegory in the worldbuilding. But as a result, it relies on the reader to reconcile the allegory with the Primary World context off-page. In contrast, *The City We Became* is set in a storyworld overlaid on the Primary World. That the allegorical origin is part of the storyworld alongside the estranged allegory makes it possible to reflect directly on the Primary World phenomenon. But because the Primary World associations are consistent

with the world logic, it can be harder to avoid connecting alienating associations with the allegory.

A strength of estranged worlds is that through the storyworld, the reader can imagine the world differently, especially circumstances or ideas that may otherwise be alienating for one reason or another. The level of estrangement of the world can facilitate different interactions depending on whether cognitive estrangement or defamiliarization is emphasized, which can affect how the estranged allegory is engaged with and what the reader is likely to get out of it. The legacy of slavery can be difficult for readers to engage and empathize with due to the alienating associations with race in the Primary World. In *The Fifth Season*, estranging race and the legacy of slavery encourages the reader to interact with each of those elements outside of those associations, largely the racial politics of the United States. The estrangement of the allegory creates gaps that guide the reader's worldbuilding, enforcing the defamiliarization and providing the reader experiences that create the conditions to build empathy and understanding outside of a Primary World context. Conversely, white supremacy and racism, especially implicit expressions of them, can and often do become invisible through habituation. In *The City We Became,* actively connecting the estranged allegory back to the Primary World origin reveals the implicit so that it can be understood and critiqued as part of the larger whole. The estranged allegory still defamiliarizes the theme so that they can be reimagined, but an important outcome is making them visible, which is facilitated by connecting them back to the Primary World.

Estranging allegory through worldbuilding can more successfully affect the cognitive estrangement and defamiliarization fundamental to science fiction and fantasy,

can more successfully prompt the reader to reflect critically on things they have failed to see in the Primary World by making it visible in the storyworld. In *The City We Became*, the Woman in White says of the avatar of New York, "But he actually threw *concepts* at me. I had no idea your kind had advanced to using energized abstract macroconstructs in combat" (103). Functionally, Jemisin is doing the same thing: weaponizing abstract concepts, taking the ideas and themes that motivate her novels and using them to dismantle the structures of oppression by encouraging the reader to better understand them, and how they affect people. Critically, she is not *only* allegorizing or defamiliarizing the themes that motivate her storyworlds but integrating all of the key Primary World elements of the allegorical origin into the worldbuilding independently, which reinforces their defamiliarization. Estranging the allegory works to decenter whiteness and breaking the habits of destructive whiteness on and off the page by reflecting critically back on them in a way that mitigates alienating aspects that can keep readers from successfully or meaningfully engaging with them.

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