This excerpt, taken from my dissertation on genre in contemporary media (mostly novels, but also video games and film) focuses on the worldbuilding as practice by NK Jemisin in her Hugo Award winning trilogy The Broken Earth. *In this piece, I work through the myriad choices – at scales both large and small, geologic and interpersonal – that go into creating a coherent fictional world and trace the reverberations of those choices throughout Jemisin's "Stillness." The specific decisions here are specific to the author's trilogy; But the* questions *speak to worldbuilding as a process, and the work that goes into it when done carefully and intentionally.*

Top-Down: The Broken Earth *and the Building of Secondary Worlds*

In the world of Jemisin's making, orogenes are humans who possess the innate ability to manipulate the inherent force and energy of the material world. These superpowered individuals have the capacity to reach their consciousness into the strata and substrata of the earth itself, or to draw latent energy from the air around them, and channel what they find into acts of immense force – raising mountains, channeling lava flows, freezing broad areas around themselves. The central fantastical element of *The Broken Earth* is the ability, quite literally, to manipulate territory, to change the shape and face of the earth, to build and destroy the world.

Among the whole crowded field of SFF, Jemisin's novels are useful specifically because of how deliberate and forthright she is about *how* she crafts her literary worlds. As a writer of SFF, rather than strictly fantasy *or* science fiction, Jemisin brings together the intense worldbuilding characteristic of fantasy since Tolkien with the central conceit of a *novum* that has been proposed by Darko Suvin as the constitutive feature of science fiction.[1] Following Jemisin's

[1] In a blog post announcing her stint as the first editor of the *New York Times* column "Otherworldly," Jemisin self-reflects: "I'm an eclectic reader, so the new column will obviously feature science fiction, fantasy, horror, some YA, some graphic novels, some anthologies, and even some nonfiction where it impacts the genre," showing the capaciousness of genre fiction she considers within her ambit as a reviewer. With the breeziness of someone well familiar with these corners of the publishing world, she herself envelops all of these categories later in the same introduction under the umbrella "SFF," writing, "I still have books of my own to write; I *do not* have time to vet the entire SFF book world." ("My New Side-Gig." Epiphany 2.0, December 29, 2015. https://nkjemisin.com/2015/12/my-new-side-gig/). In articulating her investment in SFF, rather than SF, fantasy, or "speculative fiction," Jemisin's language is also symptomatic of a desire to reinvest SFF with the particularities of its forebears after decades spent in

lead, I argue that instead of thinking of the border between these two genres as things to be policed, they should be considered together as a holistic way of thinking that provides new modes of imagining a world.

SFF worldbuilding – the type of worldbuilding characteristic of this consciously blended category – depends on two rules, as I see them, derived from dominant strains of thinking about, alternatively, fantasy and science fiction. First, that fictional worlds should attempt to be coherent and proceed logically, no matter how fantastic their premises or details. Secondly, that these fictional worlds are nonetheless built around some specific element that is not strictly bound to the laws of reality that form the primary world that we all inhabit – the very fantastic element that secondary worlds must work to maintain as coherent and logical. These modes of imagining fictional worlds overlap, obviously. All writers of fiction in some way engage in both. But as readers, we are encouraged by these alternative modes of understanding SFF to think in competing, opposed directions. Either we start with the whole of a fictional world, fantastic or otherwise, as a solidified whole within which a plot and its elements are drawn, or we are drawn to focus on a specific change or fantastic invention that has been imagined, around which a world swells as a consequence. Jemisin herself alternatively refers to this latter narrative invention as the "speculative element" and "Element X," both of which amount to different conceptualizations of the same thing. But whereas distinctions between these two methods of mapping built-worlds might otherwise be used to distinguish *between* SF and

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linguistic homogenization. (It's also worth mentioning that her first column published for "Otherworldly" opens as a review of, among other novels, China Miéville's *This Census-Taker* [2016]).

fantasy, in bringing them together Jemisin articulates an approach to writing that disregards such distinctions.

Jemisin regularly leads worldbuilding workshops, in which, step by step, she walks participants through the process of creating an engaging fantasy world.[2] In these workshops we see both the remnants of this distinction and the elision between them. Her presentation begin by pushing her participants to think creatively within the context of SFF: it opens with some prefatory notes on the history of science fiction, the concept of the "iceberg" – "A common adage of speculative fiction writing is that worldbuilding should be like an iceberg: only 10% should be visible above the surface, with the rest hidden underneath" – a consideration of "low immersion" to "high immersion" in narration, and finally a recommendation that "research is your friend."

[2] She provides the slides for these workshops on her website, granting readers and critics direct access into her creative process, a process that is all too often obscured by the time such creative procedure arrives in our hands as a finished codex book. The slides of the presentation, titled "Growing Your Iceberg: Crafting a Secondary World That Feels Ancient in 60 Minutes (or less)" can be found at http://nkjemisin.com/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/WDWebinar.pdf, and this course has also been repackaged as a recently-released course on Masterclass.com ("N. K. Jemisin Teaches Fantasy and Science Fiction Writing | MasterClass." Masterclass.com. https://www.masterclass.com/classes/n-k-jemisin-teaches-fantasy-and-science-fiction-writing). I originally encountered this presentation simply by Googling "Element X NK Jemisin" after encountering the term on the /r/worldbuilding subreddit, a subcommunity dedicated to SFF worldbuilding on the social media platform reddit.com, and it's worth noting that the presentation cannot, as far as I can tell, be accessed directly by link from nkjemisin.com. The formal conventions of a dissertation are such that I feel wary about including such a resource, stumbled upon via research methods that I can't help but feel might appear less-than-rigorous. But this kind of ad hoc, non-academic encounter with the term speaks to the generative capacity of worldbuilding outside of professional writing, and the structure of this latter half of her workshops, premised on a series of cascading questions, mirrors the array of online fan hobbyist communities and "worldbuilding workbooks" that have sprung up in the past decade or so. (See Randy Ellefson, *Creating Life*. Evermore Press, 2017; T.M Holladay, *The Only World Building Workbook You'll Ever Need: Your New Setting Bible*. Independently published, 2020; T.G. Franklin, *World Building Guide & Workbook*. PaperSteel Press, 2018; A. Trevena, *30 Days of Worldbuilding: An Author's Step-by-Step Guide to Building Fictional Worlds*. Independently published, 2019, and the like, all available on the first page of Amazon's search results and available for delivery to your home in 24-48 hours. Note also that many of these workbooks are self-published – creatives building their own worlds in more ways than one.)

The third section of her workshop slides, titled "Let's Build a World," commences at planetary scale (as do her novels).[3] "Pick your planet!" she enthuses, adding some basic questions – "Habitable (to the people you'll create)? Inimical? Continents, archipelago, all ocean, no water at all?" – while lightly reminding her imagined seminar, "*Your story's people will have adapted to the above too.*"[4] After proceeding through a series of exemplar decisions, in which Jemisin postulates realistic weather and climate patterns, and an archipelagic constellation of continents to dictate certain distinct features of the planet, she writes of her newly imagined exemplar geography, "[o]ur world gives us the basics: Agriculture difficult, Tsunamis, earthquakes, storms frequent, life dependent on trade and the sea."[5] Jemisin's workshops lead attendees through the creation of their own new world, before it is polished and fleshed out. Obviously, it's tricky to assume that a retrospective and commodified Masterclass-style calibration of Jemisin's own writerly process must necessarily translate to how we read her finished novels. But we can still nonetheless see artifacts of this process in the final books as we receive them as readers.

Again, following Jemisin, let's begin with the "macro" worldbuilding and work our way down. The excitement a true aficionado of SFF feels when cracking open a doorstopper novel and encountering a map cannot be overstated, and these same aficionados are greeted with a two-page spread of The Stillness right at the very beginning. Since Tolkien, these line drawings promise that the world the reader will encounter is intelligible and, literally, mappable. From the maps in *The Broken Earth,* we know a few things immediately: the world of *The Broken Earth*

[3] "[Y]ou need context," the narrator tells us on the first page of *The Fifth Season.* "Here is a land."
[4] "Growing Your Iceberg," slide 15, emphasis original.
[5] "Growing Your Iceberg," slide 25.

is that of The Stillness, a mega-continent that is alone on its planet, akin to our own terrestrial Pangea, comprised of a "Minimal Plate" and a "Maximal Plate," bisected by a crosshatch of fault lines and mountain ranges. But while a technical description of a *planet* might be reasonably reducible to its geography, worlds are, of course, more subtle things, as the existence of maps imply. Someone had to make these maps, someone or something had to name these geologic formations. "Worldbuilding" in the literary sense is extended here to include the broader categories of culture, history, social formation.

The rhetoric of a planetary scale runs through the distinction of macro and micro-worldbuilding, as Jemisin defines them. "Macro worldbuilding is the creation of the physical environment in which… this culture developed, these characters emerged from, this story takes place."[6] This latter bit, "Let's Build a People," is micro-worldbuilding, a contranym – the smaller scale building of the whole of a world. After prompting her audience to establish the materiality of their settings, she segues into the task of building a people and a society, writing that "sociology gives us the rest." Lingering for a moment here with the maps, we can still and already see echoes of her proposed methodology in the world of *The Broken Earth*. The maps give us fault lines, but their existence in the first place also imply a diegetic authority within the world of the novels that have the technological capacity to survey space, and the technology of abstraction which is required to draw the maps in the first place. As we read, we can surmise that this map is the product of the academic apparatus of which the Yumenescene Fulcrum, the seat of centralized hierarchical quasi-governmental power, is a part.

[6] Transcription of the introduction to "Masterclass," asyndeton *sic.*

Sustaining our attention to the novels' paratexts, the completeness of Jemisin's built world is further signaled by another feature of SFF, namely the extended appendices a well-conditioned reader of SFF would be unsurprised to find at the back of the books. Maps lead us into the fictional worlds of SFF, and appendices stay with us as we might leave the pages of the narrative proper.[7] In the first volume, readers are treated to two such appendices. The first, "*a catalog of Fifth Seasons that have been recorded prior to and since the founding of the Sanzed Equatorial Affiliation, from most recent to oldest,"* orients the happenings of the series in deeper, albeit fictional, time (*TFS* 451, italicization original). The period surveyed stretches from 9800 "Before Imperial" up to "2719 Imperial," a range of 12,500 years. (*TFS* 455, 451). Whether or not a year in the world of *The Broken Earth* is equivalent, roughly or otherwise, to a terrestrial year here in our reality doesn't much matter – regardless, the effect is that this is an old, established world, with a history that is available to the practice of historiography itself. "Before Imperial" implies a history of subjugation by an Empire, which itself implies the growth of an individual sovereign power into an entity that has the capacity for such imperial calculus, and therefore of competing sovereignties that must have existed in order for such an Empire to be thusly imperial.[8]

[7] For a compelling reading of *TBE's* paratexts, including the ongoing deployment of "stonelore" from the perspective of history rather than that of narrative, see Erika Harlitz-Kern, "History and SFF: Historical Sources and N.K. Jemisin's Broken Earth Trilogy." Tor.com, December 17, 2019. https://www.tor.com/2019/12/17/history-and-sff-historical-sources-and-n-k-jemisins-broken-earth-trilogy/.

[8] The diegetic historiography of the world is further established by the inclusion of an "Editor's note," which allows for historical coherence to emerge from an implied instability in history. This supposed editor caveats that "[m]uch of the information about Seasons prior to the founding of Sanze is contradictory or unconfirmed," but these earliest seasons have been "agreed upon by the Seventh University Archaeomestric Conference of 2532" (*TFS* 454). Geohistorical indeterminacy itself is rendered legible and disciplined in this appendix – the very process I suggest the appendices are enacting as whole for the trilogy.

The world – both the planetary and geographic one, and the world populated by peoples – that is implied by the mere presence of the paratextual conventions of SFF (the maps, the appendices, the sheer page-count of the series) links directly with the manifest history as provided in the series' narrative. At the level of deep history and empire, geography intersects with the interpersonal and social: again, as Jemisin reflects, "Macro-worldbuilding is the creation of the physical environment in which… this culture developed, these characters emerged from, this story takes place." The Stillness is populated by a multicultural patchwork of humans, whose differences are mapped in terms both geographic and phenotypical, ranging from the darker-skinned Midlatters, at the continent's center, where temperatures are generally more hospitable, out to the paler Coasters to the East and West, Nomidlatters to the north and Somidlatters to the south. At the present of the story's beginning, the continent is controlled in whole by the Empire of Sanze, centered in the continent's central city of Yumenes. From this basic geography, we can see how the character of the people within it developed.

Sanze is functionally a "global" society, considering that it spans the far reaches of the planet's solitary continent. When Essun describes one of the trilogy's primary antagonists, Schaffa, she reflects that "[h]is skin is almost white, he's so paper-pale… He has long flat hair, which together with the skin might mark him as an Arctic, though the color of it – a deep heavy black, like the soil near an old blow – doesn't fit. Eastern Coasters' hair is black like that, except fluffy and not flat, but people from the east have black skin to match…. Nothing about him makes racial sense" (*TFS* 29). It is this final sentence of commentary – that Schaffa doesn't "make sense" – that by negation reinforces how clearly these phenotypical markers could otherwise be used to map the racial sociology of the Stillness. The history of Sanze has

produced a cosmopolitan heuristic in how characters (and the narration) scan new introductions – descriptions of hair style, skin-tone, and general temperament are mapped against these geographically-determined qualifiers, although often in contradistinction to hard and fast racial or culturally essentialist terms.

By combining "macro-" and "micro-" worldbuilding, what Jemisin has done altogether is build a robust "secondary world." The term, which is credited primarily to JRR Tolkien's influential essay "On Fairy Stories" (1939), introduces a distinction that has proven durable in the way critics of fantasy specifically have considered their objects. In order to articulate the role creative worldbuilding might play in interrogating the methods proposed by scholars of world literature, it is first important to articulate a distinction made in SFF between "primary" and "secondary" worlds. It is this distinction, rather than that between genres (realist vs. non-realist, SF vs. fantasy) that allows readers to envision *The Broken Earth* as a fully realized world despite its inherent fictionality and its fundamental physical impossibility.

Tolkien writes of authors of fantasy, "[w]hat really happens is that the story-maker proves a successful 'sub-creator.'" Although Tolkien has been taken up by writers of fantasy for obvious reasons, and although the nested context of his theory is explicitly fantastical works ("fairy stories"), it's worth noting that nothing precludes reading his theory as holding for all those creating literary worlds. All authors are sub-creators; in his schema, God is the only true creator of the primary world. What the *sub*-creator achieves, he theorizes, is to make "a Secondary World into which your mind can enter. Inside it, what he relates is 'true;' it accords

with the laws of that world."[9] These secondary worlds – the worlds in which every work of literature operates – may function in parallel with our own.[10] That is, the laws of physics may generally be the same, the geography – be it local, planetary, or extraplanetary – might generally accord with what we know about our own reality, albeit small changes may be made here and there. But this is not strictly necessary. The paradigm of primary and secondary worlds holds both for worlds where faster-than-light travel is undertaken with the same familiar weariness as a flight out of Newark, and for the worlds where the most impossible reality is that one might fly out of Newark *without* imagining you are undertaking a perilous and impossible world-historical adventure.

SFF, with its deeper investment in creating worlds that are obviously and emphatically different from our own, doubles down on the distinction between primary and secondary worlds. The apparatuses that frame the *The Broken Earth* – the maps, the appendices, the histories – and the organizing sociological principles that sprawl over the novels' descriptions all point to the world of *The Broken Earth* as world, built out both in time and in space. Or, as Tolkien put it in a letter to a foreign publisher about his own appendices, "they play a major part in producing the total effect… in producing the compelling sense of historical reality."[11]

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[9] Tolkien, "On Fairy-Stories," 52.

[10] For a study of subcreation and worldbuilding that is more deeply informed by Media Studies and which extends the primary/secondary world distinction to broader, more ecumenical SFF worlds – think *Star Trek, Star Wars,* fan communities, the concept of "canon" vs. "non-canon" etc – see Mark J.P. Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. London: Taylor & Francis Group, 2012. Wolf brings the critical strand of worldbuilding endemic to fantasy together with the efforts by Pavel to theorize the role of imagined worlds in post-structuralist critical technique. Augmenting Tolkien's formulation, Wolf argues that SFF specifically operates under of rubric of both primary and secondary worlds – and is defined by such a relationship – but also that such a formulation can be extended to include the iterative worldmaking that emerges out from and above individual creative efforts.

[11] JRR Tolkien, *The Letters of J.R.R. Tolkien*. Edited by Humphrey Carpenter. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1981, 228. There's Barthes's pesky Reality Effect again, this time building out the world in works of SFF. Compare the paratextual apparatuses in *TBE* to the requests Tolkien lamented, in a letter to fan and editor J.H. Cotton Minchin in 1956, for ever more detailed information about the world of *The Lord of The Rings*: "while many like you demand

The codification of history and social infrastructure, both explicit and implicit throughout *The Broken Earth*, establish the world of The Stillness as a coherent and intelligible whole, a world in the strictest sense available to fiction – a secondary world.

If this is the case, then, what questions are rendered possible by the SFF novel, specifically its inheritance directly from the fantasy novel, with its generic preoccupation with generating entirely new, non-realist worlds? By lowering the generic walls around fantasy, it becomes clear that *all* literary worlds serve as a fully secondary world, a space apart from our own world wherein questions of logic are constrained by that which "accords with the laws of that world." For Tolkien, this is the privileged ambit of the fairy story, what we have now come to call "fantasy." For SFF, however, this process of creating secondary worlds not only creates a new whole, but, in drawing in the speculation of SF, they also create in that secondary world the space for more granular, specific questions of how that whole functions.

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maps, others wish for geological indications rather than places… Musicians want tunes and musical notations. Archaeologists enquire about ceramics, metallurgy, tools and architecture. Botanists desire more accurate descriptions of the *mallorn*, of *elanor*, *niphredil*, *alfirin* and *mallos*, and of *symbelmynë* [Tolkien's name for various flora in his world]. Historians require more details about the social and political structure of Gondor, and the contemporary monetary system" (*Letters* 248). So comprehensive was Tolkien's desire to provide these appendices that the process of writing them actually delayed the third volume of the series, *The Return of the King* (1951), so that they could be included in the finished book.