Alternative History and Afrofuturist Bricolage in N. K. Jemisin's "The Effluent Engine"

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N. K. Jemisin has received well-earned critical attention for her novel-length works of speculative fiction, especially after her Hugo Awards triumphs in 2016, 2017, and 2018. Her collection of short fiction, *How Long 'Til Black Future Mont*h (2018), brought together pieces of several genres, both previously published and unpublished materials. The collection includes "The Effluent Engine,"[1] which follows a Haitian spy through New Orleans in an alternative history adventure. Jemisin's heroine must negotiate the new ideals of a liberated Haiti and the internalized norms of New Orleans' Creole society as she attempts to garner vital strategic information. The story highlights intersectionality on a personal as well as a group level in a nuanced exploration of how we can change our worlds. As argued by scholars such as Sofia Samatar, alternative history itself can be a powerful tool of Afrofuturism. Alongside the concept of *bricolage*—a process of merging, reshaping, and redefining—alternative history highlights the confluence of individual and group identities within Jemisin's story. Applying Samatar's reading of alternative history and bricolage foregrounds how Afrofuturist techniques in "The Effluent Engine" explore the identities of intersectional characters, their community relationships, and their connection to place.

"The Effluent Engine" presents an alternative history where dirigibles and access to other technologies changed the course of Haitian struggles for independence. The main character, a Haitian spy named Jessaline, must enter the slave state of Louisiana to seek an engineer who can further refine the fueling mechanisms for these powerful airships. While Jessaline's contact is unwilling to help lest it risk his position in New Orleans' Creole society or prompt backlash from the white leaders of Louisiana and the United States, his sister, Eugenie, proves her knowledge of chemistry can help develop a dirigible engine powered by the effluent, or waste product, of sugarcane processing. Pursued by white supremacists hoping to steal the plans and sabotage Haiti's independence, Jessaline and Eugenie flee to Haiti intent on developing the engine as well as their romantic relationship.

Speculative fiction as a broad category embraces alternative histories like "The Effluent Engine" for their ability to reimagine both the past and the future. Indeed, Sofia Samatar points out in "Toward a Planetary History of Afrofuturism" (2017) that alternative histories engage with both points in time simultaneously: "To propose an alternate history is to propose that history can be altered, to change directions, to inaugurate an alternate future." (Samantar, 187) One cannot imagine an alternative past without carrying forward the implications of such changes. In picturing a new history for Haiti, readers are inherently asked to apply these changes to the arc of history. A rich alternative history crafts space for readers to question how such alterations would affect their present time. While some references to the arrest of Toussaint L'Overture place the action of the story in the years following 1802, the lack of dates overall points to their middling

importance to the narrative; Jemisin does not need to offer a blow-by-blow account of the changes to history to tell a compelling story that prompts readers to think about large-scale shifts in society. Jemisin emphasizes the transformative aspects of alternative history through characters who are invested in imagining new futures.

At the core of the changes to history in "The Effluent Engine" are Haitian airships, which allowed them to fight back against French colonial forces. Jessaline's mission is an attempt to find a scientist who can turn the by-product of rum, the titular effluent that produces methane, into a cheaper and plentiful fuel source. Innovative use of by-products and discarded materials is a theme within many pieces of Afrofuturist media, which Samatar evokes in her discussion of the terms *bricolage* and *bricoleur*. (177-178) Initially coined by Claude Lévi-Strauss, *bricolage* was used to distinguish (white) Western invention and what Lévi-Strauss deemed the lesser reinvention, "proceeding in a haphazard fashion and working with second-hand materials, the leftovers of various civilizations". (Samatar 177) Samatar aligns herself with creators such as Nnedi Okorafor, who uses the phrases bricolage and bricoleur in her novel *Who Fears Death*. Bricolage celebrates the process of excavating history: "it is from these historical fragments that the data thief or bricoleur constructs visions of what is to come…the bricoleur detaches objects from time, making them available for the creation of new histories." (Samatar 178) The process of reclamation and reformation is paralleled, for Samatar, by the formation of cultural independence and positive engagement with technology, as she argues that "Afrofuturistic bricolage asserts black people's right to use whatever is at hand, to enter the technologically enhanced future through whatever door is closest and to do so without assimilation into a global monoculture." (Samatar 178)[2] Haitian use of effluent as a fuel source repurposes the by-product of a process that itself was intimately connected to colonization. The economic benefits to France from rum and sugar production are re-integrated into the new, independent Haiti as something which has the potential to preserve the nation's survival. Jessaline's mission, therefore, is not only espionage but tied up with the process of bricolage.

Beyond the genre of the story itself, "The Effluent Engine" engages with personal uses of alternative history and bricolage as well as collective or group uses of the concepts; Jessaline is a notable character who uses these tools to create disguises and false histories for herself in her role as a spy:

> She was indentured, she told the captain, and he had waved her aboard without so much as a glance at her papers (which were false anyhow). She was a wealthy white man's mistress, she told the other passengers, and between her fine clothes, regal carriage, and beauty—despite her skin being purest sable in color—they believed her and were alternately awed and offended. She was a slave, she told the dockmaster on the levee; a trusted one, lettered and loyal, promised her freedom should she continue to serve to her fullest. He had smirked at this, as if the notion of anyone freeing such an obviously valuable slave was ludicrous. Yet he, too, had let her pass unchallenged. (Jemisin 78)

With every movement, speech, and look, Jessaline creates an alternative history for herself which both protects her and her nation while simultaneously eating away at the solidity of her own identity. In a single journey as described above, Jessaline navigates the elision between identities with practiced ease. Later, when she must change hotels to avoid the pursuit of white, anti-Haitian independence spies, she uses padding which "rendered her effectively shapeless—a necessity, since in this disguise it was dangerous to be attractive in any way". (Jemisin 99-100) The disguise is meant to make her appear both older[3] and poorer; it includes alterations to her walk and a patched dress. The implication that appearing attractive and poor would make her a target comes across clearly; when she dresses better, Jessaline references a white owner or takes the guise of a white man's mistress. Through her disguise, her attempts at anonymity are successful: "She was, for all intents and purposes, invisible". (Jemisin 100) In both of these alternative histories of herself, it is not her class that provides protection, but the implication that she is under a white man's control. But what effect does this constant construction of alternative histories have for Jessaline herself? Her identity itself is fluid as her goals change and she comes across different challenges. While her disguises can act as a shield, the necessity for a shield itself takes a toll.

Jessaline's assumed surname for the start of the story, Dumonde, offers a hint at her attempted invisibility. The French *du monde*, meaning "of the world," obscures a sense of specific nationality or community. As a spy, Jessaline must attempt to be a member of any and every nation where her mission might take her, and as such, she cannot risk solidifying her identity. Jessaline embodies the bricoleur in her relationship with the names she uses. Her true name, which she reveals to Eugenie in an attempt to gain her trust, does not seem to resonate with her personally. She explains "My name is Jessaline Cleré. That is the name of the family that raised me, at least, but I should have had a different name". Her actual name does not provide her with a sense of identity, because she feels that she "should have had a different name, after the man who was my true father". (Jemisin 92) Jessaline is the illegitimate child of Toussaint L'Overture, one of the best-known leaders of the Haitian Revolution. Jessaline's attempt to identify with her father through his family name is frustrated by her status as the daughter of his mistress, revealing yet another source of liminal fluidity at the core of Jessaline's identity. Her family, we are left to interpret, is itself a collection of pieces, and Jessaline is the bricoleur attempting to bring the disparate elements into harmony.

Jessaline embodies the use of alternative history and bricolage as an individual, but when considering the group identities at play in "The Effluent Engine", New Orleans provides a key example. Jemisin's depiction of New Orleans emphasizes this assemblage of identity, narrowing in on the liminality of the free Creoles such as Norbert and Eugenie Rillieux. Caught between social strata, Jessaline describes the Creole class as "a closed and prickly bunch, most likely because they had to be: only by maintenance of caste and privilege could they hope to retain freedom in a land which loved to throw anyone darker than tan into chains." (Jemisin 78) The retention of hierarchical structures in the relative freedoms of Creole society stands as a question for Jemisin's alternative Haiti, whether internalized norms have persisted after revolutionary change. Creole

society's retention of strict hierarchical boundaries is one example of normative class division making itself known, as the social group ostensibly outside of hegemonic control reconstructs the same or similar categories of division and power. The tensions between the norms of Creole society, particularly regarding feminine sexuality, come to the forefront as Eugenie begins to vocalize an imagined life with Jessaline in Haiti.

Even though the alternative history of Haiti shapes the entire story, "The Effluent Engine" never directly engages the alternative space. The fact that readers never see Haiti itself in the story encourages the perception of Jemisin's Haiti as a potential utopia. Jemisin inverts the contemporary narrative of Haiti as a disaster-wrought refugee nation, especially as Eugenie and her brother Norbert are forced to flee their home in New Orleans. In "The Effluent Engine,"Haiti as a nation embraces the method of re-examination of that which is cast aside, a nation of bricoleurs. Airships function as more than the trappings of a steampunk-influenced alternative history here; rather, they are the site of a collective bricolage. "Producing rum is a simple process with a messy result; this effluent, namely, and the gas it emits, which until lately was regarded as simply the unavoidable price to be paid," Jessaline explains to Norbert Rillieux. "We wish you to develop a process by which the usable gas—methane—may be extracted from the miasma you just smelled." (Jemisin 81) The production of sugar and rum has decimated the landscape in parts of Haiti, Jessaline affirms, hinting at the ecological impacts of colonial production methods. Even when independent Haiti builds upon its relationship with sugar, not completely discarding it, but reframing the ecological relationship such that the country may have a more balanced impact on the landscape and fuel their airship engines. Jemisin's Haiti engages with bricolage not only in the use of effluent as a fuel source but through examining how elements of the colonial past can help form an independent future.

Part of this imagined future for Jessaline and Eugenie comes from the alterations Haitian society has already undergone in its own history and accepted ways of being. By creating an alternative history for Haiti, Jemisin as an author has opened the door for greater representation of sexual preference. Jessaline explains to Eugenie that the revolution changed circumstances for women in Haiti, and that "it is not uncommon for a woman to head a family with another woman, and even raise children if they so wish". (Jemisin 96) The word "wish" becomes operative here; couples have agency in choosing whether or not to have children, rather than a sense of responsibility to reproduce. But Eugenie's eventual enthusiasm does not seem to acknowledge the radical potential of changes in Haiti; rather, she still relies upon the norms she finds familiar, such as the fact that one partner would provide for the family as in the typical heterosexual couples in New Orleans. Eugenie declares her concern for Jessaline's work as a spy, "I'm not fond of you keeping up this dangerous line of work. My inventions should certainly earn enough for the both of us, don't you think?", and seems more than willing to step into the breadwinner role which she has seen enacted during her life in New Orleans, "there's no reason for you to work when I can keep you in comfort for the rest of our days". (Jemisin 111) Going to Haiti means that Eugenie can follow her passion for science both openly and lucratively, but she does not pause to ask whether Jessaline's work as a spy provides her with similar fulfillment. Since Eugenie has only

recently acknowledged her sexuality, one could interpret this as a part of a newly accepted identity trying to retain some of the structures of socially acceptable relationships, i.e. heterosexual, patriarchally-organized couples. Jessaline, as an individual, is once again caught in between, this time between the social openness of Haiti's new society and the stricter norms of New Orleans Creole expectations. On the level of group identity, Haitian society allows for alternative ways of being, the crafting of alternative histories, but individuals such as Jessaline and Eugenie must still navigate the internalized norms embedded in their conceptions of possible futures.

Jessaline's personal liminality reflects the transitions taking place around the main characters in "The Effluent Engine" and the resulting tension between new ideals and internalized norms. Both individuals and larger societies must negotiate such tensions to survive. Jessaline must create alternative histories for herself to be a good spy, but these take a toll on the solidity of her identity, which she must then attempt to reassemble in her role as a bricoleur. On a larger scale, the society of both Haiti and New Orleans must deal with different types of bricolage to make sense of their histories and strive for alternative futures. "The Effluent Engine" captures the struggle for socio-cultural survival and the balance between persistence and change. Jemisin's short story is not only an example of richly imaginative Afrofuturism but a beautiful example of how authors and scholars can use tools of alternative history and bricolage in their writing to highlight both personal and group identity.

Notes

1. Also published in Lightspeed Magazine in 2011.
2. Divorced from the racially-charged comparisons of Lévi-Strauss, one might see how bricolage infuses the work of Black artists throughout history. The collages of Romare Bearden (1911-1988) are just one example of the work of African American collagists who reconstruct images out of seemingly disparate pieces. Visual artist Kara Walker's installation piece *Fons Americanus* (2019) in the Tate Modern highlights this fusion of forms, echoing the Queen Victoria memorial, the Trevi Fountain, and Confederate statues in the United states while depicting images of slavery and black resistance (Bakare). Walker reclaims forms historically used in white European and American contexts to critically engage with historical and present harms and trauma.
3. In order to make herself "disappear", Jessaline chooses to make herself seem older, another layer of armor alongside the pillows she uses to make herself appear shapeless. With her obvious desire to avoid sexual violence, Jessaline ages herself in an attempt to seem sexless. Her strategies for personal survival rest upon the perpetuation of a belief that older people, and older women in particular, cannot be attractive. While not imperative for the argument of this article, acknowledging the intersectionality of both character identities and the identities they intend to evoke in the imaginations of others requires an understanding of the problematic character of essentializing conceptions of age.

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