Locating Blackness at the End of the World: N.K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* and the Black Anthropocene

Misha Grifka Wander

The Anthropocene has been portrayed as a crisis that implicates the whole human race, threatening every person as well as their nonhuman ecological surrounds. However, several theorists have critiqued the totalizing nature of the Anthropocene. Axelle Karera writes that "the 'political Anthropocene' (if there is or ought to be one) will remain an impossibility until it is able to wrestle with the problem of black suffering," (33) and further argues that theorists of the challenges facing the human race have yet to take into account the fact that Black and other marginalized peoples are often not counted as part of that human race. I believe both that Anthropocene ethics are important and also that Karera is right. As a first step toward reconciling these two beliefs, this paper will use N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series as a speculative staging of the ethics involved when Blackness meets apocalyptic sensibilities.

This paper is intended to be an opening statement in a conversation that I believe is crucial for scholars of speculative fiction: that of speculative fiction's ability to imagine possibilities for us that critique has yet to address, specifically with regards to climate change and the pressing problems of the Anthropocene. While I hope to contribute valuable ideas to this discussion, I am not a Black person, and I acknowledge the potential discomfort in my speaking on this topic. I am still going to do so, hoping that I have honored the topic and material as best I can, because I believe white people should be and are called to do anti-racist work. That being said, I acknowledge the possibility I have failed to do the material justice, for which I can only apologize and invite correction from other scholars.

My main critical conversant is a paper by the philosopher Axelle Karera called "Blackness and the Pitfalls of Anthropocene Ethics," in which she critiques the theorists of Anthropocene ethics in light of their failure to acknowledge race. Calls for interconnectedness with the earth and urgent recognition of relationality fall flat when one realizes that white humans have failed to treat other humans as equals, much less the nonhumans that Anthropocene ethicists would have them attend to. The claim that the world is ending once again begs the question: Whose world? As Karera writes, in the academy "To deny the 'unprecedented' geological impact of humans' force on nature is now practically untenable" (33), and yet, this apocalyptic sensibility fails, in Karera's eyes, to produce a viable ethics or critical framework. She sums up, "In other words, the insidious problem of the Anthropocene is the generalized—perhaps even calculated—unwillingness to account for past and current imperial injustices, coupled with a rampant inability to imagine alternative futures outsides an apocalyptic state of emergency" and that "More specifically, I would like to argue that apocalyptic sensibilities which have significantly monopolized Anthropocenean

discourses are powerful in disavowing and erasing racial antagonisms" (33). The apocalyptic sensibility is one in which we are told that unless we take drastic collective action, the human species will not survive, to say nothing of the countless other species which will die (and are already dying). "We" who are about to die must act together, with each other and with an awareness of the interconnected nature of human and nonhuman existence.

However, this "we" is suspect. Currently much of Anthropocenic ethical writing "establishes grievability—or the capacity (and the necessity) of mourning one's own life—as the constitutive imperative that both forms the category of the human and ensures its survival." (37) And yet if we accept that, what do we make of "those ungrievable lives for which even survival requires facing death. That is to say, those lives for which existence requires suicidal decisions such as deadly expeditions across the Mediterranean Sea, the Mexico-United States border, and the many 'border-fortresses' of the EU" (45)? Karera makes a powerful argument about the failure of Anthropocene ethics to incorporate the reality of racial violence and death, and therefore its failure to make its own argument for interdependency and species unity.

Karera's argument is troubling for scholars of the Anthropocene such as myself. And yet, I think the concept of Anthropocene ethics can be rescued. Karera concludes that "In these conditions, therefore, we are left with what I would like to call here the potential of 'speculative experimentations' whereby one can experiment with ethically counterintuitive terms like the 'non-relational' in the attempt to renew the central tenets of our critical endeavors" (50). Speculative fiction provides a space to conduct ethical experiments, creating test conditions, so to speak, where responses to extreme ethical quandaries can be explored, tested, rejected, altered, and more. N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* series is rife with difficult ethical questions, and thus provides a perfect testing ground for a re-evaluation of Anthropocene ethics.

In the *Broken Earth* series, we find the complete shape of an apocalypse: the lead-up, the beginning, and the struggle to survive mid-disaster, as well as the new shape of the world after the total apocalypse is averted. The people who live in the world of the Stillness (the setting of *Broken Earth*) are quintessential Anthropocene subjects—living in an actively unfriendly environment, suffering under onslaughts from both nature and the political system. The apocalypse they are suffering is swifter than the one discussed in Anthropocene ethics, but nonetheless the parallels are striking, as no doubt Jemisin intended. While many of the people in the Stillness are described as Black-presenting, it is the orogenes who are the metaphor for Blackness. Their labor and lives are exploited to maintain the status quo and even possibility of life in the Stillness, through the enforced labor of the Fulcrum orogenes and the grotesque enslavement of the tortured orogenes inside the node stations. Yet, even though they are necessary, they are despised and subject to both lynching and judicial murder. Just as Karera acknowledges that American democracy is built on Black death, so too is the Sansed Empire of the Stillness built on orogene enslavement and death.

It might at first appear, then, that Alabaster's choice to end the world is a kind of revenge, a strike back against the world that has treated him and his kind as so much chattel. But then we

learn that it was in fact an attempt to fix the world, to bring back the moon and end the Fifth Seasons that necessitate orogenes' powers in the first place. Karera characterizes the apocalyptic sensibility of the Anthropocene as one that erases "the racist origins of global warming" (38) and fails to imagine a new system of racial relations in the hereafter. Alabaster's actions portray the apocalypse as, instead, a kind of political action, a destructive but potentially also corrective and renewing explosion of the old political order, in favor of a hoped-for better future. Of course, there are differences between the world of the Stillness and ours—no one person is causing anthropogenic climate change. But it does portray the possibility of apocalypse as a liberatory rupture from oppressive systems.

In fact, as we learn in the third book, it is a rejection of oppression that caused the Fifth Seasons in the first place. An earlier civilization had subjugated the original orogenes and tortured them to provide energy; when the tuners (who later become stone eaters) found this out, they destroyed the civilization in question rather than allow such injustice to continue. In the process, the Earth grew angry at the people who tried to manipulate it, fought back, and the moon was flung out of orbit, causing the Fifth Seasons and further angering the Earth. Unfortunately, while this struggle successfully erased one kind of oppression, it gave way to another, as the orogenes were used to control the geological chaos of the Fifth Seasons.

So then, what: are apocalypses liberatory? Are they doomed to re-create the world in all its oppression again? The callous use of the Earth, the torture and oppression of the orogenes; these crimes resonate through the history of the Stillness just as anti-Blackness resonates through our own history. In her review of the series, author Amal El-Mohtar writes:

> I am used to fantasy and science fiction […] setting up apocalypse as threat, cataclysmic change as something to be prevented at all cost. […] The unquestionable premise of this kind of setup is that the world is precious and worth saving. *The Stone Sky* rejects this out of hand. If the *Broken Earth* trilogy as a whole shows a world where cataclysm and upheaval is the norm, *The Stone Sky* interrogates what right worlds built on oppression and genocide have to exist.

El-Mohtar's writing aligns with Karera's in understanding apocalyptic themes as a plea to protect the status quo. I could not agree more that Jemisin rejects the right of genocidal worlds to exist. However, I would like to examine the ending of the series. In the end, Essun makes the ethical choice to let her daughter end the world rather than kill her own child. And yet her daughter, Nassun, is inspired by this choice to save the world after all. Saving the world, though, does not mean restoring it to the same world in which she grew up. Neither Essun nor Nassun want to continue the world as-is, but they both recognize the value of life-in-relation, the value of one's own loved ones, the ethical weight of caring. Caring for others' pain, for the injustices they were subjected to, leads those in the Stillness to end the world, but also to make sure that there is some kind of afterlife for the world, a chance to rebuild a different and better society.

This, ultimately, is how I believe *Broken Earth* can help resolve the problems Karera describes: the apocalypse should not usher in an urgent desire to protect the status quo, but rather introduces an explosive, liberatory understanding of the fact that the apocalypse represents an opportunity to remake the world. The apocalypse may end some worlds, without ending all life. The interconnected, relational Anthropocene ethics that Karera critiques are valuable, I believe, but only as a goalpost to strive for in remaking the world. They are speculative as well: we have seen the instantiation of none of them, not yet. To fully commit to an ethics of interconnected relationality would mean committing to an ethics of justice, would mean addressing environmental racism as part and parcel of any other environmental topic. In the shadow of an Anthropocenic apocalypse that threatens to end all life, let us instead work to end the world-as-is, and make a new world that fully recognizes the importance of justice to our interconnected existences. Otherwise we will simply preserve the existing world of oppression and, for marginalized peoples, relationality will only be "the condition for the possibility of their enslavement" (48).

Works Cited

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Misha Grifka Wander is a PhD candidate in the Ohio State University English department. Their major fields are video game studies, comics studies, and speculative fiction studies, using a ecocritical and queer lens. Other publications include an essay on sexism in speculative fiction genre divides (*The New Americanist*, Fall 2019), ecology in Skyrim (*Being Dragonborn*, 2021), and a forthcoming chapter on pronoun use in contemporary science fiction (*The Routledge Companion to Gender in Science Fiction*).