

The Place for Theory: Reproductive Justice Discourse in N. K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

By Devon Graham

ABSTRACT. In this paper, I demonstrate how N.K. Jemisin, popular science fiction and fantasy author and winner of three Hugo Awards, is in conversation with Reproductive Justice theory in her novel *The Fifth Season*. I argue that N.K. Jemisin has resisted the hegemonic academic language and rhetoric by creating expansive theory and critique through her many works of speculative fiction and further demonstrate how Jemisin's approach using literature as her means of production is crucial to her unique way of theorizing. Centrally, through close textual analysis, I argue that through *The Fifth Season* Jemisin is in conversation with other theorists, such as Loretta J. Ross and Barbara Christian, grappling with the burdens of reproductive injustice for Black women in the United States.

“Children are the undoing of us” (Jemisin, 2015, p. 144). So writes N. K. Jemisin in her novel *The Fifth Season*, placing the words into the mouth of one of her characters, a person so relentlessly abused by the systems of power that oppress him and his people that he wrenches apart the world they are forced to live in. The novel exists as both an escapist science-fiction story and as a theoretical wrestling with the experience of Black women and reproductive justice movements. Barbara Christian argued in 1988 in her piece “The Race for Theory” that Black women and people of color have always theorized, just not in ways that the institutional academia and thinkers recognized as legitimate. In 2015, nearly 30 years later, N.K. Jemisin (1998) undertakes this outsider theorizing, continuing the

work of Black fiction writers from Christian's era. Jemisin melds the experiences of Black women in her novel to allow theory on and critique of reproductive justice work, shown predominantly through how Jemisin shapes Syenite's experience conceiving, raising, and killing her son, Coru. In this paper, I will demonstrate through close textual analysis of *The Fifth Season* how Jemisin is in conversation with reproductive justice theorists, particularly with Loretta Ross' (2017) article "Trust Black Women: Reproductive Justice and Eugenics." Using Christian's understanding of theory production as a theoretical guide and engaging with Rickie Solinger's (2017) call for art as a method of engaging reproductive justice, I further demonstrate how Jemisin's approach using literature as her means of production is crucial to her unique way of theorizing and enhances the conversation around reproductive justice.

In her article "Trust Black Women: Reproductive Justice and Eugenics," Loretta J. Ross (2017) lays out a definition of what the fight for reproductive justice is up against:

As an expression of collective social trauma, reproductive oppression is experienced by women of color as the exploitation of our bodies, sexuality, labor, and fertility in order to achieve social and economic control of our communities and in violation of our human rights. (p. 62)

There are complex and multilayered systems of oppression facing Black women when they decide how or whether to "have children, to not have children, and to safely parent [their] children" (Ross, 2017, cover copy). Jemisin places her main character Syenite in an existential and physical paradox that serves as a representation of the real life social location of Black American women. She uses Syenite to work through the inherent injustice and the systemic nature of oppressive control over reproductive rights of Black women. Barbara Christian (1988) writes that in the academy of her time "that authors are dead, irrelevant,

mere vessels through which their narratives ooze; that they do not work nor have they the faintest idea what they are doing—rather, they produce texts as disembodied as the angels” (p. 72). Christian critiques this trend, and Jemisin bucks it completely. Jemisin is a Black woman born and living in the United States, a positionality intrinsically connected to her written work. Her identity does not dictate what she produces but rather could only come from such an intimate experience with the lives and work of Black feminist writers while living as a Black woman in a world without reproductive justice.

Jemisin’s approach, engaging a theoretical discussion of reproductive justice through literature, is in conversation with a larger movement of art-based activism and scholarship. Rickie Solinger’s (2017) work “Making Art for Reproductive Justice” identifies art as a way to enact change in a culture breathing the mainstream narratives of the pro-life versus pro-choice debate that leaves so many people at the margins. Solinger (2017) argues that art “has the potential to invite people to see things they otherwise might (passively) not see or (actively) render invisible” (p. 397). Not only is Jemisin engaging in theoretical production about the way in which the world operates for Black women, but she is also inviting readers and members of the public to engage in the work with her. Engaging with Solinger’s analysis, I will demonstrate how Jemisin’s novel becomes a call for empathy even as it contains so much brutality.

In the fictional world of *The Fifth Season*, there are people who are born with the ability to control the energy of the earth around them. These people are called “orogenes” and are widely feared, despised, and controlled throughout the nation-state known as the Stillness. The manner in which orogenes are treated throughout the novel serves as a representation for the systems in place that control Blackness in American society from birth, to reproduction, to death. Ross (2017) writes the following:

American society inventively contorts itself to constantly criminalize and profit off of our blackness, as our children either are valued only when they *produce* white wealth (for-profit prisons or professional athletes) or *protect* it (by joining the military and protecting corporate profits around the globe). (p. 59)

This is precisely how orogenes are valued by the Fulcrum and the wider culture in the Stillness. The orogenes *protect* the people of the Stillness from the constant threats of earthquakes and tremors that the chaotic planet throws at them. “The orogenes of the Fulcrum serve the world...[they] can be useful not merely to a single comm, but all the Stillness” (Jemisin, 2015, p. 34). The orogenes are immeasurably valuable to the safety of the non-orogene, ‘still’ population and the state is willing to use their bodies to save others much as the U.S. military does with its troops. The orogenes are also valued for what they are ordered to (re)produce: children who will be controlled by and useful to the state.

The Fulcrum, an institutional body with the purpose of educating and controlling orogenes, dictates when and with whom orogenes have children. Thus the state control of orogenes begins before birth and lasts until death, much like “the cradle-to-prison pipeline” constructed to control people of color in the United States through the wider prison-industrial complex and police-monitoring state (Ross, 2017, p. 63). As Jimenez et al. argue, the “prison- and medical-industrial complexes” are part of a legacy of colonization to “control and contain our communities” that has much more to do with power than with individual reproductive decisions (Jimenez, Johnson, & Page, 2017, p. 361). Michel Foucault writes on the metaphor of the Panopticon, a physical structure usually associated with a prison in which the inmates are all observable by a singular watchman, and where the inmates cannot know when they are being watched (Foucault, 1977). As a result of such an architectural structure, inmates are incentivized to act as though they are being watched at all times. Foucault uses

the idea of the Panopticon as a metaphor for power in disciplinary societies in which no physical restraints are necessary to control a population. The threat of surveillance ensures that the oppressed will monitor themselves. Jemisin creates a version of this monitoring state with the Fulcrum. A mentor reveals to Syenite that advanced orogenes do not require constant monitoring by a Guardian. Upon hearing this news, Syenite experiences “shock” because she has been trained to find it unthinkable that orogenes would be able to exist without the watchful eye of a Guardian close by (Jemisin, 2015, p. 63). Deborah Small explains that Syenite has become accustomed to constant monitoring, just as “African Americans [are] preconditioned to accept monitoring and surveillance by the prison industrial complex through the entirety of their lives” (as cited in Ross, 2017, p. 63). The Fulcrum’s control over Syenite is directly related to her bodily autonomy and her lack of agency to make reproductive decisions for herself.

The monitoring persists throughout society, even to affect orogenes outside the Fulcrum’s control. Orogene children who are born outside of the Fulcrum are viciously criminalized and called ferals as a derogatory term. Unable to reap value out of these orogenes, the government criminalizes them through a generations-old propaganda machine. Stereotypes proliferate through the Stillness, such as “you’ve heard that orogenes don’t feel cold the way others do” and other lies meant to create an image of orogenes as something other than human (Jemisin, 2015, p. 31). A Guardian warns, “anyone caught harboring an unregistered orogene is ejected from their comm as a minimum punishment” (Jemisin, 2015, p. 36). Orogenes who are not handed over to be controlled by the Fulcrum are literally made criminal, a stigma that spreads to anyone willing to be a potential ally. Jemisin’s world reflects the way in which Black individuals are stereotyped and profiled in the United States and reveals the consequences

of such labels by placing a spotlight on the criminalization of orogenes, even those who are small children. Such racial stereotypes negatively affect Black children from before they are even born, reducing the ability of parents to “safely raise [their] children,” a core component of reproductive justice (Ross, 2017, cover copy).

Once Jemisin has established the police surveillance state in her fictional world, she introduces a means for both the character and the reader to grapple with it. Syenite has accepted, as Ross calls it, the “*reasonableness* of racism” (Ross, 2017, p. 63). Her life being monitored has “a logic, a reason, a justification” that stems from the core belief that orogenes are dangerous (Ross, 2017, p. 63). Alabaster complains to Syenite: “Even within the Fulcrum we always have to think about how *they* want us to act. We can never just... be.” (Jemisin, 2015, p. 123). Though Alabaster has lived within the Fulcrum’s control his entire life, he has begun to look beyond the internalized hatred and fear of self that has been instilled in him and in all orogenes. He gives Syenite a chance to think critically about the internalized monitoring she has been trained to engage in. Alabaster shatters her illusions about her right to agency over her own body and any children she may bear when, in a pivotal scene, he takes Syenite to see the node maintainers—orogene children whose bodyminds have been enslaved. The image of the enslaved child bears close resemblance to another Black speculative fiction writer: the child in the basement of Ursula K. Le Guin’s (1975) “The Ones Who Walk Away from Omelas.” Notably, Le Guin also engages in theoretical production through art, in this instance a short story. Similar to Le Guin’s story, the revelation of the child locked up for the prosperity of the greater community causes Syenite to rethink her place in the world. After she visits the node maintainers, she embarks on a path where she will eventually leave and defy the Fulcrum. Le Guin (1975) writes, “At times one of the adolescent girls or boys who go to see the child does not go

home to weep or rage, does not, in fact, go home at all. Sometimes also a man or woman much older falls silent for a day or two, and then leaves home” (p. 258). The orogene children who are kept as node maintainers mirror the child in Le Guin’s (1975) story, and they give Syenite a chance to question the Fulcrum and leave the only home she knows. Syenite has “been thinking about it. About how the boy in the wire chair resembled Alabaster. She begins, ‘Our child...’” (Jemisin, 2015, p. 145). Once Syenite becomes aware of the true horror, the Fulcrum and their enslavement of orogene children, she is faced with an unthinkable dilemma: grappling with the fate of her own child.

The power of Jemisin’s theory is intrinsically connected to its narrative presentation. In any society, systems of oppression shape all people, even those who seek to change and dismantle the power structures in place. However, because institutional and social barriers shape every person from and before birth, imagining alternative futures outside of societal structures becomes difficult if not outright impossible. It becomes easier for activists and theorists to imagine changes within current systems rather than radical new conceptions outside the current reality. Creative speculative fiction, such as *The Fifth Season*, expands the possibilities for theorizing outside of the conditions thinkers have been raised in. None of Jemisin’s readers have been raised in the Stillness, so when Alabaster rips the world apart, readers can rip it apart too. As Solinger (2017) writes, the use of art can “amplify reproductive justice’s truth in one way to open up that heart for everybody to see” (p. 403). Jemisin creates space for herself and her readers to explore the richness of theoretical imaginings through the fictional world of her novel.

In the final pages of *The Fifth Season*, Syenite is forced to choose between giving up her infant son to the Fulcrum or ending his life. Stereotypes about Black motherhood pervade American white-supremacist culture

in accusations that Black women are not responsible enough to make decisions about their own reproduction and their own children. Jemisin grapples with this stereotype directly by having her character commit the very violence that she, an orogene, is assumed by the state to commit. Syenite's actions and character in the moment act as a direct and purposeful challenge to this stereotype. Ross (2017) discusses this plight of Black mothers in the United States:

Black women had to ask, how did we become defined as the major threat to the health of our babies? Why was the womb the most dangerous place a child will ever inhabit, disregarding the invisible vulnerabilities and heightened precarity of our children's lives in a white supremacist society? (p. 63)

As Ross poses this question, Jemisin imagines an answer. While Syenite falls directly into the accusations leveled against Black women, Jemisin shows her reader how Syenite and her son are inherently at risk in "a society allergic to their existence" (Ross, 2017, p. 63). Alexis Pauline Gumbs wrestles with these concerns as well, related to the trauma of raising children as a Black woman. Gumbs (2016) wrote a poem to Ebony Wilkerson, who is described as "a black mother who drove herself and her children into the Atlantic Ocean saying she was taking them all to a better place." In her poem, Gumbs (2016) centers the crushing weight of oppression that sits heavily on marginalized parents forced into impossible situations by racism, capitalism, and sexism. Gumbs (2016) writes "some days we just cannot. We cannot give our babies to this world that eats our bones like centuries of salt." Similarly, in her narrative, Jemisin crafts an understanding of the violent, horrific context in which Syenite acts. The reader has experienced Syenite's life alongside her and knows her choice to be impossible. The reader saw the node maintainers and knows they were potentially this child's siblings. By creating an emotional narrative in which

readers connect to her characters, Jemisin challenges the reader to ask why harmful stereotypes exist and to inquire into what dangers Black children face in the reality of everyday life in the United States.

Jemisin also forces the reader to critically examine the context for the stereotype that affects Black women's ability to have agency over their own lives. Ross (2017) writes, "Accused of being selfish, confused, potentially violent and incapable of making responsible choices, [Black women] were offered a platitudinous charge that said 'innocent' fetuses needed to be protected from our selfish whims" (p. 63). In Jemisin's novel, the Guardians attempt to convince Syenite they are the only true protection for Syenite's son. Schaffa tells her, "We should have killed [Alabaster]...as a kindness, of course; you cannot imagine what they will do to him" (Jemisin, 2015, p. 440). He offers the same safety to Syenite's son, saying "his child will be a worthwhile replacement" (Jemisin, 2015, p. 440). Schaffa plays the role of those who call the decision making and agency of the mother irresponsible and demands that the mother, Syenite, give up her agency regarding her child to the powers that be. Faced with the choice of giving her son over to those who would enslave him, Syenite chooses to end his life. In creating this scene, Jemisin challenges the systems of oppression that lead to impossible choices for Black mothers by forcing the reader to acknowledge the reality of Syenite's situation.

Barbara Christian (1988) writes that due to the "takeover" of theory and academia, "some of our most daring and potentially radical critics (and by *our* I mean Black, women, Third World) have been influenced, even co-opted, into speaking a language and defining their discussion in terms alien to and opposed to our needs and orientation" (p. 68). N.K. Jemisin has resisted the academic language and rhetoric by creating expansive theory and critique through her many works of speculative fiction, such as her novel *The Fifth Season*. By doing so, Jemisin

becomes part of a larger movement that makes writing a “main form of activism” and allows wider engagement with the theory often restricted to the academy (Solinger, 2017, p. 398). In the novel, Jemisin is in conversation with other theorists, such as Loretta J. Ross, grappling with the burdens of reproductive injustice for Black women in the United States. Jemisin’s approach through speculative fiction grapples with the crushing, lived, and intersectional experiences of Black women and reproductive justice, and it not only breaks the mold of traditionally defined theoretical works but also actively enhances the academic discourse.

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