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**Living through the Apocalypse(s):**

**climate change and (non)human boundaries in Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and N.K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy**

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*Some worlds are built on a fault line of pain, held up by nightmares. Don't lament when those worlds fall. Rage that they were built doomed in the first place.*

N.K. Jemisin, *The Stone Sky*

*The function of art is to do more than tell it like it is-it's to imagine what is possible*

bell hooks, *Outlaw Culture*

## Table of contents

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>1. N. K. Jemisin’s <i>The Broken Earth</i> trilogy and Octavia E. Butler’s <i>Parable of the Sower</i>.....</b>	<b>3</b>
<b>2. Climate fiction: origins and theoretical background.....</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. Climate fiction and ecocriticism.....	6
2.2. The Anthropocene and its critiques.....	8
2.3. The power of speculative fiction.....	10
<b>3. Posthuman theories.....</b>	<b>12</b>
3.1. The Posthuman .....	12
3.2. Gaia and Zoe .....	13
3.3. Agency and (De)animation .....	15
<b>4. Critical dystopias as social commentary .....</b>	<b>18</b>
4.1. Butler’s and Jemisin’s depiction of the “everyday Anthropocene” .....	18
4.2. The role of knowledge: stonelore vs. Earthseed.....	21
4.3. Intertwining oppression, race, and slavery.....	24
<b>5. A re-vision of the relationship with the Earth.....</b>	<b>28</b>
5.1. Nonhuman agency: Jemisin’s Father Earth.....	28
5.2. Towards a sympoietic co-existence: orogeny vs. hyperempathy.....	31
5.3. Stone eaters as failed “mutualists” .....	35
<b>Conclusion .....</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>41</b>

## Introduction

Climate change is undoubtedly one of the most pressing issues of our time. Scientists have been warning for decades against the dangers of a 2°C increase in global temperatures, which is likely to set off a series of natural catastrophes all over the world such as hurricanes, droughts, wildfires, and the rise of sea levels. All these disasters are already happening, but if we do not rise to face the challenge of climate change they will increase in the future and put in peril the lives of millions – if not billions – of people, and life on (of) the planet itself. Literature is one way of dealing with this seemingly incomprehensible phenomenon affecting each and every one of us, but such a monumental challenge is not easy to imagine, let alone to represent in fiction (Poray-Wybranowska 2021). In his thought-provoking collection of essays on climate change *The Great Derangement*, Indian author and ecocriticism scholar Amitav Ghosh (2016) expresses his doubts about the power of literature to deal with such an all-encompassing issue, and starkly criticises the contemporary literary landscape for failing to provide tools to deal with the catastrophe we are called to face. While discussing the potential of climate-related stories, Kate Rigby also highlights that the kind of stories we tell are going to influence the way we prepare, face the environmental catastrophe and deal with its aftermaths, and especially “whether our responses are geared toward maintaining current systems [...] or whether they are transformative, enabling the emergence of new ways of being and dwelling that might prove not only more adaptive but also more just and compassionate” (2015: 2). Climate change narratives have then the potential, or one could say even the *duty*, of providing us readers with both a way to understand the issue of climate change and at the same time provide solutions, models, or at least alternative ways of dealing with this catastrophe. Unfortunately, so far most apocalyptic fiction has failed to do so: as noted by Susan Watkins, “conventional apocalyptic fiction (usually male-authored) tends towards conservatism [...] with traditional patriarchal and imperialist definitions of what civilisation is” and an ending that tends “either towards the restoration of what has been lost during the apocalypse or focuses on nostalgic mourning for the past” (2020: 1). In spite of that, with the growing spread and popularity of climate fiction, marginalised and oppressed people have had the chance of having their stories told, and many of them have depicted different ways of dealing with the environmental catastrophe – often disruptive of the status quo. Among others, Carl Death notes how “climate fiction, and particularly Africanfuturist climate fiction, offers critical theorists important resources in challenging dominant, Eurocentric and restrictive ways of imagining the future” (2022: 432). Two such authors are African American women writers Octavia Butler and N.K. Jemisin, whose novels are the object of study of this thesis.

My interest in the topic of climate change and its connection to literature was sparked when during my first year of bachelor's degree I attended Professor Chiara Xausa's seminar on Gender, postcolonial narratives and climate change. I was truly fascinated by the vast array of perspectives and depictions of the climate crisis, as well as all the critiques of traditional world views and representations brought up by postcolonial and feminist thinkers. For the final assignment of the seminar, I read and analysed Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*, the first novel of *The Broken Earth* trilogy. Jemisin's outstanding writing and master storytelling interested me so much that I continued on and finished the whole trilogy and have since then read other climate-related fiction such as Margaret Atwood's *Oryx and Crake*, Jesmyn Ward's *Salvage The Bones* or Nnedi Okorafor's *Lagoon*. Therefore, when debating which topic to choose for my thesis, I knew I wanted to expand on the themes discussed in the seminar and give my personal analysis and interpretation of climate fiction novels. In the end, my choice to analyse Jemisin's trilogy together with Butler's *Parable of the Sower* was motivated both by my interest in reading something by Butler, one of the most beloved and revered science fiction authors, as well as by the various similarities between the two African American authors' series (Butler also published a sequel titled *Parable of the Talents*, although I will not take it into consideration for the sake of this thesis).

The aim of this thesis is then to analyse the three novels which constitute Jemisin's Hugo Award-winning *The Broken Earth* trilogy – namely *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017) – together with Butler's landmark *Parable of the Sower* (1993) and describe how the two authors depict the issue of climate change, as well as the problematization and shift in human and nonhuman boundaries that comes with it. This body of work will be divided into five chapters. In Chapter One I will briefly introduce the authors and novels object of study in this work. Chapter Two and Three will be dedicated to presenting the theoretical framework I used for the analysis of Jemisin's and Butler's novels, and will deal, respectively, with climate change, ecocriticism, and the power of speculative fiction (Ch. 2), and posthuman theories (Ch. 3). In Chapter Four and Five I will then analyse *Parable of The Sower* and *The Broken Earth* trilogy based on the theoretical aspects I introduced in Ch. 2 and 3. The analysis in Chapter Four will be mainly connected to climate change and the possibilities in the face of a climate apocalypse offered by science fiction, while the one in Chapter Five will describe the re-vision of human-nonhuman boundaries in the novels through a posthuman lens – with a focus on the relationship with the Earth. Finally, I will draw conclusions that highlight the importance of such novels in providing different alternatives of dealing with the climate crisis for our contemporary society already living through climate shift.

## 1. N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy and Octavia E. Butler's *Parable of the Sower*

In this first chapter of my thesis, I will briefly introduce the two authors and four novels object of analysis throughout the following pages. The two authors whose works I will be discussing in this thesis are Octavia Butler and N. K. Jemisin. Despite belonging to different generations – Jemisin was born just as Butler achieved commercial success with her first novels and short stories –, both authors share a number of features, also reflected in their works, which make a comparison between the two of them reasonable and productive.

Octavia Butler was born in Pasadena, California, in 1947. A shy and introverted child, little Butler found solace at the library reading books, especially fantasy ones. She then started writing as a teenager, and throughout the 1970s started to publish stories and books. With her short stories “Speech Sounds” (1984) and “Bloodchild” (1985) she found commercial and critical acclaim and was able to work as an author full-time. Butler was multiple times awarded important prizes in the science fiction and fantasy genres, such as Hugo, Nebula, and Locus Awards. She died of a stroke at the age of 58 in 2006. Butler remains one of the most influential figures in science fiction, and her works have been lauded and applauded for their intricacy, complexity, and richness. Her novels often include multifaceted discussions of themes such as racism, colonialism, imperialism, and discrimination, as well as what it means to be “human” or “other”, which clearly can be traced to her position as a Black, African American woman.

N. K. Jemisin was born in Iowa City, Iowa in 1972. Growing up between New York and Alabama, she also worked as a counsel psychologist before becoming a full-time writer. Although her first novels were critical successes – her debut *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010) earned her a Locus Award as well as nominations for the Nebula and Hugo Awards – it was *The Broken Earth* trilogy which prompted Jemisin's rise to stardom in the sci-fi/fantasy genre. The African American author achieved a feat which no one had been able to achieve before: she was the recipient of the Hugo Award for Best Novel for three years in a row, for all the books in the trilogy (*The Fifth Season* in 2016, *The Obelisk Gate* in 2017 and *The Stone Sky* in 2018)<sup>1</sup>. Nowadays, she is considered one of the most prominent and acclaimed authors in the science fiction and fantasy genre, and her novels have often been praised for their intricacy and handling of a variety of themes such as oppression, climate change and discrimination.

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<sup>1</sup> Simultaneously with Jemisin's win, there was an attempt by right-wing groups known as “Sad Puppies” and “Rabid Puppies” to influence the decision on the Hugo Award in favour of their preferred works, claiming that “science fiction has become dominated by a liberal, left-wing bias” (Barnett 2016: 1).

Although academic pieces focusing on a comparison between Jemisin's and Butler's works are still rare, many articles analysing Jemisin's spellbinding and intricate novels often include references to Butler's works and stress the similarities between the two. Jemisin herself has recognized multiple times Butler's influence on her own writings and the role she played in opening science fiction to a Black audience by putting specifically Black characters at the centre of her novels (Hurley 2018). Jemisin also recently had the chance to write the foreword to the newest edition of Butler's *Parable of the Sower*, a feat which clearly showcases her success as an author as well as the connections between her and Butler's works. Furthermore, it also stresses the importance of their role as African American women writers in a world – that of science fiction – which has traditionally been dominated by white European men: Butler is considered by many – especially in the African American community – as the “Queen Mother of Science Fiction” (Loadholt 2020), and Jemisin was recently graced with the title of “Reigning Fantasy Queen” by Vulture (Shapiro 2018).

I will now move on to give a brief summary of the content of the four novels object of analysis in this thesis: Butler's *Parable of the Sower* as well as the three novels comprising Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy – *The Fifth Season*, *The Obelisk Gate*, and *The Stone Sky*.

Octavia E. Butler's novel *Parable of the Sower* (1993) is considered by many a landmark novel in science fiction, and, as noted by Shelley Streeby, it is one of the first to imagine possibilities in the wake of climate change disaster (2018: 70). *Parable (POTS)* depicts a California in the 2020s ravaged by wildfires and droughts, where humanity has organized itself into little walled communities, towns, or neighbourhoods around which 10-foot walls are erected to protect the people living inside them from intruders, thieves, and drug addicts. The protagonist of the novel is Lauren Olamina, a girl living inside a community in California with a peculiar ability: “hyperempathy”. Due to her drug-addict mother overdosing on a drug called Placetco when she was carrying her in her womb, Olamina was born with “what the doctors call an ‘organic delusional syndrome’” (*POTS*: 16): an overdone ability to empathise with other people resulting in her *actually* feeling their pain. The novel is told from the perspective of Olamina herself, who recounts her life through dairy entries, where she also starts to form thoughts about her credo and self-made religion, Earthseed. While at first the story plays inside Olamina's walled community, its destruction by drug addicts on pyro (a drug which causes people to feel aroused by arson) forces Lauren to fight for her survival outside those four walls which had since then protected her. The young woman then embarks on a journey north along the East Coast, during which she will have to learn to find the balance between self-defence and disdain for others. Step after step, with her enhanced empathy as burden and guidance at the same time, Lauren builds a

community of like-minded individuals, who will be the first members of what will come to be her Earthseed community, Acorn.

N. K. Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy starts, quite literally, with the end of the world: the first line of the first book of the trilogy, *The Fifth Season (TFS)*, is namely "Let's start with the end of the world, shall we?" (*TFS*: 11). In the world depicted by Jemisin, thousands of years in the future the Earth is continuously scattered by seismic and geological events, which find their worse outcome in "Fifth Seasons", catastrophic events that cyclically happen every few hundred years that put humanity's own survival in peril. In the first book, we follow three different perspectives that navigate this apocalyptic world: Damaya, a little girl taken away from her family because of her powers; Syenite, a strong-headed woman on a mission to reproduce; and Essun, a grieving mother who is desperately looking for her lost daughter and the husband who killed their other child. It is later discovered that all three perspectives belong to the same person, just representing different stages of her life. Damaya/Syenite/Essun is an "orogene", one of the three subspecies into which humanity is divided into in Jemisin's novels. "Orogenes" are individuals who "possess orogeny, whether trained or not", that is "the ability to manipulate thermal, kinetic, and related forms of energy to address seismic events" (462). They differentiate themselves from powerless "stills", the subspecies which most closely resembles humans as we intend them in our world today, and "stone eaters", a rarely seen sentient humanoid species whose flesh, hair, etc., resembles stone. From this starting point, throughout the trilogy Jemisin progressively expands and complicates the world of the Stillness – the clearly ironic name she gives to the sole continent which comprises the Earth – and proceeds to interweave a story full of social critiques of capitalism, imperialism, racism, environmental destruction and much more. At the end of *The Fifth Season*, Alabaster – the orogene who at the start of the novel gave the final blow to the Stillness and triggered an endless Fifth Season – reveals to Essun a shocking truth: humans destroyed the Earth's only child, the moon, thus triggering the first ever Fifth Season. *The Obelisk Gate (TOG)* picks up where the first book ended and sees Essun edging closer to reaching her lost daughter, Nassun, who in the meantime is forced to grow up fast and make choices no child should be making. The final book, *The Stone Sky (TSS)*, shines a light on the past of the world through the eyes of Hoa, the stone eater who befriends Essun in the first book, before a crescendo of tension and shocking revelations which leads to the final confrontation: mother and daughter are pitched against each other in a fight which will decide much more than just their lives, and which will change the fate of the whole world, forever.

## **2. Climate fiction: origins and theoretical background**

This section delineates the theoretical foundation used in my analysis. Firstly, I'll provide an overview of the history of climate fiction, starting with its definition and then discussing its ties with ecocriticism and ecofeminism. I'll then introduce the concept of Anthropocene, and its many critiques, including but not limited to Donna Haraway's Chthulucene and Andreas Malm's Capitalocene. Finally, I will briefly explore the world of science fiction by discussing sub-genres such as utopia, dystopia, and Afrofuturism, which are of particular relevance for the novels discussed in this thesis.

### **2.1. Climate fiction and ecocriticism**

The term climate fiction – often shortened as “cli-fi” – was coined in 2007 by British Journalist Dan Bloom. Bloom defines climate fiction as a newly proposed genre term for works of art such as novels, short stories or movies that deal with climate change and global warming (Thorpe 2015). Gregers Andersen provides a similar definition of cli-fi as fiction that “use[s] the scientific paradigm of anthropogenic global warming in their world-making” (2020: 5). Climate fiction can therefore be seen as a branch of science fiction (sci-fi) – or even its sister genre (Thorpe 2015) – with the main difference being that the former focuses more heavily on climate change and the concerns it poses for humanity.

The difficulty of an unambiguous definition of climate fictions is posed by Chiara Xausa (2022), who highlights how the similarities between climate fiction and science fiction, not always intelligible, paired with a lack of stylistic conventions and plot formulas that characterise other genres result in unclear genre boundaries. Many science fiction novels include themes related to climate change, or depict (post)apocalyptic scenarios, but are not necessarily climate fiction. Stephanie LeMenager refuses to give a typological definition of climate fiction, underlining how remarkably diverse work of fictions that have been called cli-fi are; instead she sees cli-fi as a “symptom of a social need [...] at a moment when life as many humans know it is changing at a pace and scale difficult to imagine” (2017: 222). Axel Goodboy and Adeline Johns-Putra posit that climate fiction is not a genre in the scholarly sense, but rather a term used for “a distinctive body of cultural work which engages with anthropogenic climate change” (2019: 1-2). Despite this difficulty in narrowing down a proper definition for the genre, climate fiction has seen a surge in popularity and spread in the last few years, as the issue of climate change has become more and more prominent in today's society. Cli-fi narratives are, in fact, a tool for authors and readers alike to face the immediacy of climate change; thus they have “the potential to present not just a techno-science story but rather to narrate our

transcorporeality, explicitly addressing differences of gender, race, nation, economics and ecologies, sexuality and species” (Gaard 2017: 158).

Various types of novels have been discussed as examples of cli-fi: among them, Margaret Atwood’s *MaddAddam* trilogy (2003-2013), Cormac McCarthy’s *The Road* (2006), Barbara Kingsolver’s *Flight Behaviour* (2012) and Nathaniel Rich’s *Odds Against Tomorrow* (2013). These few novels alone are a great indication of the variety of themes and genres discussed in cli-fi, as well of the diversity in the portrayal of climate change even among cli-fi narratives. Atwood’s *Oryx and Crake*, first book in the *MaddAddam* trilogy, depicts a world disrupted by climate change, but its main focus is a man-made epidemic which has decimated the world’s population to just a few lone survivors; similarly, McCarthy’s book does not explicitly address the issue of climate change but rather has it in the background of the main characters’ quest for survival in a desolate world. Kingsolver’s novel takes a more direct approach to climate change and focuses on how it is perceived differently due to differences of class and religion; finally, Rich’s all-too-realistic depiction of the impacts of a disastrous storm in America is used as a tool to address how people respond to risk and crisis.

Climate change novels trace their roots back to ecocriticism (also known as environmental criticism), a subfield of literary criticism which is “devoted to the investigation of the relations between literature and the environment from an interdisciplinary point of view” (Xausa 2022: 1). Greg Garrard (2023) traces the start of modern environmentalism back to ‘A Fable for Tomorrow’, the first chapter in Rachel Carson’s *Silent Spring* (1962), which through the overturning of a pastoral and pseudo-idyllic setting where humans and nature live in complete harmony provides an actually quite modern take on the effects of human activities on the Earth and its creatures. Ecocriticism *per se* emerged in the 1980s and 1990s but has since seen a surge in its importance among other literary fields of studies due to its relevance in today’s society.

A fundamental contribution to ecocriticism has come from feminist and postcolonial scholars, whose research in the environmental humanities is central to the content of this thesis. Discussing the similarities between feminism and ecocriticism, Douglas Vakoch (2012) states that feminism’s and ecocriticism’s plurality of approaches and the absence of unanimous definitions of their respective fields provide fertile ground for the emergence of a new literary research field: feminist ecocriticism or ecofeminism. The term “ecofeminism” was coined by François d’Eaubonne in 1974 but was scarcely used in the following decades; it was only during the 1990s that literary critics started to analyse connections between the domination of women and nature. Ecofeminist scholars “claim that there is some kind of inherent or structural connection between the patriarchal domination of women

(and, in the view of some theorists, other socially oppressed groups) and the ecologically destructive exploitation of the earth.” (Rigby 1998: 144).

## **2.2. The Anthropocene and its critiques**

The birth of climate fiction is closely tied to the epoch we are living in, and consequently with the term “Anthropocene”, which was first introduced in a 2000 newsletter by Paul Crutzen and Eugene F. Stoermer. According to Clive Hamilton, the Anthropocene is “a proposed new epoch to be added to the Geological Time Scale describing the very recent rupture in the functioning of the Earth System as a whole arising from the impact of human activity” (2019: 1). It is a term which is nowadays quite widespread in literary, ecological and climate discourse, and which aims to pinpoint humanity’s impact on life on Earth and on the planet’s geology and ecosystems, including anthropogenic climate change (but not limited to it). There are no set and unanimous boundaries for the start of this proposed new epoch; some scholars suggest dating it back to even 8,000 years ago with the development of farming and sedentary cultures, while others indicate the European colonization of the Americas or the Industrial revolution as starting points.

In spite of the spread of the term in popular culture too, the concept of the Anthropocene has been criticised by many scholars for a variety of reasons, including its ties to a lone image of Man or the different responsibilities of the on-going climate crisis. One such critical scholar is Janet Fiskio (2021), who highlights the intertwining between colonization, imperialism, and climate change. She names European imperialism as the “driving force behind the onset of the Anthropocene”, which she considers “an effect of colonization” (58). She believes that marking industrialization as the main cause of climate change only goes as far as to focus on greenhouse emissions; putting imperialism at its roots instead “suggests the need for structural critiques” and “calls for social and political change” (59). Other critiques of the term Anthropocene come from Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte (2018), who points out the falseness of the claim that humanity has never faced radical climate change before, naming the forced deportation of Africans during the Slave trade to America as one such example. Slaves had to adapt swiftly to completely different biomes and climates, and erasing their experience from the mainstream Anthropocene discourse is yet one instance of erasure of non-white voices and environmental racism<sup>2</sup>. Despite acknowledging the importance of many criticisms to the concept of the Anthropocene, many scholars such as Chiara Xausa or Anna Tsing still use the

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<sup>2</sup> Environmental racism refers to “any policy, practice, or directive that differentially affects or disadvantages (whether intended or unintended) individuals, groups, or communities based on race or color” (Bullard 1993).

term in their works. Firstly, because it allows interdisciplinary conversations between humanists and natural scientists, and secondly because acknowledging the false universal “Man” the term Anthropocene is based on can help to recognize legacies of inequalities and “focus in on the uneven, unequal features of planetary environmental issues” (Mitman 2019).

Other terms have been proposed by scholars and activists to substitute Anthropocene to better represent the complexity of the epoch we are living in, such as “Chthulucene”, “Capitalocene”, and “Plantationocene”. Donna Haraway coined the term “Chthulucene” after a species of redwood forests spiders, *Pimoida cthulhu*. Haraway (2016) sees the spider as a much more apt metaphor for the time we live in as its many legs (which she describes as tentacles) spreading around its body enable it to connect much more efficiently to its surroundings compared to humans. Ours is a time for “responsibility” (28), meaning that we as humans must recognize that we are only one player among many – one of which is the Earth itself. Haraway also focuses her attention on the need to install a symbiotic mode of living, together with all species – human and nonhuman alike –, which I will expand on in the posthuman section of this thesis.

Another term which has sparked debate is “Capitalocene”, coined by human geographer Andreas Malm, who makes reference to the origin of capitalism in the use of coal to fuel factories in 19<sup>th</sup> century England (Malm 2016). The term clearly references the close intertwining between the climate crisis and capitalism, and also focuses on our capitalistic society as culprit rather than blaming humans as individuals. While using the term Capitalocene, historian Jason W. Moore (2016) dates back its origins to the feudal system of 15<sup>th</sup> century Europe. Moore also clarifies that Capitalocene does not refer to capitalism as an economic and social system, but as a “way of organizing nature – as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (3).

Closely related to capitalism and its consequences is also the use of the term “Plantationocene”. Discussing its use as opposed to Anthropocene, Haraway notes that while the Anthropocene is generally considered by scholars as a species act, something almost inevitable that humankind as a whole is perpetuating, it is “an historical, situated set of conjunctures that are absolutely not a species act” (Mitman 2019: online). Using Plantationocene is “at once a provocation and a reflection meant to challenge the species-level thinking of the Anthropocene” (Moore S. et al. 2021: online), because it helps to put emphasis on societal, environmental, and economic inequalities that have made living in a world undergoing rapid climate change more precarious for some human and nonhuman beings than others. Similarly to the works of aforementioned scholars such as Fiskio (2021) or Whyte (2018), closely linking climate change and humanity’s influence and disruption of the geological and environmental equilibrium on Earth to plantations, imperialism and colonialism are both ways to

recognize past environmental, racist and speciesist violence and provide a context for the reinterpretation of the current debate around climate change.

### **2.3. The power of speculative fiction**

As previously mentioned, climate fiction can be considered as a part of the broader “genre” of science fiction. To use the term “genre” to define science fiction is itself quite problematic because it does not recognize the hybrid nature of many SF works; it should be instead considered as “a mode or field where different genres and subgenres intersect” (Seed 2011: 1). Despite the common misconception that SF narratives are about the future, most of the time they are intrinsically linked to the present time of the authors who write them and position themselves between possibility and impossibility. Margaret Atwood also deals with the difficulty of defining science fiction novels, expressing her preference to have her books defined as “speculative fiction” instead of science fiction. The Canadian author explains that, to her, speculative fiction refers to “things that really could happen but just hadn't completely happened when the authors wrote the books” (Atwood 2011: online).

Closely intertwined with science fiction are also the terms “utopia” and “dystopia”. The former entered the English language in 1516 following the publication of Thomas Moore’s homonymous *Utopia* and is a wordplay meaning at the same time ‘eu-topia’ (good place) and ‘ou-topia’ (no place). Embodying social alternatives to the society of the writer’s time, utopias present a huge number of differences, but one aspect which remains predominantly unchanged is the narrative: the story sees a protagonist or narrator who has the possibility of visiting and experiencing a more perfect society (Ferns 1999). Although starkly criticised, both in the past and in the present, utopian narratives are considered by Christopher S. Ferns (1999) as one tool to explore possibilities, different (and better) outcomes of how things could be. Dystopias are the exact opposite: they present flawed societies, where citizens live in nightmarish conditions, much worse than our own. They combine a parodic inversion of the traditional utopia with satire on contemporary society, and where utopian fiction stresses the difference between the society it depicts and the current one, dystopias tend to portray the nightmare future they describe as a possible outcome of present-day society.

At first glance, the distinction between utopian and dystopian novels may seem crystal-clear, but in reality distinguishing between the one and the other is quite a complicated matter. Many scholars have discussed the two concepts together, and for the sake of this thesis is of particular relevance the concept of “critical dystopias” posited by Tom Moylan and Raffaella Baccolini. The two scholars see critical dystopias as dystopias that maintain some form of utopian impulse, both inside and outside

the pages of the books, and that intensify genre blurring and fluidity aiming at a renovation of the traditional dystopia by making it politically and formally oppositional (Moylan and Baccolini 2003). The utopian core that these texts maintain at their centre becomes then a “locus of hope that contributes to deconstructing tradition and reconstructing alternatives” (Baccolini 2000: 13). Discussing contemporary dystopias, Baccolini (2022) further stresses this constant push and pull between the two: contemporary dystopias “maintain [...] hope and a utopian horizon within the pages of dystopia” (1227). Atwood (2011) even goes as far as to propose a new term to address the fact that both utopias and dystopias most of the time contain a latent version of the other: “Ustopia”.

Among the most promising and rising subgenres in the big bowl that is science fiction literature is Afrofuturism, a complex and multifaceted cultural current. Mark Dery coined the term in 1993, defining it as “speculative fiction that treats African American themes and addresses African American concerns in the context of twentieth century technoculture” (Dery 1993: 180). Through the recovery and reclamation of often forsaken and silenced pasts and histories, its aim is not solely the promotion of non-white, African and African American literary and artistic production, but also the creation of a more inclusive genre – changing the predominant whiteness of science fiction –, capable of addressing everybody’s dreams, desires, hopes (Bigoni 2019). In *Afrofuturism: The World of Black Sci-Fi and Fantasy Culture* (2013), Ytasha Womack argues that at its core, Afrofuturism is about envisioning possible futures through a black cultural lens and reinvigorating an often-repressed culture. In this sense, Jemisin’s series and Butler’s novel can be seen as explicit examples of Afrofuturist fiction that suggest new possibilities for the future by centring around *specifically* Black main characters and interweaving their stories with more or less subtle references to the exploitation of Black people, race, oppression, and slavery.

### 3. Posthuman theories

Moving on from the theoretical background on climate fiction, I will now give a brief overview of the second main field of study used in the analysis in this thesis, i.e. posthuman theories. Starting with Rosi Braidotti's exemplary work *The Posthuman*, I will then proceed to analyse posthuman reflections in the works of Latour, Margulis, Lovelock and Haraway. All these scholars devoted attention to a new definition of the relationship between humanity and the Earth, and between human and nonhuman others. Lovelock's and Margulis' 1970s fundamental work on Gaia and Braidotti's concept of *Zoe* will be compared, as well as more recent works that re-animate the Earth and other nonhuman actants such as Latour's *Facing Gaia* and Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble*. These theories are of particular relevance for this thesis, as I will explain later, for both Butler's and Jemisin's works dispute the traditional human-nonhuman binary and through the medium of science fiction showcase new possibilities of interspecies living and "becoming-with" (Haraway 2016).

#### 3.1. The Posthuman

Following the introduction of the term Anthropocene (see Ch.2), humanity has been recognized as a geological force that is having a widespread effect on the Earth and on life on the planet. Still, as many critics of the term have pointed out, using the term Anthropocene fails to disrupt the thread that permeates much of human history that sees us humans, the *Anthropos*, at the centre of everything. Posthumanism, which is a fairly recent development of poststructuralist<sup>3</sup> and post-anthropocentric philosophy, is trying to change that by refusing to appoint any sort of higher value to humans as opposed to other living or non-living things (Stenberg 2020). In her influential book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti describes the posthuman turn of philosophy as a "qualitative shift in our thinking about what exactly is the basic unit of common reference for our species, our polity and our relationship to the other inhabitants of this planet" (2013: 2). In other words, posthumanism focuses on a re-vision of the traditional position of humanity as a substantially superior form of life to the others, and on de-centring the – allegedly – universal figure of "Man", as well as proposing a re-thinking of the nature-culture divide – which becomes a nature-culture *continuum* (see Braidotti 2013 or Haraway 2016) – and a new approach to the relationship between humans and nonhuman others (the Earth itself, but also animals, plants, bacteria and so on).

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<sup>3</sup> "Poststructuralism" is a movement in literary criticism and philosophy begun in France in the 1960s which "held that language is not a transparent medium that connects one directly with a "truth" or "reality" outside it but rather a structure or code, whose parts derive their meaning from their contrast with one another and not from any connection with an outside world." <https://www.britannica.com/art/poststructuralism>.

A crucial contribution to posthuman reflections comes from the subfield of posthuman feminism, which Braidotti describes as a convergence of feminist anti-humanism and anti-anthropocentrism. The former focuses on the “critique of the humanist ideal of ‘Man’ as the universal representative of the human” while the latter criticises “species hierarchy and advances ecological justice<sup>4</sup>” (2016: 674). Posthuman feminism is not merely a sum of these two strands of thought but represents a further expansion of philosophical reflection in a more complex and intersectional direction. While recognizing the impact and importance of early feminist (humanist) theorists such as Simone de Beauvoir, Braidotti points out the flaws in their analysis – which still proved to be revolutionary at the time –, because while still being based on a radical critique of “masculinist universalism” (2013: 22), they still depended on humanism and failed to put into question the universality and binary at its core. For posthuman scholars, it is not enough anymore to substitute “Man” – alleged measure of all things – with “woman” as some early feminist movements suggested: anti-humanism rejects universalism and criticises the hierarchical binary thinking. Pivotal contributions to poststructuralist and posthuman theories also came from anticolonial thinkers, who started to question “the primacy of whiteness in the humanist ideal as the moral, intellectual, and aesthetic canon of perfection” (Braidotti 2016: 677). This reduction of non-Western others to a subhuman status was also often appointed as one of the reasons for the dehumanization of “others” and the stigmatization of difference. So the universal “Man”, once Eurocentric, white, male, handsome and able-bodied, gets discarded in favour of a more intersectional approach that allows a more inclusive look at the concept of “human”, but which also signifies “new recompositions of humanity after humanism” (679).

Closely connected to the posthuman thread of thought are theories which see the Earth under a new light, no more an inanimate object to exploit, but rather a player in itself, an actant that has regained its agency, and which is, lamentably, fighting back. In the following part, I will introduce two examples of such theories: the Gaia hypothesis and the concept of Zoe.

### **3.2. Gaia and Zoe**

The Gaia theory, or Gaia hypothesis, was formulated in the 1970s by James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis. It owns its name to Gaia, the ancient Greek goddess and personification of the Earth. In *Symbiotic Planet*, Margulis argues that the Gaia hypothesis “postulates the idea that the Earth is alive”

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<sup>4</sup> Ecological (or environmental) justice is the belief that humans and all other species on Earth are intrinsically linked, and nonhuman others alike have entitlements and deserve justice when their environment is harmed by human actions (Wienhues 2020).

(1998: 2). Lovelock adds that the Gaia hypothesis “views the biosphere as an active, adaptive control system able to maintain the Earth in homeostasis<sup>5</sup>” (2006: 29). In other words, the Earth should be considered as a complex and multifaceted system, comprising both the planet itself and all life that thrives on it. Furthermore, according to Lovelock, the Earth is also a self-regulating system, meaning that it strives toward a maintenance of the status quo, in this case the right temperature to allow life to flourish. Lovelock recognizes that most of humanity still finds difficulties in grasping the concept that humans and the rest of life are all part of a “much larger and diverse entity, the living Earth” (5), but, he adds, that is the only way to be able to see humanity’s impact on the planet. Only if we manage to stop assuming the traditional view of the Earth as “a planet made of dead rock with abundant life aboard” (6) can we start to see how our actions, from farming to industrial production to the extraction of petrol, are actually damaging the Earth, and, consequently, ourselves. Analysing Margulis’ and Lovelock’s works, Stenberg (2020) points out that “all that is living on the planet affect the planet just as the planet affects all that is living on it, meaning that Gaia is not only a synergistic network, but also that it should be regarded as alive” (11). The “dead” planet humans have exploited for millennia has now clearly regained its long-lost agency – which people had mistakenly taken away from it by separating themselves from Nature – and is now fighting back against those who are putting in peril the status quo: humans. While using the term “alive”, Lovelock (2006) precises that he does not regard the Earth as alive in a sentient way as Jemisin does in her novels, but there are still many clear connections between Jemisin’s fictional portrayal and Lovelock’s biological and scientific analysis of the Earth system.

Rosi Braidotti’s concept of *Zoe* presents both resemblances with the Gaia hypothesis and critiques of it. Describing the shift away from the centrality of the *Anthropos*, Braidotti further expands on the posthuman discussion centring around the role of humanity and postulates the concept of *Zoe*, which she describes as “the non-human, vital force of Life” (2013: 60). Following a vitalist<sup>6</sup> approach, Braidotti refuses the traditional division of matter among what is considered alive– *anthropos* and consequently *bios*– and what is not, and instead proposes *Zoe* as a new term to indicate all “living” matter, including animal and nonhuman life. The critique of *Anthropos* and the destabilization of its central and distinct role from all “inferior” others – for they are rendered as a pejoration, an anomaly or a deviance compared to the supposed standard of Man – has as a consequence that “animals, insects, plants and the environment, in fact the planet and the cosmos as a whole, are called into play” (66).

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<sup>5</sup> Homeostasis is defined as “any self-regulating process by which biological systems tend to maintain stability while adjusting to conditions that are optimal for survival”. <https://www.britannica.com/science/homeostasis>.

<sup>6</sup> Vitalism is a philosophical current that “attempts to explain the nature of life as resulting from a vital force peculiar to living organisms and different from all other forces found outside living things”. <https://www.britannica.com/topic/vitalism>.

Braidotti clearly takes an environmentally conscious approach to posthuman life and stresses the necessity of an inter-species living that redefines the boundaries between humans and nonhuman others, and similarly to Lovelock puts emphasis on the Earth as a system that is made of different actants – humans, animals, nonhuman others, and the Earth itself. Braidotti also encourages to establish more equitable relationships with animals in order to create what she calls a “zoe-egalitarianism” that is based on a vital interconnection between animals and humans, forgoing traditional hierarchies that see humans as the dominant species, for we are all living on the same planet and sharing the same territory and environment (71). She also expands on the relationship between humans and the Earth – which she defines as “our complex habitat which we used to call ‘nature’” (81) – and presents the challenge of visualizing the posthuman subject as “a transversal entity encompassing the human, our genetic neighbours the animals and the earth as a whole” (82). Despite this remark, the Italian-Australian scholar criticises Lovelock’s Gaia hypothesis for its premise of the Earth as a single, sacred organism, which instead of problematizing them reestablishes dualisms which posthumanism has long been critical of, such as earth to industrialization, nature to culture and so on. For Braidotti, positions and theories such as Lovelock’s are helpful but are a way of “humanizing the environment, [...] a well-meaning form of residual anthropomorphic normativity, applied to non-human planetary agents” (83).

### 3.3. Agency and (De)animation

The process that Braidotti defines as “becoming-earth” represents a shift in our thinking in order to establish a “qualitatively different planetary relation” (2013: 88), seeing the Earth and other nonhuman others as actant, no more inanimate matter to be exploited. This conceptual shift is clearly pointed toward a re-definition of the agency of the other players, which for the longest time Man has thought to be without agency, or at best dormant. Another scholar that explores the agency of the Earth is Bruno Latour. The French philosopher postulates that “the Earth has now taken back all the characteristics of a full-fledged actor [...], it has become once again an agent of history, or rather, an agent of [...] our common geostory<sup>7</sup>” (Latour 2014: 3). In his article “Agency at the time of the Anthropocene”, Latour explores how the Earth has regained its agency, and what sort of agency this “new” Earth should be granted. He posits that humans had wrongly deanimated the Earth, but, as he later expands in *Facing Gaia*, “agency is always there, whatever we may do” (Latour 2015: 58). The false claim that the Earth was not an actant in itself has wrongfully concealed its agency, which has

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<sup>7</sup> For Latour, geostory literally means “story of the Earth”; he uses the term to highlight the fact that the Earth must also be included in the stories we tell ourselves (Stenberg, 2020).

not disappeared entirely but was merely hidden. And in the era of the Anthropocene, the Earth is no longer “objective”: “it cannot be put at a distance and emptied of all Its humans. Human action is visible everywhere” (Latour 2013: 5). Analysing Latour’s works, Stenberg adds that “it is crucial not to deanimate the Earth, but instead to reanimate it and realize that humanity is only one actor among many” (2020: 16). Humans have to accept the fact that the Earth is now an active subject, just as humanity and plants and animals are, and is actually fighting back against us. Latour also adds that “Gaia is another subject altogether—maybe also a different sovereign” (2013: 6): in line with posthuman critiques, the traditional notion of humanity as sovereign of the Earth definitely comes to an end. Latour’s concept of deanimation and his discussion of the agency of the Earth is of particular relevance for this thesis, since in her books Jemisin describes a *truly* sentient Earth – which has regained its agency and is actually acting according to its *own* interests. The American author also calls her *animated* version of the Earth “Father Earth”, completely overturning the traditional view of the Earth as something feminine, following many critiques to the dubious correlation between women and nature (see for example Vakoch 2012, Merchant 1980 or Plumwood 1993).

Tightly connected to Latour’s view of the now-regained agency of the Earth is Donna Haraway’s aforementioned Chthulucene (see Ch. 2.2). Haraway’s alternative substitute term for the Anthropocene, the Chthulucene,

is made up of ongoing multispecies stories and practices of becoming-with in times that remain at stake, in precarious times, in which the world is not finished and the sky has not fallen—yet. We are at stake to each other. Unlike the dominant dramas of Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse, human beings are not the only important actors in the Chthulucene, with all other beings able simply to react. The order is reknitted: human beings are with and of the earth (2016:55)

In other words, similarly to Latour, Haraway sees humanity as just one actor among many, and, in line with Braidotti’s theories, stresses the need for an interspecies, harmonious living, where connections between humans, animals, nonhuman others, and the Earth need to be rekindled and reestablished. Stenberg notes that in the Chthulucene “mankind is not the pro and/or antagonist of the Earth, but simply one of the players among many others, which relates to Latour’s argument that all entities are actants with their own agency” (2020: 17). Despite some common points with Braidotti’s work, Haraway ironically distances herself from posthumanism: “We are humus, not Homo, not anthropos; we are compost, not posthuman” (2016: 55). Still, in line with Braidotti’s *Zoe*, Haraway’s stressed the fact that humans need to undergo a process of “becoming-with”, that is to live in symbiosis with the other actants on the Earth, for no actant can thrive alone if it does

not replenish its connections with the other ones (2016: 12). Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble" then becomes a metaphor for humanity's arduous task in the time of the Chthulucene: "living and dying in response-ability on a damaged earth" (2016: 2) means that we need to find a way to live in symbiosis with nonhuman others, Earth included, and at the same time recognize our responsibility as well as our role as *only* one actant among many.

## 4. Critical dystopias as social commentary

Having provided a theoretical background, I will now turn to my analysis of *The Broken Earth* trilogy and *Parable of the Sower*. In Chapter 4, I will base my reflections on the theories introduced in Ch. 2 and portray Jemisin's and Butler's novels as critical dystopias that depict climate change and (post)apocalyptic scenarios to provide a social commentary and showcase new possibilities for different, more equitable and diverse futures. The following chapter will be divided into three subchapters: the first one will deal with the representation of society in the novels, which closely resembles Stephanie LeMenager's concept of the "everyday Anthropocene"; the second subchapter will focus on the role of religion and knowledge in times of uncertainty and climate destruction through a comparative analysis of Jemisin's stonelore and Butler's *Earthseed*; finally, the last one will describe the intertwining of oppression, slavery and race together with climate change discourse.

### 4.1. Butler's and Jemisin's depiction of the "everyday Anthropocene"

Both Butler's and Jemisin's novels offer a chilling but also realistic representation of what it feels like to live through a climate crisis (or in its aftermaths), i.e. what Stephanie LeMenager calls the "everyday Anthropocene" (2017: 223). In "Climate Change and the Struggle for Genre", LeMenager describes it as the "present tense, lived time of the Anthropocene" (223) and analyses "what it means to live, day by day, through climate shift and the economical and sociological injuries that underwrite it" (225). Incidentally, LeMenager appoints Butler's *Parable* series as the first novel that clearly depicted in narrative form such a scenario, even though it was published way before the introduction of the term cli-fi (223). Quoting one of Butler's notes regarding her writing process for the *Parable* novels, Streeby notes that Butler's depiction of society in *Parable of the Sower* is that of a society that "did not prepare itself to deal with Global warming, because the warming isn't just an incident [...], it is an ongoing trend – boring, lasting, deadly – that feed[s] on itself" (2018: 93). This description also fits perfectly with the society in ruins because of frequent Fifth Seasons that Jemisin portrays in her novels, although in *The Broken Earth* trilogy the Iowa-born author complicates the temporal structure of apocalypses, so they become "simultaneously a past cataclysm, a regular occurrence, and a looming future" (Hurley 2018: 468-9).

In both Jemisin's and Butler's novels, humanity tries to grapple with the impending and all-encompassing issue of the climate crisis by dividing itself into little walled communities – a representation which is quite common in other cli-fi/dystopian narratives, such as Margaret Atwood's

*Oryx and Crake*. In the Stillness, such communities are known as “comms” and are described as “the smallest sociopolitical unit of the Imperial governance system, generally corresponding to one city or town” (*TSS*: 348). Inside the walls of comms, inhabitants are divided into “use-castes”, categories which signal one’s person abilities or talents. Of the twenty official use-castes, only seven are commonly used in the Sanze Empire: Strongback, Resistant, Innovator, Breeder, Lorist, Hunter, Leader. Each use-caste indicates different functions as well duties that individuals must attain to, which may be different during Seasons and in times in between. Use-castes are also important because as they are assigned they become part of the name of a person, which is usually made up of three different names: First Name, Use Name, and Comm Name. For example, Essun’s name as she was living as an undercover orogene in the comm of Tirimo was Essun Strongback Tirimo. In Butler’s representation of a 2020s ravaged California, similar conditions have arisen. Americans – but one could also guess people in other parts of the world – have created communities protected by walls in order to protect themselves from outside dangers. Lauren herself lives in one of those communities, which in her diary entries she describes as a besieged “cul-de-sac community” (*POTS*: 10), “an island surrounded by sharks” (44). For her and the other children that have only known life inside the gated community, it is the only imaginable way to live, so much that she affirms that it must be “crazy to live without a wall to protect you” (14). Similarly to the division in use-castes in Jemisin’s trilogy, in Butler’s novel people inside a gated community are also entrusted with different functions according to their abilities and inclinations, although with a much less strict separation compared to Jemisin’s books. Lauren for example is a teacher for all the young children of the community which cannot go to school outside; her father and other strong men are assigned guard duties establishing “a regular neighbourhood watch” (63) to keep watch over the community and keep the poor “sharks” outside of it. But, as Jerry Philipps points out, such walled communities are “a fantasy of escape” (2002: 302), doomed from the beginning, as Lauren realises at one point: “We’ll die in here unless we get busy now and work out ways to survive” (*POTS*: 55). One other common aspect are what Jemisin calls “runny sacks”, that is “a small, easily portable cache of supplies most people keep in their homes in case of shakes or other emergencies (*TFS*: 463)”; similarly, Butler’s protagonist hides a bag containing useful supplies and tools, such as seeds, food, knives, and clothes in order to be prepared if her community were to be attacked or if she wanted to escape and live on the outside world on herself. It does in fact come in handy to Lauren when her whole community is burned to the ground, and she is left to roam the deserted ruins of 2020s California with Harry and Zahra, the only two other survivors. Clearly, runny sacks become really valuable objects in worlds such as Jemisin’s Stillness and Butler’s waterless California, where uncertainty reigns and one never knows when natural phenomena or dangerous people could strike next.

Jemisin and Butler both also further analyse how humanity responds to catastrophe and societal collapse, thus giving insights into the fundamental debate about human nature which Rebecca Solnit discusses in her work *A Paradise Built in Hell* (2009): whether humans mostly behave in a selfish way or whether “the prevalent human nature in disaster is resilient, resourceful, generous, emphatic, and brave” (2009: 13). Analysing disaster rhetoric, Janet Fiskio (2021) provides examples of two different narratives in relation to climate change: the “lifeboat”, which posits that humans only act according to their own interests, and the “collective”, which sees humanity as courageous and altruistic in times of disaster. Butler and Jemisin provide examples of both narratives that constitute this dichotomous human response to disasters, problematizing them and showcasing how both often coexist in times of acute danger. During an interview with Jessica Hurley, Jemisin explains the meaning behind the trilogy: the books are “Black female power fantasy”, where in real situations of disaster people cooperate to survive, look out for each other, and “altruism and community are what help you get through” (470.). The whole journeys Lauren and Essun go through in the novels can be seen as a representation of the intersections between the lifeboat and collective narratives: both women need to think first of themselves in order to survive, be it disguising themselves as a man or hiding their orogeny, but they cannot make it alone. In both cases, it is only through the shared and mutual help with other groups of people that the two women can navigate life in the everyday Anthropocene and have any hope to survive the current disaster. Deeply hindered by her hyperempathy, Lauren needs to find a way to balance between tending to her own needs and being wary of people: “we don’t have to hurt anyone unless they push us into it, but we don’t dare let our guard down. We can’t trust people” (*POTS*: 179). Despite the grim reality of the world, “it’s not so bad if people stick together” (180): learning to trust others in spite of danger and diffidence proves vital for Lauren and her community’s own survival, allowing them to reach Acorn and found the first Earthseed community, even with casualties and many obstacles along the way. Similarly, Essun starts her journey looking for her daughter alone, but soon is joined in her voyage by Hoa, whom she later discovers to be a stone eater. Despite her initial unwillingness to travel together, his child-like shape brings out her maternal instincts and she accepts him as a travel companion, although without trusting him at first. When he saves her from a kirkhusa attack by turning the wild animal into stone, she wonders about his abilities, having “no idea what to do with a monster who can turn living things into statuary” (*TFS*: 275), but still offers him her hand to continue the journey together: “He stares at it, then at you, and there is something in his gaze that is entirely human, and [...] makes you feel a little more human, too, amazingly” (275). Then, overcoming her wariness of strangers and building a community to travel together proves vital not only for Essun’s survival but also for her as a person,

allowing her to recognize humanity both in herself and in others which were deemed by the Sanze empire as less human.

After all, despite being horrible in itself, “disaster is sometimes a door back into paradise, the paradise at least in which we are who we hope to be, do the work we desire, and are each our sister’s and brother’s keeper” (Solnit 2009: 5). Precisely there lies the power of critical dystopias such as Butler’s and Jemisin’s: by portraying an apocalyptic world that has already fallen into climate madness, they serve as a social reminder and warning of the dangers of not acting now that we still can, and at the same time through the arduous journeys of the protagonists of the novels they provide us with a glimpse of hope. In the end, “it is the disruptive power of disaster that matters here, the ability of disasters to topple old order and open new possibilities” (Solnit 2009: 25): it is up to us to decide how to behave after disasters, and whether we aim at rebuilding everything up as it once was or if we will strive toward a different future, opening different possibilities for humanity. Or, as Jemisin put it: “the end of the world is happening even as we speak. The question becomes whether it’s the kind of world that needs to go.” (Hurley 2017: 477).

#### **4.2. The role of knowledge: stonelore vs. Earthseed**

In difficult times, when certainties fall and fear spreads, humans often turn to religion to find solace and a guide to live by. Being set in postapocalyptic worlds, where society has fallen and the world is in utter chaos, Butler’s and Jemisin’s series both provide an example of the importance of religion and knowledge in times when uncertainty and doubt rule the roost. For Mathias Nilges, a religion is a “strong set of rules that have ultimate truth-value for the believer, a system of explaining and mapping one’s environment” (2009: 1338). Following this definition, the need for a set of rules and values that explains the devastating and frightening changes which humanity has to navigate through in the climate crisis becomes evident, and it then comes as no surprise that both African American authors have thoroughly incorporated this aspect in their respective series.

In Jemisin’s novels, humanity’s knowledge about itself, its history and the world is transmitted through the generations thanks to a sort of written and oral folklore, known as *stonelore*. Throughout the chapters of the novel, more is revealed about the world of the Stillness thanks to stonelore entries (some of which are known as Tablets) that disclose details about the history of the Sanze Empire, the Use-caste division of people, or also the three humanoid subspecies. Teachings from stonelore range from indications about how to better prepare for and survive a Season – “Keep green land within the walls, advises stonelore” (*TFS*: 13) –, to behaviour conducts that are to be preferred – “*Honor in*

*safety, survival under threat*. Better a living coward than a dead hero” (348). Stonelore then can be seen as a collection of teachings, pieces of advice or admonitions which are meant to offer an example of a morally sound and effective way to navigate life in the Stillness. In this sense, its function closely resembles that of religions and their sacred texts: they offer a moral guide to live life by. Unfortunately, just like other religious texts in our world, it has been misused and changed in order to fit the ruling class’s interests. While Syenite holds stonelore for something unchanging and everlasting, Alabaster warns her that it has actually been changed widely: “Stonelore changes all the time, Syenite. [...] Every civilization adds to it; parts that don’t matter to the people of the time are forgotten” (117). One way through which stonelore is misused is to justify the oppression of orogenes: they are often referred to as tools, or monsters, and the official designation is that they are lesser human: “any degree of orogenic ability must be assumed to negate its corresponding personhood. They are rightfully to be held and regarded as an inferior and dependent species” (*TOG*: 221). The belief that orogenes do not qualify as humans is so engrained even in the orogenes’ own minds through the training at Fulcrum that Syenite herself believes that she is not human. To which the ten-ringer answers: “Yes. We. Are. [...] I don’t give a shit what the something-something council of big important farts decreed, or how the geomests classify things, or any of that. That we’re not human is just the lie they tell themselves so they don’t have to feel bad about how they treat us” (*TFS*: 305-306).

The role of religion is quite different in *Parable of the Sower*. In Butler’s novel, the protagonist Lauren Olamina develops a kind of personal religion, which she calls *Earthseed*, based on a series of teachings that she writes in a diary. The fundamental principle of Earthseed is:

“All that you touch  
You Change.  
All that you Change  
Changes you.  
The only lasting truth  
Is Change.  
God Is change”. (*POTS*: 8)

Per se Earthseed is a quite obscure religion, and its teaching can be seen as a development and blending of various principles from other religions, from Christianity to Islam to Taoism. Lauren starts to develop the fundamental principles of Earthseed because of her disillusion towards Christianity, the religion she practised and which her father, a pastor, taught her since she was a child. Incongruences between its principles and the way supposed good Christians acted brought her to estrangement and disillusionment, followed by the need to start something new all by herself: “There

has to be more that we can do, a better destiny we can shape. Another place. Another way. Something!” (*POTS*: 76). Olamina describes Earthseed as a “God-is-Change belief system” (77), which “deals with ongoing reality, not with supernatural authority figures. Worship is no good without action. With action, it’s only useful if it steadies you, focuses your efforts, eases your mind” (218). It is then a series of principles which should regulate humanity’s behaviour, and ideally change the world for the better. As is the case with most religious texts, the main function of Earthseed is then to be a guiding light, a path to follow for the people of the world, the *seeds* of the Earth, towards the stars: “We are all Godseed, but no more or less so than any other aspect of the universe, Godseed is all there is—all that Changes. Earthseed is all that spreads Earthlife to new earths. The universe is Godseed. Only we are Earthseed. And the Destiny of Earthseed is to take root among the stars” (77). That is in fact Lauren’s greatest aspiration in life: through Earthseed she hopes to convince humanity that their place is among the stars, something which will constitute the main narrative of the second *Parable* novel, *Parable of the Talents*. For the most part of *POTS*, though, Lauren keeps her diary entries and Earthseed for herself, but, after having to reveal her (dis)ability to her companions in travel, Harry and Zahra – the only other two survivors of her walled community – she also begins to share with them her Earthseed teachings. Though their success is little at first, step by step Lauren manages to convince her friends more and more, and the other travel companions that they meet along the way follow suit. The first seeds of Earthseed have been planted, and its roots have started to grow. Mathias Nilges points out that through Earthseed Lauren attempts to “form a new community, based upon a new understanding of individual and collective existence, which is designed to accept the fact that the post-apocalyptic world surrounding them lacks any form of permanence or stability” (2009: 1332). When the group arrives at Bankole’s place, despite the saddening discovery of the ash and bones of Bankole’s family and the ruins of the house, Lauren and her group have finally found a place where they can start to grow a community. Following the teachings of Earthseed, Lauren and her group of like-minded people found Acorn, the foundation for a new era of humanity, characterised by empathy, collaboration, celebration of diversity and acceptance of different sexual orientations. Miller describes Butler’s fictions as “salvation history”, i.e. fictional places where new notions of community and identity are under construction and sees the portrayal of Lauren’s Earthseed community as an “inspiring utopian political myth that prizes diversity but avoids a fragmented identity politics” (1998: 349).

On the one hand, both stonelore and Earthseed have a similar function in Jemisin’s and Butler’s novels: they are dogmas that serve the purpose of showcasing humanity how to behave, and how to go about their actions. Their function is the same that religions have in our world: they provide humans with an explanation of the world, and at the same time regulate humanity’s behaviour. On

the other hand, the main difference between the two is that stonelore has been repurposed by the ruling class of the Sanze empire to justify their mistreatment of orogenes, while Earthseed expresses a “worldview based on the notion of a radical reciprocity” and puts “emphasis on the crossing of boundaries and openness toward others and the world” (356). In early writings for *Parable of the Sower*, Lauren’s father, Lawrence, worked as a professor at a local community college, which was then taken over by a corporation. He then decided to resign because he would be required to teach a false version of history, pointing at Asian and African people and their disregard for the environment as the main cause of global warming and the catastrophe that followed suit (Streeby 2018: 96). In this sense, education would have come to play a similar role to the lore children learn in creches (comm schools) and the Fulcrum’s teachings in Jemisin’s novels: it would have been repurposed to brainwash children into thinking what people in power wanted them to think, and it turn propel a widespread hate and diffidence towards minorities which is clearly visible in the Sanzed people’s attitude towards orogenes. In what Madhu Dubey calls a defining feature of “black anti-science fiction”, Afrofuturist tales often entail critiques of the use of scientific practice for its “exploitation of black bodies and scientific theory for validating claims of black racial inferiority” (34). I will now precisely turn to the portrayal of oppression, race, and their intertwinements with slavery in Butler’s and Jemisin’s novels.

### **4.3. Intertwining oppression, race, and slavery**

Jemisin’s trilogy and Butler’s *Parable* novels focus on the themes of ecological collapse and climate change, which Butler predicted would be major problems in the near future and understood as “global forces whose damage would not be confined to a single part of the world though she also imagined that the worst of their impact would be unequally distributed and would hit the poor hardest” (Streeby 2018: 84). As such, both *The Broken Earth* and *Parable* series intertwine their discussion of climate change and the consequent disaster with issues of race, gender, and class. As Fiskio points out, “modes of utopia and apocalypse are mutually constituting and depend upon the control and exclusion of certain kind of bodies” (2020: 23); thus science fiction – and especially cli-fi – has the capacity to open a space to reconfigure the dominant narratives of climate change discourse.

As previously mentioned, in Jemisin’s trilogy stonelore is used as tool to justify the oppression of orogenes, which are even considered not human: “[they] kill us because they’ve got stonelore telling them at every turn that we’re born evil—some kind of agents of Father Earth, monsters that barely qualify as human” (*TFS*: 185). As noted by Alastair Iles, “throughout the books, we see systematic denigration of orogenes as a dangerous, treacherous racial group in need of constant supervision” (2019: 16). This is particularly evident through the brainwashing of Damaya: for example, her

Guardian Schaffa tells her the story of Misalem and Semsena, respectively an orogene who tried to kill the king and the hero who stopped him. It is later revealed by Alabaster that Misalem did not act for the sake of it but sought revenge for the killing of his family. But obviously “roggas<sup>8</sup> have no right to get angry, to want justice and protect what they love” (*TFS*: 418). The apex of the systemic oppression of the orogenes relies in the monstrous, life-depriving treatment of those stationed at nodes. Syenite and Alabaster reach one of those stations and find a corpse inside. It is thus described:

the body in the node maintainer’s chair is smack, and naked. Thin, its limbs atrophied. Hairless. There are things—tubes and pipes and things, she has no words for them— going into the stick-arms, down the goggle-throat, across the narrow crotch. There’s a flexible bag on the corpse’s belly, attached to its belly somehow, and it’s full of—ugh. The bag needs to be changed. (*TFS*: 139)

The treatment of orogenes in the novels can then clearly be connected to the treatment of Black people in our own world, and to slavery as well. Although Jemisin said during an interview that *TFS* does not directly reference slavery (see Hurley 2017), she recalls working on her novels during protests for the killing of an innocent Black man at Ferguson and wanting to express her anger at the present situation through her writing. Kathleen Murphey underlines that Jemisin captures the inhumanity of slavery, especially because she unties the connection between the systematic oppression of orogenes – and before them, of tuners – and race: “light and dark skinned people are enslavers and enslaved, so racism falls away from the dynamic or rationale for the enslavers treatment of the enslaved, highlighting its inhumanity even further” (2018: 110). In *The Broken Earth* trilogy, oppression is determined by orogeny, which in a way can be then linked to how race serves as a discriminatory factor in our world, also because it is a characteristic people are simply born with, and something which they cannot change: as Alabaster tells Syenite “It isn’t your fault [...]. There’s nothing you did to be born like this, nothing your parents did. Don’t be angry with them, or with yourself” (*TFS*: 63). Discrimination and the consequent slavery that orogenes are subjected to in the novels is further complicated because Jemisin turns around the traditional dichotomy powerful/enslavers vs. powerless/enslaved (Grifka-Wander 2019): orogenes are the one who possess Earth-controlling powers and abilities, while stills have no magical ability whatsoever. But through the breeding and training system that constitutes the Fulcrum, stills have been able to subjugate orogenes, or as Schaffa puts it

to perpetuate [x] their enslavements of themselves, under Old Sanze. The Fulcrum was nominally run by orogenes, [...] chosen carefully, so that they would obey. So that they knew their place. Given a

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<sup>8</sup> “Rogga” is a derogatory term used by stills to refer to orogenes, which clearly echoes the n-word Black people are referred to in a discriminatory way by white people.

choice between death and the possibility of acceptance, they were desperate, and we used that. We made them desperate (*TOG*: 270).

As was the case in real-world slavery, it is “the elaborate dehumanization of the enslaved by the enslavers that allowed this to happen” (Murphey 2018: 110). Using lies – stonelore in Jemisin’s novels –, sexual coercion, breeding, derogatory names, separating children from parents, and reducing people to tools – e.g. Alabaster is exploited for his abilities as a breeder, powerful but unstable orogenes are stationed barely kept alive at nodes –, such a system of torture and death was able to be built, maintained, and kept running for the longest time.

Slavery is also commonly referenced in many of Butler’s novels, with *Kindred* being the most prominent example as the novel is a time travel book which is modelled on slave narratives. The approach to oppression, race and slavery still plays a big role in *POTS*, but, as Madhu Dubey points out discussing Butler’s works,

The last of Butler’s novels to contain direct and extended allusions to the fugitive-slave narrative, *Parable* marks a departure from *Kindred* and *Wild Seed* in its orientation toward the future rather than the past: the novel depicts a twenty-first-century dystopian society marked by widespread debt bondage to multinational corporations. Inserting repeated references to antebellum slavery into this futurist dystopia, Butler exploits the distinctive temporality of extrapolative science fiction in order to capture the novel forms of inequality spawned by global capitalism (2013: 357).

Furthermore, just like Jemisin, Butler reworks the neo-slave narrative by focusing on a range of abusive practices not reducible to race, and “even when race does operate as a central axis of inequality in Butler’s novels of enslavement, it far exceed the binary (black-white) logic” (346). The most direct reference to slavery in the *Parable* series is represented by a sort of debt slavery to multinational corporations, which take over entire towns and then invite people to work for them in what closely resembles past examples of indenture or slavery. Upon the creation of one such towns, Olivar, and the news that some people from her neighbourhood are considering the idea of moving there, Lauren observes that “something new is beginning– or perhaps something old and nasty is reviving” (*POTS*: 116). This comment clearly creates a connection between old and new forms of slavery, through which Butler highlights both the historical starting point as well as futuristic forms of slavery/servitude which base their roots in present-day practices. As Jim Miller points out, Butler’s depiction of slavery in the *Parable* series aims at “achieving historical consciousness by way of the future rather than the past” (1998: 347). Although slavery has *de facto* been abolished, many people in today’s world are still working under conditions which barely differ from those of slaves; similarly, in the *Parable* series version of California new forms of

*legal* slavery take hold, also because "The workers are more throwaways than slaves. . . . They're easy to replace - thousands of jobless for ever" (325). As mentioned before, and similarly to Jemisin's novels, race as the cause for oppression and enslavement is also problematized. The runaway slaves which join Lauren's group may be sort of like "the crew of a modern underground railroad" (293), but by depicting the struggles of migrants of varied ethnicities and races that come together to form a safe community and heaven, Butler presses the case that the only possible opposition to dominant forces relies in multiracial alliance (Dubey 2013). Through the motto of "Embrace diversity/ Or be destroyed" (*POTS*: 194), Lauren's Earthseed community then reflects a "postmodern politics of difference" (Dubey 2013: 359) and is constituted by people who were once part of "the freeway crowd [which] is a heterogenous mass—black and white, Asian and Latin" (*POTS*: 173), all affected by discrimination and oppression in different ways, but who must find a way to put their differences aside for the well-being of Acorn.

## 5. A re-vision of the relationship with the Earth

In this chapter I will now turn to analyse the aspects of Jemisin's and Butler's books which are related to the posthuman section of this thesis and focus on how they portray a re-vision of the relationship with the Earth, as well as the shift in human-nonhuman boundaries brought about by the climate crisis. The first subchapter will focus on Jemisin's re-vision of a motherly Earth figure in favour of an irate, hateful and manly Earth; the second one will present a comparative analysis of Lauren's hyperempathy and Essun's orogeny as abilities that complicate the concept of humanity and showcase our ties to the planet and life itself; finally, the last part will analyse stone eaters in Jemisin's novels through a posthuman lens and draw comparisons with early versions of Butler's *Parable* series.

### 5.1. Nonhuman agency: Father Earth

One of the most visionary and revolutionary aspects of *The Broken Earth* trilogy is Jemisin's groundbreaking revision of the typical representation of the Earth. It is quite common in media, literature, and films to confer the Earth peculiarities and characteristics closely related to the female gender: it is normally referred to as "Mother Earth", and is often portrayed as a loving, caring, (green) woman with long hair and a motherly attitude (see Rigby 2018 or Beth et Sprinkle 2016<sup>9</sup>). This representation has been starkly criticised by feminist scholars, who have denounced this supposed correlation between the Earth and women, clearly a false patriarchal concept, which in turn has also produced harmful stereotypes for women – they supposedly are closer to nature, their role as mothers fulfils their natural attitude, and so on (see Rigby 2018 or Merchant 1980). Ecofeminists also claim that there is a correlation, "some kind of inherent or structural connection between the patriarchal domination of women [...] and the ecologically destructive exploitation of the earth" (Rigby 2018: 144). Jemisin does not specifically address this misrepresentation, but instead completely turns the point of view around and represents the Earth in her novels as a raging, angry and vengeful He: *Father Earth*. Throughout the novels, Father Earth is portrayed as a sort of sentient figure, and there are frequent references to his actions both in dialogues between characters and in *stonelore*: "The people became what Father Earth needed, and then more than He needed. Then we turned on Him, and He has burned with hatred for us ever since" (*TFS*: 109). Although this portrayal may seem overstated at first, in the last novel, *The Stone Sky*, Father Earth is *actually* represented as a both living and sentient

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<sup>9</sup> Beth and Sprinkle (2016) offer another interesting perspective on the relationship between humanity and the Earth: they refer to the Earth as their "lover" and to themselves as "ecosexual".

figure, with his own interests and will. This representation of the Earth can be seen as a nod to Bruno Latour's work on the regained agency of the Earth: the French author notes that "to have goals is one essential part of what it is to be an agent" (2014: 10) and adds that now that the Earth has regained its agency, it is necessary to realize the "entangled agencies" we are experiencing more and more every day. The "entangled agencies" mentioned by Latour, which also reference the interspecies entanglement mentioned by Haraway (2016), are visually and concretely represented in the last of the novels of the trilogy: while progressively discovering more about her powers and abilities, Nassun – Essun's daughter – starts to see "silver", filaments and connections between all things on the planet, something which Steel – a stone eater – calls *magic*. This kind of energy of the Earth is

the stuff underneath orogeny, which is made by things that live or once lived. This silver deep within Father Earth wends between the mountainous fragments of his substance in exactly the same way that they twine among the cells of living, breathing things. And that is because *a planet* is a living, breathing thing; she knows this now with the certainty of instinct. All the stories about Father Earth being alive are real. (*TSS*: 209)

This representation of the Earth and of the interconnections among its very parts echoes Lovelock's representation of Gaia as a complex system, as well as Margulis claim that humans are "symbionts on a symbiotic planet" (1998: 5) and Haraway's description of the Earth as "sympoietic" (2016: 33), meaning that nothing is made on its own and everything is interdependent. In the novels, all subspecies of humanity are made of the "silver" as well all animals, plants, and the Earth itself; this, paired with the ability of many lifeforms to manipulate the Earth, clearly points out the interdependence between each actant.

But the Earth as a synergetic network is broken, because "all actants are refusing to agree to be part of that network despite the impossibility of existing outside of it" (Stenberg 2020: 26). Humans and the Earth are part of the same system, but both parts are refusing to recognize each other's role: on the one hand, humans have distanced themselves from the Earth and, following Latour's theories, have "deanimated" the sentient Earth debunking references to its agency as lore or myths; on the other hand, Father Earth himself also has "in its blind rage created a false dichotomy between it and humanity" (Stenberg 2020: 23), failing to see the differences among the subspecies of humans and considering every one of them as his "little enemies". This depiction of humans as enemies of the Earth, epitome of Lovelock's and Latour's representations of the vengeful Gaia, only comes into play

in *The Obelisk Gate*, when Essun removes a corestone<sup>10</sup> from a Guardian, accidentally sparking a conversation with the Earth himself:

Oh

No

there is hate and

*we all do what we have to do*

there is anger and

*ah; hello, little enemy (TOG: 201)*

The hatred that Father Earth feels towards humanity is motivated by the loss of his only child, the moon: as is discovered in the third book, at the height of their hubris, humans in Syl Analgist tried to put lashes on the planet and ended up fending off the moon. That caused the anger of the Earth, and a complete destruction of the harmony between the planet and the life on it. It was at that point that those “tuners”<sup>11</sup> that dared too much, and who caused the Shattering – among them Hoa – were punished and transformed into stone eaters; it was also then that the first of a long series of Fifth Seasons started, as a sort of revenge on the part of the Earth towards those creatures, whom he had loved and cared for, that had turned on him for their greedy interests. The apex of the revenge enacted by the planet against humanity is the punishment that humans face when they die: their souls are dragged to the Earth’s core, “a silver sun underground, so bright that she [Nassun] must squint [...], so powerful with magic” (*TSS*: 399), where “the Earth eats everything they were. This is only fair, it reasons—coldly, with an anger that still shudders up from the depths to crack the world’s skin and touch off Season after Season” (400). In this sense, Jemisin’s depiction of a vengeful Earth which is actually trying to kill off humanity for good nods to Stenger’s updated Gaia hypothesis (2015), which states that the Earth is actually trying to erase humanity from its surface, and at the same time represents an inversion of Margulis’ (1998) conviction that the Earth substantially takes care of life on it.

The relationship between the Earth and its (human) inhabitants is clearly past the breaking point and has come to be a constant confrontation basically aimed at mutual destruction, which sees no actual winners: humans suffer, die, but then hold on Fifth Season after Fifth Season, each time building

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<sup>10</sup> Corestones are stones implanted in the back of the head of Guardians that allow Father Earth to control their will and make them act according to his own interests.

<sup>11</sup> “Tuners” is the name used by the people of Syl Analgist to refer to Hoa and its fellow companions, engineered individuals created to control the Obelisks who had powers comparable, although much more developed, to those of orogenes.

everything up again; the Earth is still childless and angry. Interestingly enough, as noted also by Stenberg (2020), humans are the only animals who do not become-with the Earth and evolve to adapt to the conditions of living during a Fifth Season. Kirkhusa start to eat meat, boilbugs reproduce much more frequently; yet humans – stone eaters, orogenes and stills alike – do not. They merely struggle to survive amidst the terrible conditions which Father Earth’s wrath puts them through. Expressions such as “Uncaring earth”, “Earth burn it”, “rusting Earth”, “what in fire-under-Earth” are consistently scattered throughout the novels, thus giving a sense of the terrible vision that humans have of the Earth: they also consider him as an enemy, for his anger has nearly completely annihilated them over and over again, and therefore use his name in expressions of stupor, bewilderment, or anger. This constant struggle for survival on a planet that has turned on humans can be seen as a not so far-fetched metaphor for Man-induced climate change, and the consequences of it. Similarly to what we are doing to our planet now, the humans who inhabited the Stillness “began to do horrible things to Father Earth. They poisoned waters beyond even his ability to cleanse and killed much of the other life that lived on his surface. They drilled through the crust of his skin, past the blood of his mantle, to get at the sweet marrow of his bones” (*TFS*: 327). Here Jemisin is consistent with her portrayal of the Earth as an actual sentient being, and even in the aforementioned quote she refers to the Earth’s crust as “skin”, to the lava in his mantle as his “blood” and to (presumably) petrol as the “sweet marrow of his bones” (327). It is notable though that “[t]he Earth did not start this cycle of hostilities, it did not steal the Moon, it did not burrow into anyone else’s skin and snatch bitch of its still-living flesh to keep as trophies and tools” (*TSS*: 401): it was humanity that started the war against the Earth by trying too hard to control him, another actant which possesses his own will and cannot be easily restrained.

Jemisin’s representation and complication of the figure of the Earth clearly points toward the need of a new way of harmonious living on and with the planet. In her novels, orogenes have a peculiar relationship with Father Earth, and are most apt to describe this much needed change of course for humanity. In the next chapter, I will compare their role and representation in *The Broken Earth* trilogy with Butler’s envisioning of the hyperempathy that affects Lauren in *Parable of the Sower*.

## **5.2. Towards a sympoietic co-existence: orogeny vs. hyperempathy**

As previously mentioned various times throughout this thesis, both main characters in Jemisin’s and Butler’s books possess some kind of power which differentiates them from the rest. In *The Broken Earth* trilogy, Essun possesses orogeny, which allows her to manipulate kinetic energy and use it as a source of power. In the *Parable* series, Lauren has a condition known as hyperempathy, which

allows her to share other people's pain and pleasure. Both of these "powers" indicate a re-vision of the role of humanity in the era of the Anthropocene and are tools for the respective authors to complicate the notion of what it means to be human and at the same time offer a glimpse of new possibilities for a more "entangled" way of living – as both Haraway and Latour posit. In this sense, they allow us to take "seriously the geopolitical unfoldings on our planet while also rethinking our relations to and with it precisely as relations" (Zylinska 2018: 52).

In the Stillness, orogenes are in a more symbiotic relationship with the Earth compared to the rest of society, and their ability to mentally "go into the Earth" and use kinetic energy from it as a source of power demonstrate that they are intrinsically entwined and inherently tied with it, in a state very close to Haraway's "becoming-with" (Stenberg 2020). Their interconnectedness with nonhuman others becomes even clearer throughout the trilogy as it is revealed that they are not only able to command kinetic energy but can also use magic (see Ch. 5.1) and use the literal entanglements between all matter to prompt their powers. The deeper connection to the Earth can also be observed through the silver which permeates everything on the planet: "you notice that an orogene's silver is both brighter and less complex than that of the plants and insects around it. The same ... er, *amount*, if that word applies, if not *capacity* or *potential* or *aliveness*, but not the same design" (*TSS*: 106). Apart from depicting the entangled agencies between all matter in a very similar way to Braidotti's Zoe, the silver which flows through orogenes and stone eaters and the planet itself offers the possibility of realizing the position of the human subject as not separate from the world, but instead acknowledging the prior existence of relations between matter (Zylinska 2018). The notion of the inferiority of orogenes, which positions them officially as subhuman, also plays a role in their displacement from society and closer relation to Nature, and at the same time intensifies their grief for their shattered existence tied to the Earth. Just like becoming-with is crucial in the time of the Chthulucene, Haraway also stresses the importance of "grieving-with": it "is a path to understanding entangled shared living and dying; human beings must grieve *with*, because we are in and of this fabric of undoing." (2016: 39). The parallels between Essun's and the Earth's grief are impendent, as both have lost children; both are also handling grief the wrong way by focusing on retribution rather than reconciliation (Stenberg 2020). Grief then becomes a sort of unifier between actants, but both Essun and the Earth initially fail to completely grasp the need for sympoiesis despite being part of an interconnected network. Through the trilogy, Essun has to unlearn what she knows about herself (not human) and the Earth (not alive) in order to realize that just like in Haraway's response-ability and sympoiesis, all actants are wrapped together in a network. Becoming-with the Earth becomes for her much more than a metaphor when she literally starts to turn to stone, but also because of the changes she undergoes thanks to her relationships (especially the one with Hoa): "After all, a person is herself, and others. Relationships

chisel the final shape of one's being. I am me, and you." (*TOG*: 11). It is by embracing diversity and starting to accept the definitive blurring of traditional binaries that she is able to recognize her nonhuman status, and gain her own agency, as well as seeing the long-lost agency of the other actants.

Grief and negative emotions in general also play a big part in Butler's novel, as Lauren is *physically* able to perceive other people's pain. Butler's depiction of Lauren's hyperempathy, combined with the Earthseed teachings she believes in, showcase that "we are all interrelated and responsible for each other", and portrays a "worldview based on the notion of radical reciprocity" (Miller 1998: 356). This in turn proves to be very similar to what Jemisin aims to do with the division of humanity into three subspecies with different grades of connection to the Earth, and thus both Jemisin's orogeny and Butler's hyperempathy can be interpreted as a re-vision in a posthuman sense of the role of humanity in a fast-changing world in the era of the Anthropocene. Haraway's concept of staying with the trouble comes handy in this situation: Lauren's and Essun's powers represent a chance for the two main characters to open to new possibilities of living on a damaged Earth, and to recognize the responsibility of humanity as just one actant among many.

Furthermore, Lauren's hyperempathy is the perfect representation of what Anna Tsing refers to as "precarity". For Anna Tsing, precarity is

the condition of being vulnerable to others. Unpredictable encounters transform us; we are not in control, even of ourselves. Unable to rely on a stable structure of community, we are thrown into shifting assemblages, which remake us as well as our others. We can't rely on the status quo; everything is in flux, including our ability to survive. Thinking through precarity changes social analysis. [...] Indeterminacy, the unplanned nature of time, is frightening, but thinking through precarity makes it evident that indeterminacy also makes life possible. (2015: 20)

Lauren's hyperempathy becomes for her at the same time both an ability and a disability because it hinders her in a collapsed society where pain is everywhere. Lauren's life in Butler's California is precarious in Tsing's sense, as she is literally vulnerable to others, and is changed through her encounters, until that Change propels her to try a new way of living based on mutual understanding and embracing diversity. Analysing hyperempathy as a catalyst of Tsing's precarity helps to depict a scenario where being vulnerable to others is not enough, though; it is also necessary to recognize the entanglement with others, and one's own responsibility (Zylinska 2018), in a way which very much echoes Haraway's concept of "staying with the trouble", and also proposes the need to recognize the entanglements with human and nonhuman others as both Latour (2014) and Haraway (2016) emphasize.

Although surely the comparison with Jemisin makes Butler appear to have a more humanist approach to the issues of the Anthropocene<sup>12</sup>, hyperempathy is not limited to connections to human bodies. When Lauren and a group from the community venture outside of Robledo for a shooting session, they encounter a seemingly dead dog. Upon seeing it, Lauren realises that it is still alive: “I saw its bloody wounds as it twisted. I bit my tongue as the pain I knew it must feel became my pain. What to do? Keep walking? I couldn’t” (*POTS*: 45). She then decides to kill it, because she knows that if not she will be overwhelmed by its pain: “With my right hand, I drew the Smith & Wesson, aimed, and shot the beautiful dog through its head. I felt the impact of the bullet as a hard, solid blow—something beyond pain. Then I felt the dog die.” (45). The dog’s death lingers with Lauren, and even as she walks away she is “still not quite free of the dog I had killed. I had felt it die, and yet I had not died. I had felt its pain as though it were a human being. I had felt its life flare and go out, and I was still alive” (46). Its death becomes an act of mercy as much for it as for Lauren, and the violence of the scene is translated into an exchange of affect between bodies (Leong 2016). Observing the scene with Haraway’s conception of entanglement in the Chthulucene, Lauren’s feelings point out that hyperempathy is an ability that allows Lauren to overcome species hierarchy and embrace her interconnectedness with nonhuman others. Encouraging more ethical approaches to difference, Lauren’s hyperempathy also announces the need for a radical break with our attachments to the body, in the scope of post- and nonhuman turns (Leong 2016), and when read with Tsing’s concept of precarity in mind encourages “humans to embrace cross-species coexistence as an ethical way of being in the world” (Zylinska 2018).

Apart from the scene with the dog, though, Butler’s *Parable* series does not dedicate much attention to animals, lacking the critique to species hierarchy appointed by Braidotti as characteristic of posthuman feminism. Similarly, despite her revolutionary approach to the figure of the Earth and the entangled agencies among human and nonhuman others, animals also play a very small role in Jemisin’s trilogy. But her envisioning of humanoid subspecies more or less connected to the Earth still blurs the boundaries between human and nonhuman others, in this case the planet itself, in line with what Madhu describes as a trend in women writer’s works: “blur[ring] the boundaries between human and animal in order to explore and affirm women’s difference from masculinist notions of science and culture defined in opposition to nonhuman nature” (33). What both series *do* incorporate from Braidotti’s view of posthuman feminism is their critique of the ideal of Man: both series have as protagonists Black women with powers, a feat which is definitely quite rare in literature, let alone

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<sup>12</sup> It is to note here that *POTS* is arguably Butler’s least posthuman book. Other novels such as *Wild Seed* (1980), *Fledgling* (2005), and the *Lilith’s Brood* trilogy (originally known as the *Xenogenesis* trilogy) present many more discussions of (non)human boundaries and showcase Butler’s position in the posthuman debate much more clearly.

in science fiction (Spillers 2008). During an interview, Jemisin underlined the importance of this choice, feeling that in fiction some characters are treated more harshly than others, and that readers have more difficulty empathizing with women or people of colour, who are usually held to higher standards (Hurley 2017). This is also a testament to the uncomplete critical approach to the issues of the Anthropocene in both Jemisin's and Butler's novels: although they both present – especially Jemisin – evident and articulate critiques of humanism, capitalism, and anthropocentrism, they also end up giving back to the human its central position, failing to completely rid themselves of their humanist instances and to fully embrace posthumanism. Speaking of which, I will now turn to analyse stone eaters in Jemisin's novels as precisely a representation of failed posthumans and will also draw comparisons with Butler's original plans for her *Parable* series.

### **5.3. Stone eaters as failed “mutualists”**

Although orogenes have a strong relation with the Earth, the humanoid subspecies which most evidently encompasses Braidotti's concept of “becoming-earth” and Haraway's “becoming-with” are stone eaters. Stone eaters are described as a “rarely seen sentient humanoid species whose flesh, hair, etc., resembles stone” (*TOG*: 343). If on the one hand orogenes have the ability to sense the Earth and can metaphorically go into it to reach for the energy that powers them, stone eaters literally can travel through it. In many instances throughout the novels, stone eaters appear and disappear at will just by merging with the Earth and moving underground through it. They can also bring people with them, if they touch each other, like when Hoa, Essun and a group of people from Castrima travel from the Stillness to Warrant in a final, desperate effort to find Nassun. This in turn blurs the lines between what is considered flesh and what is not, and the stone eaters can be seen as an “extreme metaphor for showing the absurdity of binary boundaries already introduced through the orogenes” (Stenberg 2020: 46). Stone eaters have truly undergone a process of becoming-earth, and their mere existence singles them out as posthuman in the sense Braidotti gives to the term, i.e. they serve as a literal representation of the re-visioned relationship between human and nonhuman others (in this case the Earth). Their process of becoming-with the Earth has not been a peaceful one, though, and their transformation to what Haraway would call “human beings [...] with and of the earth” (2016: 55) is the consequence of the wrath of the Earth: when people in Syl Analgist tried to put chains on the Earth through the Plutonic Engine and use it to power their cities through his very essence (what comes to be known as silver, or magic, in the trilogy), the Earth stroke back. And in doing so, it transformed those tuners responsible for trying to tame its energy into stone eaters:

[the Earth] looks upon human beings and sees short-lived, fragile creatures, puzzlingly detached in substance and awareness from the planet on which their lives depend, who do not understand the harm they tried to do—perhaps *because* they are so short-lived and fragile and detached. And so it chose for us what seemed, to it, a punishment leavened with meaning: It made us part of it. In my wire chair, I screamed as wave upon wave of alchemy worked over me, changing my flesh into raw, living, solidified magic that looks like stone” (*TSS*: 292)

Humans back then – just like humans in present-day Stillness – had mistakenly withdrawn the agency from the Earth, had deanimated it in a Latourian sense, and therefore did not see the harm they were causing, nor could they foresee the possibility of reaction of an actant they falsely believed passive.

The existence of stone eaters further complicates what is considered human in the novel, and at the same time showcases the need for a sympoietic existence, as Haraway puts it, among each and every actant. Both stone eaters and orogenes are considered lesser human by stills, so much that even between orogenes there is the common misconception that stone eaters are not human. But they were, and still are, human, and both Essun and Alabaster start to recognize them as such only through their shared experience with a stone eater as a travel companion, respectively with Hoa and Antimony. In a posthuman sense, Stenberg (2020) sees this as a clear indication of the blurred boundaries of what makes a human, and also of the notion that humanity is a category to belong to in itself. At one point, when Hoa finally drops his child-like appearance and reveals himself to Essun in his true stone eater form, the following conversation ensues:

“Which was the lie? [...] Your human shape, or this?”

“Both have been true at different times”

“Ah, yes. Alabaster said all of you were human. Once, anyway.”

There is a moment of silence. “Are you human?”

At this, you cannot help but laugh once. “Officially? No.”

“Never mind what others think. What do you feel yourself to be?”

“Human.”

“Then so am I.”

He stands steaming between the halves of a giant rock from which he just hatched.

“Uh, not anymore.”

“Should I take your word for that? Or listen to what I feel myself to be?” (*TOG*: 240)

This exchange clearly showcases how arbitrary the notion of humanity proves to be in the trilogy, but at the same time it perpetuates an anthropocentric worldview, where both stone eaters and orogenes ardently desire to be considered, and to consider themselves, as human (Stenberg 2020). In this aspect, Jemisin’s trilogy proves to be not disruptive of the status quo, as both subspecies still consider

their human aspect and the connected binarism human-nonhuman important, instead of embracing their nonhumanity.

Butler's novel surely presents less opportunities for the exploration of the boundaries of what it means to be human in a posthuman sense, but throughout her life the American author assumed positions regarding the human-nonhuman debate which align her with Jemisin's work, and her deep understanding of the interdependence and necessary co-existence of humans with life on Earth would position Butler in line with posthuman scholars such as Braidotti or Haraway (see Ch.3). Analysing Butler's archive of clippings and research, Shelley Streeby (2018) notes how Butler acknowledged the peculiar position of humanity upon the Earth, symbionts who have become 'parasites', destroying the environment, and, more generally, life on Earth. In spite of that, Butler maintained her landmark utopian ideals and hopes in the face of disaster, with an approach that can be easily compared with Rebecca Solnit's conceptualization of "hope in the dark" (2004): she still held hope that we humans could become "mutualists— symbionts who truly partner the earth, benefiting it as it benefits us" (Streeby 2018: 71). Butler's concept of "mutualists" works really well for Jemisin's stone eaters as well: they can be regarded as failed mutualists, or, as Stenberg (2020) calls them, "failed posthumans", for no matter their interconnected and sympoietic relationship with the Earth and their becoming *literally* part of it, they still cannot escape the anthropocentric worldview and embrace their nonhumanity to truly become partners of the Earth. In early versions of the first *Parable* novel, Butler imagined humanity being at a crossroad for what concerns their handling of a dying planet: they could either learn to live in symbiosis with it or kill it and die with it (Streeby 2018: 79). This two options are also the main goals of the different factions of stone eaters in *The Broken Earth* trilogy: Hoa's side wants to "[re-]impose equilibrium on the Earth-Moon system" (*TOG*: 151) to appease Father Earth's wrath in the hope of ending all Seasons, while Steel's faction aims to use the Moon to permanently turn all of humanity into stone eaters. The fact that different stone eaters have different goals underlines firstly the agency of every actant – as both Haraway and Latour have strived to make clear in their respective bodies of work – and at the same time portrays them as individuals, not a homogenous mass of nonhumans (in the negative sense attributed to it by people of the Stillness), but, as Hoa puts it, people: "“Not all of us want the same thing. Some like things as they are. Some even want to make the world better... though not all agree on what that means.” Instantly his posture changes—hands out, palms up, shoulders lifted in a *What can you do?* gesture. ‘We’re people’” (*TOG*: 248). The struggle between these two opposite positions characterises much of Nassun's and Essun's journeys in the last book of the trilogy, culminating in the sacrifice of the latter and in Nassun's change of sides: instead of shoving the Moon away and using its power to turn all of humanity into stone eaters, she gives back to the Earth his long-lost child and puts an end to the feud

with the planet. It is only thanks to the prolonged experience of getting to know each other (Nassun travels with Steel and Essun with Hoa), and the shared “more-than human yet not officially human status” (Stenberg 2020: 51) of orogenes and stone eaters that they become aware of being part of an interconnected system with the Earth. This, and the realization of the need of establishing a sympoietic coexistence with all other actants are the elements which in the end make them able to see the Earth as another equal actant, and in turn save humanity as a whole. Original plans for the continuation of the *Parable* series even saw Butler speculating about writing the final book in the series focusing on a group of nonhumans who have developed from humanity after its colonization of the stars (Streeby 2018: 80); this picture closely resembles the representation of stone eaters in Jemisin’s novels as they are (mistakenly) considered by the others humanoid subspecies basically as nonhuman others.

## Conclusion

Through a close reading of Butler's *Parable of the Sower* and Jemisin's *The Broken Earth* trilogy, the aim of this thesis was to analyse with a comparative perspective how the two series portray the issue of climate change, and the shift in human-nonhuman boundaries that comes with it. In the first chapter I provided a general introduction to the authors and the novels objects of analysis in this thesis, describing their role as Black science fiction women writers and providing a summary of the main plot points of the four novels. In the second chapter I then proceeded to lay the foundation for my analysis by explaining the history and development of climate fiction and ecocriticism, providing the main critiques of the term Anthropocene, and highlighting the power of speculative fiction – and, in this specific case, of Afrofuturism – in providing readers with new possibilities of imagining both our present world and its future. In the third chapter I provided the theoretical background for the second main research theme of this thesis, i.e. posthuman theories. Starting with Braidotti's fundamental work *The Posthuman*, I then described theories that complicate the relationship between humanity and nonhuman others with a focus on the Earth, such as Lovelock's and Margulis' Gaia, and Braidotti's Zoe. I finished the chapter by focusing on Latour's fundamental work on the agency of the Earth and on Haraway's Chthulucene and her concept of "staying with the trouble". In the fourth chapter I provided my analysis of the novels, firstly through the theoretical perspective introduced in Chapter Two. By dividing this section in three subchapters, I analysed different aspects of the novel in relation to climate change: their depiction of the uncertainty of what LeMenager calls the "everyday Anthropocene"; the role that religion and knowledge play in the respective series through a comparative analysis of stonelore and Earthseed; and the way in which both authors complicate the depiction of oppression, race, and slavery in times of climate destruction. Chapter Five was then devoted to the analysis of the novels under a posthuman lens: firstly, I analysed Jemisin's groundbreaking revision of a motherly Earth as an angry and vengeful Father Earth; then, I compared the portrayal of orogeny in *TBE* trilogy and that of hyperempathy in *POTS*, as both aptly showcase new ethical possibilities for humanity in the light of the shift of human and nonhuman boundaries; finally, I offered an interpretation of stone eaters in Jemisin's trilogy as failed posthumans, and referenced Butler's early workings on her *Parable* series as an appropriate comparison.

In the end, both Jemisin's novels and Butler's can be interpreted as an attempt at providing alternative ways of dealing with life in the Anthropocene, or more specifically with what Butler called "The Burn", i.e. a "period in history when old ways of life were dying as the climate changed" (Streeby, 2018: 98). Essun's and Nassun's journeys on the one hand, and the formation of Lauren's Earthseed community on the other then become journeys for the whole of humanity towards Change. Although

“life in capitalist ruins” (Tsing 2015) is the gruesome reality the main characters of both series have to navigate, the societal assets and hierarchies of the respective worlds are not the only possible option in a postapocalyptic scenario: Jemisin showcases alternatives ways of living in the Stillness through the comms of Meov and Castrima – which put orogenes in charge and embraced their interconnected relationship with the Earth –, and also ends the trilogy with humanity and the Earth having cleared their feud; Lauren’s Earthseed community becomes the first seed of a new worldview based on radical reciprocity, diversity and openness. Thus, I argue that both Jemisin’s trilogy and Butler’s novel end on a, if not hopeful, at least open note. Mind you, in both cases the world is long from being safe or at peace. Humanity may have appeased Father Earth by giving it back its long-lost child, but harmony and a symbiotic co-existence among the different subspecies and nonhuman others are still a long way to go. Lauren has founded her community of like-minded people, but the challenges that Acorn will have to face have just started. But even in the darkest of days, it is pivotal not to lose hope. As unmistakable examples of Baccolini’s and Moylan’s critical dystopias (2013), both series allow readers and protagonists alike to hope by resisting closure, and their ambiguous, open endings maintain the utopian impulse *within* the work. Sulnit’s “hope in the dark” pairs here with Haraway’s “staying with the trouble”: even in the everyday Anthropocene of the Stillness and in Butler’s 2020s waterless California, there is still hope to re-vision human and nonhuman boundaries, and finally be able to establish a symbiotic relationship with the Earth. Whether this proves to be a reality, or will only remain just a dream, is up to the people. Fixing the *Broken Earth* is impossible and would not solve the issues that lay at the basis of the Anthropocene: what humanity can do is to aim at building “‘good-enough’ worlds, where ‘good-enough’ is always imperfect and under revision” (Tsing 2015: 255). The feminist response to the apocalyptic tone of male-authored Anthropocene fiction becomes then that of a “feminist counterapocalypse”, as Zylinska (2018) calls it, which is characterised by a re-vision of the relations between the human subject and the rest of matter and the realization that the Earth is not arranged to our likings. But it must also be marked by the recognition of the precarity – in Tsing’s sense – of our present time and of our own entanglements and responsibilities on a dying Earth. In order to imagine such a future, as far-fetched and utopistic as it may seem at times, literature comes into play and provides us with stories that showcase that a new world *is* possible, we *can* create it. But we need to find the courage to act, as Jemisin reminds us at the very end of *The Stone Sky*: “Don’t be patient. Don’t ever be. This is the way a new world begins” (TSS: 339).

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