

ESSAY

Anthropocene Fantasy and Infrastructures of Exploitation

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You could see it for miles off, a pale blue line across the northern horizon . . . vanishing into the far distance, immense and unbroken. *This is the end of the world*, it seemed to say.

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The Wall of Westeros, the “largest structure ever built by the hands of man,” overshadows the fantasy landscape of George R. R. Martin’s series *A Song of Ice and Fire*. Seven hundred feet tall and over ten thousand years old, the ice-covered Wall appears to mark the literal and symbolic limit of human dominion. Ostensibly designed to protect humanity from the threat of climate apocalypse, this massive piece of infrastructure prompts characters to speculate on its real function. If to the idealistic Jon Snow the Wall manifests a communal response to the onset of a centuries-long Winter, to the cynical Tyrion Lannister it is essentially “useless” except as a concretization of state power (Martin, *Game* 154). From the first novel in *A Song of Ice and Fire*, readers are thus alerted to infrastructure’s role as a conveyer of symbolic as well as pragmatic meanings. Frustrated fans of Martin’s novels might also note the unfulfilled narrative function of the Wall—like an Antarctic ice shelf about to cleave, or an ecological version of Chekhov’s gun, the still unbroken barrier augurs a climax that, as of book 5 in the series, has yet to arrive. This early description of the Wall also alludes to another infrastructure looming in the background: that of the fantasy genre, with its sprawling multivolume format. If the Wall invites Martin’s characters to consider the extent to which such infrastructure might contribute to a response to climate

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change, we might ask the same question about the affordances of the fantasy novel.¹

As consolidated by American publishing, the genre of epic fantasy aspires to macroscale narrative.² Its basic unit is the trilogy rather than the stand-alone novel; its plots embrace massive time-scales and geographic expanses; it narrates the agencies of human and nonhuman characters alike. These characteristics would seem to make epic fantasy an obvious genre to consider when examining the “peculiar forms of resistance that climate change presents” to the realist novel (Ghosh 9). In recent years scholars have argued for the relevance of speculative genres such as science fiction (Heise) and the weird (Marshall) to Anthropocene discourse, but they have shown significantly less interest in fantasy.³ Some of this reluctance may stem from Darko Suvin’s much-contested dismissal of fantasy as a “sub-literature of mystification,” one whose commitment to the “interposition of anti-cognitive laws into the empirical environment” impedes progressive politics (376). Ironically, it is this constitutive construction of narratives around a deliberate “departure from consensus reality” (Hume 23) that, in the eyes of practitioners such as China Miéville, lends fantasy to progressive politics. Miéville claims that in asking the reader to disregard cultural prescriptions concerning what is and is not possible, the fantasy form, more than science fiction, asks the reader “to think the potentialities in the real.” This invitation to rethink the accepted truisms and ontologies of the real world, we contend, positions fantasy as an ideal literary form through which to imagine new ecological relations.

Nevertheless, as Suvin’s criticism suggests, the fantasy form has carried with it significant ideological challenges for environmentally minded writers. These challenges can be traced to the commercial epic fantasy genre established in the 1970s and 1980s by Ballantine’s Del Rey imprint, which sought to replicate the success of J. R. R. Tolkien’s *Lord of the Rings* by transmuting Tolkien’s idiosyncratic sagas into a profitable formula. Del Rey’s novels centered on heroes completing quests in magical secondary worlds; they featured lengthy narratives and nonhuman actors but remained steadfastly

“nostalgic, conservative, pastoral, and optimistic” (Hartwell 5). Del Rey’s Tolkienesque fantasies thus serve as exemplary products of the “mass cultural genre system” (Reider 1), created, and modified, by the interactions of publishers, writers, and readers increasingly trained in its narrative conventions. Following Brian Larkin’s observation that infrastructures can also be considered “semiotic and aesthetic vehicles oriented to addressees” (328–29), we might think of the epic fantasy genre as a type of immaterial infrastructure. Like many material infrastructures, this genre established conventions of practice but could also be modified and repurposed by its users. In later decades, environmentally minded writers of fantasy would engage with the ideological problems baked into the Del Rey model and avail themselves of its affordances to tackle concerns we now associate with the Anthropocene.

Particularly problematic was commercial fantasy’s mystification of energy, which appears in its representation of both infrastructure and magic. While characters in Tolkienesque fantasies are prone to noticing infrastructure, the structures they contemplate typically appear as sublime set pieces rather than as material products of an ongoing history of labor.⁴ Manifesting the glories of societies past and present, this infrastructure causes no environmental damage; it is an unquestioned part of the pastoral landscape needing defense. In her satirical guide to fantasy tropes, Diana Wynne Jones points out the contours of the fossil fuel economy visible beneath these pastoral landscapes: the magic that builds infrastructures and empowers characters is frequently represented as existing “like liquid in a reservoir” to be tapped by a user who “simply attaches a sort of magical hose and draws off what she/he needs.” Similarly, Jones observes, fantasy infrastructure often appears to be shaped more by modern petroculture than by a medieval past—for example, heroes encounter ancient magical roads that are “clearly built to allow a traffic in horse-drawn carts, four lanes in each direction, traveling at seventy miles per hour” (116). Jones’s joking equation of magic with gasoline captures a real feature of post-1970s fantasy

fiction, which, even as it may look with suspicion on the mechanical trappings of industry, tends to imagine magic users as having access to a seemingly inexhaustible supply of energy that can speed travel, build infrastructure, reshape physical environments, and grant the user important forms of agency within the narrative.⁵ In such texts, fossil fuel is not only *like* magic, it *is* magic. Instead of disavowing the “indispensability of mineral energy” (Wenzel 12) by assigning fossil fuels to the realm of the banal, epic fantasy as popularized by Del Rey made energy spectacular, even as it disavowed its costs. Readers of such fantasies can revel in a climatic restoration of a pastoral world in which the benefits of fossil fuels nevertheless remain available—a world in which degrowth entails an enhancement, rather than a reduction, of human agency.

In recent decades, however, we have seen the rise of a counterhegemonic form of fantasy literature that confronts the implicit politics of these tropes in response to evolving understandings of the environment. This emergent narrative form, which we call Anthropocene fantasy, usually features a disruption of planetary ecological systems attributed to a historical attempt to extend human dominion over the natural world.⁶ Beginning, arguably, with Ursula K. Le Guin’s 1990 revision of her classic *Earthsea Trilogy* (1968–72), Anthropocene fantasies go beyond the mere representation of climate change or environmental crisis to grapple with the ethics of inhabiting an era in which a sentient species functions as a geophysical agent.⁷ Capitalizing on the fantasy form’s preoccupation with cultural rather than technological change, these speculative works address the ideological changes necessary for a successful response to anthropogenic crisis. In such novels, the “unthought known” (Yaeger 16) of infrastructure becomes an object of characters’ inquiry as they examine the problematic separation of nature and society encoded in materialized structures of transportation and administration.⁸ As characters acknowledge the relations materialized in the infrastructure they use—relations that often reproduce what Jason W. Moore has described as capitalism’s “commodity-oriented appropriation of unpaid

work / energy” (63)—they are forced to respond to their own implication in their world’s Anthropocene. In their most ambitious incarnations, Anthropocene fantasies question the universalizing *anthropos* of this epoch, drawing readers’ attention to inequitable distributions of agency and privilege and to the role of colonialism and extractivism in creating the environmental issues, and the material infrastructures, with which characters grapple.⁹

This essay focuses on the intertwined representation of ecology and infrastructure in three recent examples of multivolume Anthropocene fantasy series. In addition to Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire* (1991–), which has been widely recognized as an allegory of climate change denial,¹⁰ we explore Robin Hobb’s epic fantasy series *Realm of the Elderlings* (1995–2017) and N. K. Jemisin’s Hugo Award-winning trilogy *The Broken Earth* (2015–17). The various strategies Martin, Hobb, and Jemisin use to represent ecological threats also reflect their effort to rethink the fantasy novel’s conventional emphasis on individualistic human agency. In *Song* the series’ thematic assertion that humans ignore the slow violence of climate change at their peril is repeatedly shunted to the side by political intrigue, family drama, and scenes of spectacular, human-centered, swift violence. The more the plots of the novels privilege political intrigue, the less they address strategies for productive engagement with environmental threats to human existence. In contrast, Hobb’s *Realm* and Jemisin’s *Broken Earth* organize their multivolume plots around characters who consciously struggle with the legacy of a destructive “age of man” that has sought to bring “the wildness and disorder of the earth under [human] dominion” (Hobb, *Fool’s Fate* 355). Instead of fighting to maintain this age, the protagonists of these series choose to sacrifice their magically and infrastructurally enhanced agencies to establish a different set of ecological relationships. Ultimately, all three series use the tropes of epic fantasy to suggest responses to the Anthropocene through their characters’ changing relationships to infrastructure and to the nonhuman. In so doing, we contend, they self-consciously

signal the repurposing of the macroscale fantasy form for Anthropocene ecological thinking.

A Song of Ice and Fire and the Infrastructure of Division

Conceived as a rejoinder to Tolkienesque idealism, Martin's series *A Song of Ice and Fire* has dominated the media landscape in recent years with what many, including Martin himself, have characterized as a climate change allegory. As Despina Kakoudaki notes of the HBO adaptation, *Game of Thrones*, "the humans' reluctance to join forces in Westeros parallels real-world debates about climate change, from willful blindness to evidence of climate change to reckless abuse of precious natural resources, and the general adherence to local rather than global political aims" (43). Martin's novels reinforce this theme at the level of form. Unusually for 1990s fantasy narratives, the novels in *Song* use multiple limited points of view, each chapter following an individual character who, because of their limited perspective, fails to fully apprehend the threat facing their world. The reader has a better understanding of the big picture than do any of the characters and knows that climate change represents a more catastrophic threat to the human race than do the political conflicts that command the characters' attention. Moreover, although Martin's characters are highly agentic, the reader recognizes that their actions are largely ineffectual in combating the apocalyptic danger that threatens their world. The divisions among human beings and among regions reflected in the separation of narratives work against the salvation of the human species.

Martin's novels are also conscious that an ideological division between the human and the nonhuman undermines any effective response to climate change. In *Song* this division is perhaps most memorably manifested in the Wall, a sublime structure whose costs are emphasized in the narrative. Built following the violation of a treaty with nonhuman entities that would have prevented the destruction of forests, the Wall protects the domain of those designated as human in Westeros from that of wild nature. It keeps out not only the inhuman Others

but also the Free Folk, the northern human peoples who are made more vulnerable by the Wall's existence.¹¹ By organizing the world into civilized and uncivilized—human and animal—realms, the Wall reinforces the divisions among humans expressed in the invention of racial differences between the people of Westeros and the Free Folk.¹² Over the course of *Song*, Martin undermines this racialized division by showing the fundamental humanity of the indigenized northern peoples.¹³ To date, the Wall stands as a monument to a deeper division between the human and the nonhuman, or more fundamentally, to a cultural need to erect divisions as a strategy to justify the exercise of power. While Martin's series is still incomplete, the trajectory of the novels gives us a sense of how *Song* imagines these divisions might be overcome. Jon Snow, the most traditionally heroic of Martin's protagonists, becomes an advocate for the Free Folk, recognizing that their common humanity makes them natural allies in the war against the Winter-allied Others. In Martin's formulation, this recognition of human commonality depends on the radical othering of an evil force that literalizes otherness in its very name. One binary is substituted for another: the dichotomy between the Free Folk and the people of Westeros is set aside to underscore the fundamental importance of the division between the human and the truly nonhuman.

Similarly, the Others enable *A Song of Ice and Fire* to displace responsibility for climate change and fetishize individual human agency. At this point in the series, the Others remain the world's sole geophysical agents.¹⁴ In a fantasy world that is surprisingly short on magic, the Others are among the few beings that wield magic, bringing wintery cold in their wake and transforming dead humans into a zombified collective of nonhuman agents. Opposition to the Others thus represents a defense rather than a reimagining of human agency. Resistance to the Others also does not entail any diminishment in magic-enhanced agency on the part of Martin's protagonists. There is no sign as yet that Daenerys must sacrifice her flamethrower-like dragons in order to forestall climate change; indeed, we are encouraged to think of the dragons

as necessary in the coming battle against Winter. Likewise, Bran, the character whose pursuit of “green” magic most lends itself to the undoing of the human/nonhuman binary, continues to view the natural world as a location of extractable resources. When, in *A Dance with Dragons*, Bran learns that he may have to sacrifice his mobility in order to wield this forest magic, he looks on this idea with “dread” (455). Instead, he uses green magic to enhance his mobility by taking over other bodies. Not only does Bran take over his dire-wolf’s body “as eas[ily] as slipping on a pair of breeches” (450), but he does the same to the mentally disabled Hodor, even in the face of the man’s resistance. “Like a dog who has had all the fight whipped out of him,” we are told, Hodor would now “curl up and hide whenever Bran reached out for him” (454). As this animal imagery implies, the pursuit of green magic leads to an assertion of human dominance over the nonhuman—in part because Bran is unable to imagine how he can function as a hero if he cannot “run and climb and fight” (455). At a formal level, Martin appears to be struggling with a similar issue. The diminishing space allotted in the novels to sections where Bran contemplates nonhuman perspectives indicates the challenge of integrating a story line that reimagines human agency into a human-centered, relationship-driven narrative.¹⁵

While *A Song of Ice and Fire* acknowledges the importance of cultural change in responding to environmental crisis, in its externalization of climate threat and in its centering of extractive human agency, the series risks reinscribing many of the tropes it wishes to challenge. Whether Martin can plot a new course as he concludes *Song* remains to be seen. In the meantime, his struggle to imagine a way out of anthropogenic apocalypse underscores more generally the difficulty of reimagining human agency within the form of the novel, given that form’s strong association with the invention of the modern agential subject.¹⁶ And yet Anthropocene fantasies such as those of Hobb and Jemisin have leveraged fantasy tropes to reinvent the humanist subject and address the novel’s difficulty in representing collaborative forms of character agency.

Realm of the Elderlings and Infrastructures of Complicity

Hobb’s *Realm of the Elderlings* series (1995–2017) focuses on characters negotiating the ethics of human-nonhuman relations in a world whose ecology was irrevocably altered by a past attempt to establish human dominance over the environment. Hobb’s novels, which first appeared in the 1990s and were marketed using Martin’s praise for the series, serve as an intermediary step between the anthropogenic world of *A Song of Ice and Fire* and that of Jemisin’s trilogy. Hobb uses the fantasy series form and representations of infrastructure to reinforce her novels’ theme of anthropogenic environmental destruction, and her characters, unlike Martin’s, are compelled to make drastic revisions to their conception of their world. The novels’ environmental theme is expressed in the aim of the central quest on which Hobb’s characters find themselves: the restoration of dragons to the world. This goal will not “benefit” humanity, explains the Fool, Hobb’s visionary disruptor of human supremacy:

You have forgotten what it was to share the world with creatures as arrogantly superior as yourselves. You think to arrange the world to your liking. So you map the land and draw lines across it, claiming ownership simply because you can draw a picture of it. The plants that grow and the beasts that rove, you mark as your own, claiming not only what lives today, but what might grow tomorrow, to do with as you please . . . [Dragons] will hold a mirror up to humanity’s selfishness. . . . [reminding humans that] the world does not belong to men. Men belong to the world. (*Fool’s Fate* 52)

This passage articulates a suspicion of sovereign claims to ownership and dominion that we see continued in Jemisin’s fiction. As Kathryn Yusoff, drawing on Édouard Glissant, observes, “the transformation of land into territory” helps create a logic of dispossession that in turn enables slave systems (20), which the Fool plays an active role in dismantling. In this passage the Fool also thinks in terms of *species* agency: it is the restoration of another “arrogant and aggressive species” to the

planet that will force the reevaluation of the human race's claim to dominion. Human agency looks different, then, when another species is capable of overtly contesting human supremacy.

This rejection of idealized human mastery is reproduced in the novels' formal repudiation of the individualistic human protagonist. The Fool is not human, nor can he (or she—the character's gender is fluid, changing from one subseries to another) act directly on the world to realize his plans. Instead, he must mobilize the agency of others. This tendency to share agency appears in multiple novels and in connection with various characters, most notably in the case of the series' main protagonist and the Fool's reluctant human agent, Fitz Farseer. At first, this highly competent magic-user appears to embody the heroic individualism of the typical fantasy novel protagonist. However, the complexity of Fitz's character is suggested by his epithet, Catalyst—that is, one who enables the agencies of others. At crucial points in the series, Fitz acts in a way that triggers or hinders the actions of others, enabling cultural exchanges and social change that would otherwise remain unrealized. As the series develops, Fitz becomes increasingly aware of the cyclical structure of the human conflicts in which he is embroiled and begins to rethink some of his fundamental assumptions about the nature of his world.

The ecological implications of Fitz's shared agency are most apparent in his relationship with the organic nonhuman. Although he is human, Fitz possesses the Wit, a disreputable "beast magic" that allows him to read the thoughts and emotions of animals. Contrary to his culture's assumptions, the Wit gives Fitz no power over animals, and at times puts him at a disadvantage compared with his more anthropocentric peers, as when he is distracted by the suffering of animals in his vicinity. To the consternation of his human companions, his empathic affiliation with the nonhuman leads Fitz to share his agency with animals, most notably with Nighteyes, a wolf who becomes a trusted friend and adviser. Such is the influence of his animal relationships that, even following Nighteyes's death, Fitz finds himself shuttling back

and forth between wolf and human perspectives on ethical problems. While sympathetic to the non-human, Fitz remains complicit in modes of hierarchical thinking that make his decision to end the age of man (an act in which, yet again, Fitz must enable the agency of others) genuinely difficult for him.

The ecological plotline comes to a head in the sixth Farseer novel, in an episode in which Fitz excavates a dormant dragon from a glacier in which it was trapped at the dawn of his world's Anthropocene. As he digs through "the layers in the ice that marked the passing winters," dazed by the scale of the natural history he is uncovering, Fitz remarks, "It occurred to me that we were digging down through time." "Deeper we dug, and deeper, and still," he notes, in a line that puns on the scalar challenges posed by the representation of such history, "saw not one scale of dragon" (*Fool's Fate* 317). In a series preoccupied with archives and buried histories, Fitz's excavation of the glacier is the culmination of several plot threads suggesting the essential unity of human and natural history. Literally and metaphorically uncovering the dawn of the Anthropocene, Fitz succeeds in restoring a crucial ecological balance to the world, albeit at great cost. The instant the dragon is unleashed, Fitz realizes to his horror that he and his fellow humans are now "prey to this far larger predator," which upends his fundamental assumption of the proper "order in the world." The Fool's solution to the problem of the Anthropocene is to assign the entire human species to the same category to which they have comfortably assigned animals and plants—that is, to the category we normally term the *nonhuman*, with all the vulnerabilities that implies. As Fitz grasps "the immense scale on which our actions had reordered the world," he confronts his former dependence on an internalized human/nonhuman binary and recognizes that living in this brave new world will require a drastically revised set of ecological relations (416).

While Hobb's series thinks through the ethics of human-nonhuman relations, it also cuts against the grain of many of the fantasy genre's conventions regarding infrastructure and magic. The restoration

of dragons to the world of Realm of the Elderlings requires that humans change their patterns of trade and consumption, abandoning or restricting their use of magical objects derived from the once dormant, now powerfully agentic dragons. These developments take place alongside the liberation of human slaves in other parts of Hobb's world. If Hobb's protagonists are accustomed to thinking of human slavery as evil and as the province of a foreign Other, they are, nevertheless, reluctant to recognize that they have been complicit, albeit unconsciously, in systems of exploitation of the nonhuman that are not dissimilar to human slavery. Hobb's Anthropocene is thus a complex one that attempts to take stock of the ways in which *species agency* has historically been distributed unevenly, even as her characters are confronted with the fact that their unconsciousness of their participation in exploitative systems does not absolve them of ethical responsibility.

This reevaluation extends to the transportation infrastructures on which the characters have come to rely. In its early novels, Realm of the Elderlings is invested in the idea of infrastructure as an unqualified public good, such that the maintenance of roads and buildings is a recurring concern for its characters. As Fitz is educated into his role as a tool of the state, he is also taught to recognize how infrastructures, as Larkin argues, "are the means by which a state proffers . . . representations to its citizens and asks them to take those representations as social facts" (335). As the series evolves, however, its ecological preoccupations inspire a reevaluation of hitherto uninterrogated infrastructure. In the middle trilogy of the series, the pillars, devices of magical teleportation that Fitz had been using cavalierly, are discovered to be dangerous, taking "something from you, each time you use it" (*Fool's Fate* 569). While the costs incurred by these devices may seem abstract and appear to be borne only by their users, the human characters' growing sense of the larger problems attending magical agency leads them to restrict their use of these transportation systems (powered by fossil-fuel-like matter) because of the seemingly invisible ecological harms they cause.

Taking up the trope of magic systems with a cost imagined by many contemporary fantasy novels, Hobb's infrastructure participates in the series' Anthropocene narrative, representing concretized structures of human behavior, the use of which must be revised or abandoned in an era of new ecological thought. This refusal to naturalize ecological exploitation is a fundamental principle of works of Anthropocene fantasy. The mainstream novel's account of the modern subject has generally been predicated on a separation of nature and culture that privileges the human. Human exceptionalism, that is, becomes foundational to the kinds of deep analyses of human social relations that form the essence of the literary novel. This dynamic results in a closed circuit: the foundations and generic affordances of the mainstream novel interfere with its ability to engage with the infrastructures of human exceptionalism that underpin the form's insistence on the primacy of the human.¹⁷ Works of Anthropocene fantasy, by contrast, capitalize on the epic fantasy genre's long-standing interest in nonhuman histories and perspectives to challenge human exceptionalism and offer a metaphorical history of human decisions that have produced the species' alienation from nature and the ensuing crises.

The Broken Earth and Infrastructures of Exploitation

Much like Hobb's series, Jemisin's Broken Earth trilogy (2015–17) posits a fantasy Anthropocene that can be traced back to an empire's attempt to dominate the nonhuman. As an African American writer, however, Jemisin is also engaged in theorizing what Yusoff, whose own thinking has been deeply informed by her reading of Jemisin, terms the history of slavery's "nonconsensual collaboration with inhuman materiality" and its "weaponized . . . redistribution of energy around the globe through the flesh of black bodies" (24). In her Broken Earth trilogy, the category of the nonhuman thus includes what we would recognize as exploited human populations such as the orogenes, people who, through magic, manipulate the seismic energies directed against humanity in "Seasons" (cyclical periods of geological upheaval) by a vengeful nature

personified as Father Earth. Even though they serve as crucial mediators between humans and a hostile environment, orogenes are explicitly described as less than human. The novels follow the life of Essun, an enslaved orogene, as she discovers the underlying social and material history of her world. Ultimately, Essun, through her own death and transformation, ushers in a revolutionary new order built on a reimagined relationship to the planet. As with Martin's and Hobb's series, the narrative structure of the novels supplements the series' account of human agency: the narrator who frames the series is a nonhuman, and the plotline of each novel is structured around multiple limited points of view that are used to thematic effect. Jemisin's trilogy, which features fractured narration, distributed agencies, an Anthropocene-like origin story, and a world transformed by cataclysmic environmental events, thus pushes against the conventions of epic fantasy at multiple levels, including in its representation of infrastructure.¹⁸

Jemisin's trilogy offers a fantasy version of the Anthropocene, whose millennia-spanning history the protagonist eventually learns. As Essun gains a better understanding of that history, she is motivated to reform both her own practices and those of the world. In the concluding novel we learn that the violent Seasons that plague the planet can be traced to an attempt to maximize human dominance over the nonhuman. Over forty thousand years ago, we are told, one race of humans decided to enslave another, harvesting their magic and life force to power a "Plutonic Engine" that would drill into the earth's mantle to harvest the presumably endless supply of "magic" buried underground. Thereafter, the empire of the enslavers would "feed upon the life of the planet itself, forever" (*Stone Sky* 322). To aid in this project, the empire created two classes of nonhumans—the mutant human orogenes and the humanoid stone eaters—to wield the energies necessary to operate this infrastructure. The orogenes and stone eaters rebelled, destroying the machine in which they were (in some cases quite literally) enmeshed. Instead of liberating those involved, the destruction of the Plutonic Engine led to a rupture in the relationship between

the planet and those who live on its surface, and it was later used by the empire to justify the formal enslavement of the rebels' descendants. Encountered late in the trilogy, this history of attempted human dominion, violence, and insurrection allows the reader to reinterpret the protagonist's earlier moments of rebellion along with her encounters with infrastructure, which can now be read as a material history of extractivism.

Instead of being pushed into the background of Jemisin's trilogy, infrastructure, literally and as metaphor, rises to the foreground. Orogenes function as engineers maintaining the material infrastructure designed to ensure human survival, repeatedly drawing the reader's attention to the roads, harbors, and power-generating obelisks that occupy the trilogy's central characters. Like Fitz, Essun is initially educated into seeing infrastructure as a social fact proving her state's benevolence and as a tool for survival that her state requires her to maintain. As Essun discovers more about the history and ideological construction of her world, infrastructure projects become crucial metaphors for thinking about structural racism, which itself serves as a kind of infrastructure that undergirds the power relations in which the orogenes are enmeshed and that, unnoticed, frames their sense of self. The novel's characters participate in the repair of the system until they don't, punctuating the trilogy with moments of rebellion when material infrastructures of dwelling, transportation, and energy extraction are shattered, to lethal effect. These shatterings extend to the form of the novel itself, most notably in *The Fifth Season*, the first novel in the trilogy, which is initially presented as a multicharacter narrative but is ultimately revealed to reflect the experiences of a single character, Essun. As our protagonist comes to different understandings of her place in the world, she changes her name, from Damaya to Syenite to Essun, and the novel nominally changes point of view, reflecting how the infrastructures shaping her identity are reformed around her.

To drive the infrastructure point home, each of the books in the trilogy turns on the destruction of a city, which in each case is also directly the result of

the entanglement of the people's structural racism with their antagonistic attitude toward nature. The first of these scenes of urban destruction occurs in *The Fifth Season's* prologue. Alabaster, Essun's orogene mentor and sometime lover, contemplates an imperial city distinguished by its "walls . . . detailing its people's long and brutal history," its lights "powered by the modern marvel of hydroelectricity," and its streets paved "with a smooth, unbroken, and miraculous substance the locals have dubbed asphalt" (*Fifth Season* 2, 2, 3). Jemisin does not obscure her novel's engagement with a fossil fuel economy but draws attention to fantasy's idealization of energy, portraying petroleum-based asphalt as a magical marvel. As Alabaster continues to trace these networks of energy and power across paragraphs, however, the narrative also invites us to contemplate the history "of rape and coercion" that has structured this society and the equally felt, though invisible, presence of Alabaster's "fellow slaves," who make these architectural marvels possible (6, 7). Taking hold of "the humming tapping bustling . . . vastness of the city, and the quieter bedrock beneath it"—that is, by harnessing the various infrastructures that compose the city, including those that are geological—Alabaster destroys the empire (7). In the process he initiates a new Season of destruction that satisfies his fury, but that fundamentally fails to change the conditions faced by the orogenes.

A similar moment occurs when Essun lashes out against racist villagers in the wake of her husband's murder of their infant son. In her grief, Essun destroys her home village with her magic, killing allies and innocent bystanders, including birds, plants, and various other nonhumans, along with her enemies. The narrator's commentary—"uncaring Earth. Look what you've done"—solidifies the thematic connection between Essun, a grieving orogene mother, and the angry Father Earth, whose eruptions have been destroying human civilization for millennia (59). Like the original rebellion and Alabaster's act of destruction, Essun's destruction of her home village is portrayed as a natural response to her experience of racism. However, the text also takes stock of her act's cost in innocent

lives and its inefficacy in addressing the root causes of Essun's problems. These twin moments set up the essential problem that Essun grapples with over the course of the trilogy: echoing the logic of Father Earth's devastating Seasons, the orogenes' explosions of violence fail to change the underlying cultural structures that triggered them. After every explosion, humans re-create a society, mapped on old infrastructures ("dead civ" ruins and artifacts, in the parlance of the novel), that reproduces the systems of exploitation that preceded it. How then can one escape cycles of oppression? How can one solve the problem of the Anthropocene and the extractive capitalist regimes that underpin its instrumentalization of nature and people?

We see Essun coming to grips with this problem over the course of the three books as she seeks a path to a better world. During her first official mission outside the capital, Essun (known at this point as Syenite) travels to Allia, a coastal city that has secured an orogene's services to clear a blockage in their harbor. The coral reef that appears to be the cause of the problem sits on top of a large obstacle that Essun is unable to identify with her orogenic skills. Mystified, she advises Allia's leaders to abandon the city and resettle elsewhere: "Home is people. . . . Home is what you take with you, not what you leave behind." Her audience, however, rejects this definition of community, suggesting instead that community is tied to place and infrastructure. "Moving would mean the loss of our comm's identity," one leader objects, and it "would also mean losing everything we've invested in this location" (226). Hearing this objection from a working-class leader, whose hands "have done their share of everyday labor," Syenite reconsiders: "You can move people easily," she reflects, "but not buildings. Not infrastructure. These things are wealth, and even outside of a Season, wealth means survival" (217, 226). As the comm leader's calloused hands imply, infrastructure can represent not only financial investment but also the stored energies of unacknowledged laborers, including the orogenes who, like Syenite, play an important role in the city's construction and maintenance. Once Syenite recognizes that investment of energy, she accedes to the leaders'

point of view. However, Syenite's subsequent actions remind the reader that this accumulation of capital and infrastructure has occurred at the expense of those designated as nonhuman.

To keep Allia's identity static, Syenite must destroy the reef, continuing and extending the city's dominion over the nonhuman world. In doing so, she becomes aware of the reef itself as infrastructure, actively being built by "creatures [that] grow on the bones of their predecessors" (230). This image of infrastructure as sedimented building over time, shaping the identities of those who build on its "bones," adds resonance to Syenite's subsequent discovery of the object buried beneath the reef. Extracting the object, she discovers it to be an obelisk, an ancient piece of energy infrastructure. Within the obelisk, Syenite sees the body of an enslaved stone eater, a nonhuman person whose torture and subjugation, Syenite realizes to her horror, is "where the power was coming from" (231). In making this discovery, Syenite comes to a new awareness of the long, sedimented history of nonhuman exploitation and of the ways in which physical and social infrastructures continue to shape the civilizations built on the bones of those that came before. This realization in turn leads Syenite to commit her first act of rebellion against the system in which she is enmeshed, resulting in the destruction of another city. When the empire sends an agent to discipline her for her display of power, Syenite turns to the stone eater inside the obelisk for aid and, in the process, accidentally obliterates the city. This nonhuman alliance with the stone eater and the obelisk holds out hope of liberation, and the destruction of Allia temporarily frees Syenite from the empire's control. But this act also comes at the cost of a hundred thousand lives. And, as in the case of the destruction of Essun's home village, it fails to fundamentally alter the racist and anthropocentric attitudes that inform the world.

Attachment to place and capitalist accumulation are twin components of the problem, this episode implies, since in building new infrastructure on top of the old, a society will, like polyps that build a reef, inherit the forms of those who have

gone before them. How to effect change within an entrenched social and political infrastructure of extractivism thus becomes the central question for our protagonist. One possible response to this problem the novels entertain (only to reject) is to isolate oneself from the world. After Allia, Syenite and her mentor relocate to a remote island where, isolated from the rest of the world, orogenes live together in peace. Syenite soon recognizes that secluding themselves on this utopian fantasy island (an obvious allusion to Thomas More's *Utopia*) is not only personally unsatisfying but ethically irresponsible. Alabaster attempts to dissuade her from leaving by arguing that genuine structural change is not possible. He contends that "[t]he world is what it is. Unless you destroy it and start all over, there's no changing it. . . . stop looking for anything better than this" (371). Although Syenite rejects Alabaster's defeatism, she is also frustrated because she has not been able to formulate a plan to enact productive change. As it is, their utopian sojourn ends with the destruction of the island and most of its inhabitants. In a passage that thematically and stylistically echoes Toni Morrison's *Beloved*, Syenite chooses to murder their orogene child rather than risk his enslavement, refusing reproductive participation in the empire's new cycle in an act that shatters her own identity as partner and mother.¹⁹ Once again, Essun finds that her identity as an orogene leads to the destruction of the people and places she calls home. Indeed, she finds herself to be the author of that destruction in her attempts to save herself.

Essun is forced to confront the role that she plays in cycles of violence when she joins Castrima, a comm with an orogene leader who is attempting to forge a revolutionary partnership with nonrogenes. Housed in a gigantic underground geode and dependent on the presence of orogenes to function, Castrima represents a second utopian possibility, albeit one that is more engaged with the world. In this instance, the symbiosis between the machinery that powers the geode's habitation systems (lighting, water, air) and the orogenes' magical abilities signals the potential for infrastructure to serve as a site for new forms of

community. But Essun struggles to adapt to life in this more egalitarian society. Accustomed to an adversarial relationship with authority and to individualistic modes of agency, she flails against Castrima's collaborative mode of governing. Her complicity in reproducing the empire's ideological structures makes it difficult for Essun to work within the constraints of Castrima's social experiment. When Castrima is attacked, she draws power from an obelisk to overwhelm the enemy army without consulting with the comm's leadership, in the process damaging Castrima's infrastructure and rendering the geode uninhabitable. Essun initially defends her choice to act as the individualistic fantasy protagonist, on her own initiative and wielding special abilities, to save her people. In the last book of the trilogy, Castrima's leader offers a key insight that becomes the basis of Essun's final transformation: "You didn't think about any of us while you were using those obelisks, did you? You thought about destroying your enemies. You thought about surviving—but you couldn't get beyond that" (*Stone Sky* 71). As the leader's emphasis on *you* indicates, Essun is still trapped within systems of thinking that perceive agency as a matter of individual possession and its exercise as an expression of power.

Trained from childhood to think of herself as separate and different, Essun yearns for community in the abstract, but has no concrete understanding of what it means to consider the good of the whole. She also cannot seem to imagine what collective agency might look like. This incident forces Essun to recognize the degree to which she has internalized the structural racism that organizes human relations in the empire, which in turn challenges her to rethink her assumptions about agency. Agency, Essun learns, can be exercised only within the contingencies of the social context in which she lives. If she is going to have any hope of remaking her world, Essun must reassess not just her own drive toward individual agency but also the relationship between the social and political infrastructures that shape her culture.

The Broken Earth trilogy transfers our attention from material to metaphorical infrastructures of

culture most emphatically in its conclusion, when Essun tries to find her way out of the violent environmental and social cycles in which she is entangled. Fittingly, she must confront her own daughter Nassun, who, filled with the same kind of rage that once drove Essun, hopes to destroy the planet as a final solution to the oppression of the nonhuman. Essun, who has earlier proved herself capable of murdering her own child in a despairing attempt to escape a cycle, this time adopts a new strategy. Breaking the pattern of agonistic conflict and attempted domination of other beings, she instead turns agency over to the next generation, letting Nassun make her own choice about the planet's future. Essun is willing to alter the cultural narrative in which she is embedded, and this renunciation of individualistic agency ultimately brings about the transformation of the world. Accustomed to confrontation, Nassun is moved by her mother's acquiescence to her will. Instead of following through on the ultimate act of infrastructure destruction by obliterating the planet, Nassun uses the infrastructures of power, in the form of a network of ancient technological artifacts, to reverse some of their previous harms. Fulfilling her mother's wish, Nassun restores the Moon, Earth's lost child, to its orbit, an act that brings to an end the Seasons that have plagued the planet.

Essun's sacrifice at the climax of the Broken Earth trilogy deviates from the usual pattern of epic fantasy in that it involves a protagonist voluntarily handing over her agency to another rather than triumphing in a moment of conflict. In a trilogy in which the protagonist literally wields an individualized form of geophysical agency, Essun's choice has implications for the Anthropocene. By delegating agency to the next generation, even at the cost of her own interests, Essun enacts a version of the climate change response advocated by Stephen M. Gardiner, in which an ethical response to the Anthropocene entails acting on behalf of the generations and peoples most affected by the temporal distribution of its consequences.²⁰ The conclusion of the trilogy, in other words, suggests that the recognition of structural racism, a reckoning with the infrastructures of power, and a

rethinking of a culture's (and the fantasy genre's) fetishization of individual agency are necessary to any attempt to restore the planet. As Amitav Ghosh and Mark Bould have suggested, on a formal level, this is the kind of argument that the realist novel has struggled to articulate. Jemisin is not constrained by the same limits, because the genre of the macroscale fantasy novel affords her a different set of tools.

Jemisin, Hobb, and Martin each focus their macroscale Anthropocene fantasy series on a potentially transformative event through which they explore the interplay among agency, infrastructure, and human exceptionalism. Their contrasting accounts of how the characters in their worlds respond to global threats speak as much to the affordances of the novel as a form as they do to the broader cultural challenges of our present moment. They suggest, to varying degrees, that humanity cannot continue to uphold the primacy of individual agency. In Martin, this argument is presented in the novels' implicit critique of human self-interest and division; at this point in the series, it is uncertain that his outcast characters can effect any kind of positive social change. In Hobb's and Jemisin's work, in contrast, characters' decisions to reimagine agency save their worlds without reinscribing forms of dominion that have perpetuated ecological devastation. These actions in turn rearrange the terms by which the protagonists' societies relate to the nonhuman. Ending the regime of Seasons in *The Broken Earth*, much like the unearthing of the buried dragon in Hobb's series, does not merely represent another revolution in an inevitable cycle but promises to begin a new era.

The reevaluation of agency in these fantasy series takes place alongside the characters' reevaluation of infrastructure. Over the course of Hobb's and Jemisin's series, characters discover that their magical abilities, and hence their extraordinary agential powers, are directly linked to the infrastructures of human exceptionalism in their worlds. Hobb and Jemisin therefore insist that their protagonists must surrender some of their infrastructurally enhanced agency as a precondition of forging new

ecological relationships. For her part, Jemisin has given us a ferocious account of the struggle to disassemble the infrastructure of an entrenched ideological system that has been internalized by all. Metaphorizing infrastructure, Jemisin illuminates the invisible but essential work that ideology does to shape not only relationships among individuals but also the relationship between the human and the nonhuman. Similarly, in the wake of their discoveries regarding infrastructure, Hobb's characters must confront their investment in the human as a privileged category and accept the diminishment of their agentic capabilities if they are to forge a new era of ethical ecological relations. In contrast, in Martin's still-incomplete series the infrastructure of the Wall remains intact, the human remains a privileged category, and the idea that human domination over Westeros ought to be preserved has yet to be truly challenged. The onset of Winter signals a challenge to human dominance, but it has not yet produced a rethinking of the assumptions that underlie such privileged status.

Despite the significant differences between their series' approaches to the planetary threats faced by their protagonists, for Jemisin, Hobb, and Martin the form of the epic fantasy series provides particularly fertile ground for rethinking the challenges posed by the Anthropocene. In each series, these authors repurpose the very qualities that had marked the fantasy novel as a conservative form to generate a potentially radical new vision for their world. The scale of the multivolume series, the genre's traditional engagement with the nonhuman, its investment in spectacular infrastructure, and even its celebration of an idealized pastoralism all become resources for Anthropocene fantasy's remaking of the fantasy genre. At the same time, these Anthropocene fantasy novels eagerly reimagine the traditional heroic quest narrative to challenge the kind of individualistic, human-privileging solutions that characterize earlier iterations of fantasy fiction. Martin, Jemisin, and Hobb thus point the way toward a new dispensation of the fantasy novel form that invites readers to engage with the challenges posed by our anthropocentric age.

NOTES

1. Citing Levine, Hurley and Insko suggest that literary works can be likened to infrastructure, given that both are “composed of structuring forms that simultaneously reflect and construct our ideas about the world and how to move through it” (350). In fantasy genres this comparison is particularly apt, given that infrastructures are also, as Larkin argues, “vehicles whereby . . . fantasies are transmitted and made emotionally real” (333). Although our essay draws on the insights of critical infrastructure studies, we are primarily interested in the operations of the fantasy novel form, within which imagined infrastructure is deployed as a trope signaling the novel’s ecological politics.

2. When we use the word *genre*, we are referring to the narrative conventions consolidated by the publishing industry, whereas in using *form* we follow Levine in thinking about narrative patterns perceived across time. On the development of the fantasy genre in the twentieth century, see Attebery; Mendlesohn. More recently, Rieder has argued that speculative genres developed in response to historical shifts in both commercial publishing and the academy, which he treats as infrastructural “systems” within which writers operate.

3. Given fantasy’s reputation as a haven for women’s writing (see Attebery ix–x), the omission of fantasy from the turn to speculative fiction risks reproducing structural exclusions that literary studies is elsewhere trying to correct.

4. This is true not only of ruins but also of the infrastructure of thriving cities. See, for example, the description of Egwene’s “wonder” at Tar Valon’s bridges in Jordan’s *The Dragon Reborn* (148).

5. This relationship between fossil fuel and magic also exists in urban and wainscot fantasies. J. K. Rowling’s Harry Potter series, for example, happily imagines flying cars in a context where world-shaping energies can be extracted and used merely by correctly pronouncing certain words.

6. Anthropocene fantasy encompasses more than just the epic fantasies we focus on in this essay. The narrative patterns described here appear, albeit with different inflections, in other subgenres and in stand-alone novels and short stories.

7. Although better known for their revision of the gender dynamics of her Earthsea setting, *Tehanu* (1990) and *The Other Wind* (2001) also represent Le Guin’s interrogation of the human/nature binary her 1970s fantasies had supported.

8. Different subgenres of fantasy represent infrastructure differently. Urban fantasies such as Hobb’s 1986 *Wizard of the Pigeons* (published under the name Megan Lindholm) or Jemisin’s 2020 *The City We Became* depict infrastructure as a “terrain of power and contestation” that can empower marginalized peoples (Appel et al. 2). Jemisin’s and Hobb’s identification of infrastructure with state power in their epic fantasies indicates that subgenre’s formal impetus to reflect on history and the authors’ desire to push against Tolkienesque fantasy’s idealization of historical forms of governance.

9. See Junka-Aikio and Cortes-Severino on the “ideologies, discourses and practices underpinning” fossil fuel extraction and

the production of energy (177). As Gómez-Barris argues, “extractive capitalism dramatically divides nature and culture through new forms of race, gender, and sexual exclusions” (xvii).

10. See DiPaolo’s *Fire and Snow* for an overview of this discussion.

11. Trapped in the cooling North, the Free Folk see the Wall as excluding them from the “resources of social and physical reproduction” available in the South (Appel et al. 2). They also reject the hierarchical social and political forms that govern the kingdoms south of the Wall.

12. In *A Game of Thrones*, we are told that “the Pact” gave the First Men “the high plains and bright meadows,” whereas “the deep woods were to remain forever the children’s, and no more weirwoods were to be put to the axe” (Martin, *Game* 617). This treaty was violated during a later era of human settlement.

13. The Free Folk are descended from humans who kept the Pact and were racialized by a later wave of colonists. The nonhuman Children of the Forest can also be read as a stand-in for indigenous peoples. Problematically, this group is portrayed as disappearing and appears to have no political future.

14. In the television series *Game of Thrones*, the Nature-allied Children of the Forest create the Others as weapons in their war against deforestation. Read metaphorically, the Others of the television series become the harmful expression of a planetary feedback loop triggered by human activity.

15. One index of this diminishment is the number of chapters dedicated to Bran across the five novels. Whereas seven chapters are dedicated to him in each of the first two books, he has only four in the third (*A Storm of Swords*), none in the fourth (*A Feast for Crows*), and three in the fifth (*A Dance with Dragons*).

16. The most robust recent treatment of the novel’s role in the development of the modern agentic individual can be found in Armstrong’s *How Novels Think*. The longer history of scholarship on this topic dates to at least Watt’s *The Rise of the Novel* (1957).

17. For a fuller critique of the mainstream novel’s propensity for human exceptionalism, see Ghosh; Bould.

18. Jemisin’s Broken Earth trilogy operates in a space between classic fantasy and science fiction, because its setting includes references to futuristic technologies. However, the novels also feature tropes made familiar by secondary world fantasy—namely, a magic-wielding protagonist on a quest. Received by genre critics as a fantasy series, its first two novels were finalists for World Fantasy Awards. *Entertainment Weekly* later hailed the trilogy as “the best fantasy of the decade” (Holub).

19. On social media Jemisin has protested academia’s association of her fantasies with Octavia Butler’s science fiction novels. We see this intertextual reference as Jemisin’s invitation to readers to associate her fiction instead with that of Morrison, whose gothic novel *Beloved* shares formal elements, though not a genre, with *The Broken Earth*. Both depart from “consensus reality” (Hume 23) in their use of the supernatural to address the traumas of African American slavery.

20. See Gardiner’s discussion of the “intergenerational ethics” of climate change (147).

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Abstract: This essay traces the emergence of Anthropocene fantasy through an analysis of three multivolume series—George R. R. Martin’s *A Song of Ice and Fire*, Robin Hobb’s *Realm of the Elderlings*, and N. K. Jemisin’s *The Broken Earth*. Each of these series repurposes the conventions of epic fantasy to analyze the ideological underpinnings of anthropogenic crisis. Among the most important tropes revised are fantasy infrastructures, which, in Anthropocene fantasy, frequently manifest a problematic division between the human and the nonhuman. Consequently, characters’ responses to these infrastructures often reflect these novels’ ecological politics. The surrender of agency associated with the abandonment of ancient infrastructures further indicates Anthropocene fantasy’s interest in reimagining the individualistic mode of human agency that drives so many novel plotlines, fantasy and realist alike. Anthropocene fantasy’s revision of its own problematic genre infrastructures thus has implications not only for the epic fantasy but for the novel form more broadly.