Breaking the Borders of Fantasy: Travelling through the Stillness in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy

Rui Mateus

FACULDADE DE CIÊNCIAS SOCIAIS E HUMANAS DA UNIVERSIDADE NOVA DE LISBOA - CETAPS

Citation: Rui Mateus. "Breaking the Borders of Fantasy: Travelling through the Stillness in N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* Trilogy." *Via Panoramica: Revista de Estudos Anglo-Americanos*, série 3, vol. 10, n.º 2, 2021, pp. 45-59. ISSN: 2182-9934. Web: http://ojs.letras.up.pt/. DOI: 10.21747/2182-9934/via10_2a3.

Abstract

As the genre of fantasy literature continues to grow, new authors strive to innovate and stray from the traditional principles that ruled it for many decades when epic fantasy was more prominent. Though epic features still remain a great part of the genre, the characteristics that rule fantasy worlds, stories, and characters have changed over time, bringing new aspects into the fold and introducing new voices. As academics attempt to categorize a genre as diverse as fantasy to better understand it and define it, authors continue to expand and mingle fantasy elements with components from other genres, especially science-fiction. The aim of this article is to identify how a taxonomy of fantasy can be used to understand the relation between the fantastic and the narrative. By analyzing N. K. Jemisin's novels in the *Broken Earth* trilogy through Farah Mendlesohn's categorization of fantasy proposed in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), the goal is to discover the aspects in which Jemisin brings innovation into the fantasy genre by applying elements from various categories.

Keywords: N. K. Jemisin; Fantasy; Farah Mendlesohn; Taxonomy of fantasy

Resumo

À medida que o género da fantasia cresce, novos autores esforçam-se por trazer inovação ao género e desviar-se dos princípios tradicionais que durante décadas o governaram, numa época em que a fantasia épica se mostrava mais proeminente. Embora a componente épica permaneça uma grande parte do género, as características que regem os mundos, histórias e personagens mudaram com o tempo, trazendo novos aspetos para o meio literário e introduzindo novas vozes. À medida que os académicos tentam categorizar um género tão diverso como fantasia para o melhor poderem entender e definir, os autores continuam a expandir e misturar elementos de fantasia com elementos de outros géneros, sobretudo de ficção-científica. O objetivo deste artigo é identificar como uma taxonomia de fantasia pode ser utilizada para entender a relação entre o fantástico e a narrativa. Ao analisar as obras da trilogia *Broken Earth* de N. K. Jemisin à

luz da categorização de fantasia de Farah Mendlesohn proposta em *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), pretende-se descobrir os aspetos em que N. K. Jemisin traz inovação para o género da fantasia ao utilizar elementos de diversas categorias.

Palavras-chave: N. K. Jemisin; Fantasia; Farah Mendlesohn; Taxonomia de fantasia

Introduction[1]

When *The Lord of the Rings* was published in 1954-55, J. R. R. Tolkien became one of the most important authors in the fantasy genre and his work set the parameters for what is known today as epic fantasy. Tolkien's work became a "mental template . . . until someone else achieves equal recognition with an alternative conception" (Attebery 14). However, over the decades, as the genre continued to expand and fantasy encompassed an ever-growing spectrum, it became too diverse a group to easily define and classify its characteristics.

The expansion of the fantasy genre has increased the popularity of novels that mingled elements of fantasy, science-fiction and horror. Not only does this bring innovation to fantasy, but it also gives rise to the formation of new types of literature, such as science fantasy or the new weird. Gary K. Wolfe groups fantasy authors according to the contribution they bring to the genre. In one group can be found the traditionalists who maintain the principles of epic fantasy. In the other, less relevant here, are the authors who only resort to elements of fantasy to create their stories. In a third group are the authors who subvert the "rules" of fantasy, expanding the genre. About this last group, Wolfe states the following:

> The writers who contribute to the evaporation of genre, who destabilize it by undermining our expectations and appropriating materials at will, with fiction shaped by individual vision rather than traditions or formulas, are the same writers who continually revitalize genre: A healthy genre, a healthy literature, is one at risk, one whose boundaries grow uncertain and whose foundations get wobbly. (51)

Academics such as Wolfe, Brian Attebery or Farah Mendlesohn have contributed to an understanding of fantasy that involves finding the borders of the genre, however blurry, and analyzing how it incorporates elements of other genres. Mendlesohn's proposal is somewhat more restrictive, for it tries to find borders for different types of fantasy within fantasy itself. This helps organize a genre that would otherwise be too large to be understood as one.

An understanding of Mendlesohn's taxonomy of fantasy, developed in *Rhetorics of Fantasy* (2008), is required to see whether the categorization can be subverted by authors who attempt to expand the borders of the fantasy genre. For this purpose, the analysis will take into consideration N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy (2015-2017), which includes elements that straddle at least three of the four major categories in the taxonomy.

The analysis will fall on aspects of the narrative such as elements external to the main text (map and appendices), the structure of the plot and the shifting role of the main characters. The purpose of this article is, therefore, to assess how the *Broken Earth* novels, analyzed through Mendlesohn's taxonomy, provide an insight on the relation between the fantastic and the narrative, giving the readers a glimpse of some of the main principles of each of Mendlesohn's categories.

I – Text, World, and Taxonomy

N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy, consisting of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016) and *The Stone Sky* (2017), has become one of the most influential fantasy series of the decade. N. K. Jemisin had already been acclaimed by several authors and critics after the publication of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010). Nnedi Okorafor mentions Jemisin's intention of creating "fantasy worlds which distance themselves from the default whiteness of the Tolkien tradition" (Okorafor 183). Jemisin wanted to break the barrier and give importance to "different voices, spoken by native tongues" (Jemisin, *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* viii). In this respect, she clearly stands out from the traditional type of fantasy based off Tolkien's writings. Both authors wrote for different purposes. Tolkien wanted to create a mythology for the English people that he thought lost. Jemisin writes to give readers characters they can identify with and that until then were rarely seen in fantasy and science-fiction. Jemisin's novels are categorized as part of the Afrofuturism movement, a term first used by Mark Dery to classify "[s]peculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture" (180). Such novels deal with topics of slavery, race and gender, which Jemisin adopts as the core of her works.

The *Broken Earth* trilogy describes a world consisting of a single continent called the Stillness, a place constantly devastated by natural catastrophes. These disasters are caused by the orogenes, humans with the ability to control the movements of the earth as well as temperature around a certain radius. Orogenes are hated by the stills (humans without orogeny) who often persecute and kill them. Some orogenes are found at an

early age and taken to the Fulcrum, an institution that helps them control their abilities. Those trained by the Fulcrum do not usually become victims, but they are regarded with great contempt anyway. The hate felt towards orogenes can be attributed to the fear that their abilities cause among the population. When one loses control, he or she can unleash amounts of power that will cause devastation throughout the Stillness, sometimes causing the Fifth Seasons. These periods of time in which the land experiences unusual activity can occur at any time and bring different phenomena and consequences for the inhabitants of the continent.[2]

The *Broken Earth* trilogy presents a narrative very similar to fantasies with epic contours. Even though it doesn't portray a struggle between good and evil, which is common in epic fantasy, Jemisin's novels bring attention to a quest that promises to change the world once fulfilled. Despite being considered a story that displays innovation within the fantasy genre, the trilogy can actually be regarded as a portal-quest fantasy according to Mendlesohn's categorization of the genre. On the other hand, it presents characteristics of the immersive fantasy, subverting the traditional lines of the genre and, therefore, Mendlesohn's taxonomy itself.

Mendlesohn's *Rhetorics of Fantasy* proposes a division of the genre into four major groups: portal-quest, immersive, intrusion and liminal. A set of characteristics is attributed to each group concerning the story and the way it is narrated. One of the key principles of the taxonomy is the categorization according to "the means by which the fantastic enters the narrated world" already described by Mendlesohn in "Toward A Taxonomy of Fantasy" (171). Mendlesohn also refers the role of the fantastic in each category: "In the intrusive fantasy the fantastic enters the fictional world; in the estranged fantasy[3] the magic hovers in the corner of our eye; portal fantasies invite us through into the fantastic; while the immersive fantasy allows us no escape" (171). Aside from an imaginary world, the fantastic in the *Broken Earth* trilogy is the existence of orogenic abilities, skills akin to magic, and which come naturally to certain people, the orogenes. In this respect the story already deviates from the principles of the taxonomy, for orogeny can be considered both intrusive and immersive.

Mendlesohn argues that Dark Lords in fantasy can be considered intrusions, for they are often outsiders. Father Earth in Jemisin's novels represents, in a sense, an intruder, for he "disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated" (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 115). Orogeny comes from Father Earth and can be, therefore, associated directly with his intrusion. However, his nature as an intruder only comes after humanity started damaging the world. Father Earth cursed humanity with orogeny, as Schaffa explains to Damaya: "You're a gift of the earth—but Father Earth hates us,

never forget, and his gifts are neither free nor safe" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 38). The fact that orogeny is granted by a god only makes it more inevitable, and therefore inescapable, corresponding then to the immersive and intrusive types.[4]

One of the first steps in seeing how Jemisin subverts the taxonomy is by analyzing the narrative techniques employed in the novels. One important aspect to the categorization is the way information is imparted to the reader. The absence of a crossing from the Primary World to the Secondary World[5] in the *Broken Earth* frees the protagonist/narrator from giving explanations about the fantasy world since they are already part of it. So, the reader travels with the protagonists, seeing and hearing what they see and hear, and trying to decipher the meaning of everything. This is typically the type of narration found in immersive fantasies.

One technique common in portal-quests, but sometimes employed in immersive fantasies, that can be found in Jemisin's works, is the "download" (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 13). This consists of a torrent of information about the world for the reader to become familiar with the story and the setting. Sometimes, it takes the form of a story from the past or an explanation of how something works. *The Fifth Season* (2015) starts with a "download" that explains the world of the Stillness. The extract in the beginning of the novel is written as something that should be dealt with so the real story can begin: "Let's start with the end of the world, why don't we? Get it over with and move on to more interesting things" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 1). The prologue serves as context for the whole narrative, introducing the protagonist, Essun, and describing the Stillness.

The three novels in the series are steeped with explanatory excerpts external to the narrative. These may refer to the Fifth Seasons, periods of time in which catastrophe changes the land, or parts of stonelore, a philosophy that teaches people how to survive in the Stillness. The appendices at the end of each novel also work as sources of information for the reader. Therefore, in terms of narrative structure, the trilogy is more closely associated with the portal-quest fantasy than with the immersive, since the reader acquires a certain amount of relevant information before embarking on the story. However, some of this information does not elucidate the reader entirely in matters related to the plot, and much of what is seen throughout the story must be deciphered. And so, the narrative is ambiguous concerning this aspect of Mendlesohn's taxonomy.

Another important aspect that would place the *Broken Earth* in the category of portal-quest is the map. According to Mendlesohn, "the very presence of maps at the front of many fantasies implies that the destination and its meaning are known"

(*Rhetorics* 4). The map in portal-quest fantasy implies a journey. The map of the Stillness is designed, not for a known destination, but for a journey to happen. There is no path delineated for the characters, but the map shows only some communities, like Tirimo, Allia or Yumenes, all of which Essun visits. So, this particular map symbolizes several stages of Essun's quest.

In *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), Mark J. P. Wolf proposes that the construction of imaginary worlds is centered on a set of characteristics that give consistency and plausibility to the world. These characteristics are "secondary-world infrastructures", and they can be applied to a world in different amounts according to the authors' wishes.[6] Maps, timelines, genealogies, nature, culture, languages, mythologies, and philosophies help make the world consistent. According to Wolf, the first three "arise from the three basic elements needed for a world to exist" (154). These structures can either appear in the text as part of the story or as appendices, usually at the end of the novel. N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* features a map (the Stillness), a timeline (an appendix of former Fifth Seasons and their approximate dates) and the genealogy of Essun's family is implied in the text. In addition to these, Jemisin presents a wasteland (nature) where multiple communities dwell (culture). The author does not give emphasis to language in the novels, but there are hints of a mythology represented by the existence of a god, Father Earth, whose child, the Moon, has disappeared. In the philosophy aspect are included the mindsets of each community and their views on the world, in particular the stonelore.

So, Jemisin gives the reader a fully developed world whose characteristics, both in terms of narrative and of world-building, flow between Mendlesohn's categories of portal-quest fantasy and immersive fantasy. This is not uncommon, for these groups complement each other and the immersive fantasy is typical of novels in which the protagonists are already part of the imaginary world.

II – Quests and Characters

Portal-quest fantasies normally start with a familiar setting, a place of safety, that will be disrupted, pushing the protagonist into a quest. *The Fifth Season* begins with three different quests with very different outlines. The first is Damaya's, a child from the East Coast in the Nomidlats, from a town named Palela. Her display of orogenic abilities[7] represents the disruption that takes Damaya from her familiar surroundings to an unfamiliar place. When learning of her trip to Yumenes, Damaya thinks: "Yumenes is only a legend to her, and the rest of the places Schaffa has mentioned are just words in a creche textbook" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 35). So, the reader witnesses a transition

common in portal-quest fantasy, the crossing of a threshold to a zone of magnified danger. Damaya's quest is the honing of her orogeny, to be done in the Fulcrum.

The guiding figure usually found in portal-quest fantasies is a mysterious character who relays the quest to the protagonist. Since Damaya's abilities have already been discovered, she has no choice but to leave with Schaffa and no opportunity to question the information he chooses to impart. Mendlesohn states that "[t]he journeyman succeeds or fails to the extent he listens to those wiser or more knowledgeable than him, whether these be spiritual, fantastical, or human guides" (*Rhetorics* 4). Damaya is intimidated by Schaffa and impelled to do as he says, and, following his instructions, she passes the first test in her training.

The second protagonist is Syenite, who is actually Damaya as a young adult woman. Syenite's quest doesn't follow the principles of the portal-quest fantasy, for she has had enough experience with her abilities to manipulate the world around her and the reader doesn't witness that acquisition of experience. However, she still needs a guide, as Feldspar declares:

> 'Five-ringers and above are no longer required to have a partner or Guardian when traveling outside the Fulcrum'. . . . 'At that point we are judged stable enough in our mastery of orogeny to be granted a modicum of autonomy.' Five rings. She has four. It's bullshit that this has anything to do with orogenic mastery; if a Guardian has doubts about an orogene's willingness to follow the rules, that orogene doesn't make it to the first ring, let alone the fifth. (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 63-4).

Syenite resents needing a guide. On the other hand, she is impressed that the Fulcrum gave her powerful tutor, who has ten rings.[8] From this moment the reader witnesses what W. A. Senior refers as the "simplest confrontations and dangers [that escalate] through more threatening and perilous encounters" (190). First, Syenite has a confrontation with the Guardian Edki in the town of Allia: "[s]he and Alabaster face Edki on a boardwalk stark with shadows and bloody sunset light, with children and old ladies playing beyond them" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 258-9). She has the help of a stone eater, who takes Alabaster and Syenite to the community[9] of Meow, where she will be found, attacked, and forced to murder her own child to prevent the attackers from taking him and using him as a node maintainer.[10]

The plot of *The Fifth Season* starts with Essun, who had been Damaya and Syenite, years after the events in Meow. Essun is pursuing her husband Jija, who murdered their son Uche for being an orogene and kidnapped their daughter Nassun. This begins a new quest in the series. Essun leaves the community of Tirimo at a time

when communities are preparing for a new Fifth Season and, therefore, closing to outsiders. But, just like when she was Damaya and Syenite, she finds a new guide, a boy called Hoa. Though he only seeks shelter with Essun one night, "[i]n the morning you rise and move on, and the boy comes with you" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 105). Like Schaffa, Hoa is mysterious and Essun cannot decipher him, but she learns that he is a stone eater, a creature that guides Essun through the greater quest that will divert her from the search for Nassun.

All the quests presented above share the characteristics of the journeys found in portal-quest fantasies. However, the *Broken Earth* trilogy focuses on one major quest that is delivered only in *The Obelisk Gate* (2016). One of the characteristics of portal-quest fantasies is that the quest is usually delivered at the very beginning, whether it is the search for an object, the destruction of one, or a journey to defeat evil. If it isn't delivered at the beginning, there is at least an awareness of where the problem lies.[11] Only in *The Obelisk Gate* does the reader know the true goal of the story: to bring the moon back to orbit[12] and, hopefully, end the cyclical Fifth Seasons.[13] This group of quests in the first volume of the trilogy symbolizes a confusion to divert readers to the real quest, therefore subverting the paradigm of the portal-quest, in which the battle between good and evil is ever present throughout the narrative.

Nassun's quest is similar in the sense that it doesn't start as a mission of epic proportions to save the world, but as a journey imposed by her father. Because orogenes have to hide their abilities from those around them, Nassun's education was extremely harsh. Essun taught both her children to control their orogeny by recurring to violence. This education represents the first stage in Nassun's journey, influencing her decisions later, which can be analyzed in the point of view of Mendlesohn's taxonomy. Nassun is only eight when Jija takes her from her hometown. Essun's severe training makes Nassun turn to her father as a figure of affection, so she isn't much frightened that Jija will kill her as well. She doesn't feel the horror of what happened: "[b]ut she loves her father, fears him, worships him, and therefore some part of her wants to appease him" (Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* 77).

With Essun's point of view in *The Fifth Season*, the reader is led to believe Nassun was kidnaped by Jija, but when, in *The Obelisk Gate*, Nassun appears for the first time, the reader learns that she left willingly. As usual with portal-quest fantasies, there is a sense of a disrupted stability. Nassun never felt that stability during her childhood, and the beginning of the novel doesn't offer it. In fact, it seems that the situation is reversed; Nassun leaves an unstable place to find her own stability. On the other hand,

that is the ultimate goal of the portal-quest, to heal and bring restoration and, therefore, safety.

Her father's crime doesn't erase the love she feels towards him. And she knows that she is Jija's favorite. But Nassun's decision to leave with Jija was made twofold. Part of her feels only a little frightened, but she leaves out of love for Jija. Another part of her saw this as the opportunity to leave her mother behind. Nassun blames her mother for the situation she has found herself in and the text gives the reader a glimpse of what Nassun went through during her training:

> That had been Mama's command, along with all the others: Don't reach, don't ice, I'm going to make the earth move and you'd better not react, didn't I tell you not to react, even listening is reacting, normal people don't listen like that, are you listening to me, rusting stop, for Earth's sake can't you do anything right, stop crying, now do it again. Endless commands. Endless displeasure. Occasionally the slap . . . of a hand, . . . the jerk of a hand on her upper arm. Mama has said occasionally that she loves Nassun, but Nassun has never seen any proof of it (Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* 77-8).

This gives the reader an idea of the traumatizing experience Nassun suffered and why she would turn to her father for protection. And the quick succession of commands given by Essun emphasizes the harshness of Nassun's training. This experience is a prelude of the clash that will occur between mother and daughter later in the story.

However, with Uche's murder and Jija's knowledge that Nassun is an orogene, Nassun starts doubting her father's love for her, seen occasionally during their journey through the Stillness and later when they reach the community of Found Moon.

All of Nassun's and Essun's background determine how their decisions were influenced by experience.[14] First, it is important to understand what type of world is found in the *Broken Earth* trilogy. According to Mendlesohn:

> The immersive fantasies are overwhelmingly concerned with the entropy of the world. In each of the texts discussed in this chapter . . . , cities and civilizations fall, families follow political systems into moral degradation and decline, absent gods leave men to fend for themselves, worlds once impervious to the external world see their walls breached. Struck by the degree to which thinning[15] was the dominant mood of a set of novels selected relatively arbitrarily, I put the question to John Clute who responded, "Simple. Because in an immersive fantasy, what is storyable is not the discovery of the world (in which we are immersed) but its loss". (*Rhetorics* 60-1)

What Mendlesohn describes can be applied to Jemisin's works. However, Jemisin decides to manipulate this definition by having characteristics from the portal-quest and the immersive in her novels. In the Stillness, the reader finds the decline of cities and communities,[16] the apparent end of the world. In fact, according to Essun, this new Fifth Season might last thousands of years (Jemisin, *The Obelisk Gate* 68). Additionally, the story begins with the surety that "this is the way the world ends" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 14). However, in the end, the story turns from one of thinning to one of restoration, representing a shift from the immersive to the portal-quest.

The same shift occurs with the two protagonists. Damaya and Syenite are more firmly trapped within the constraints of portal-quest fantasy, a child and a young adult woman with no experience in the world and who have to learn their place in it. However, Essun is sufficiently experienced in the world "to question it while staying within the shell of immersion" (Mendlesohn, *Rhetorics* 67). The fact that Essun is the same person as Damaya and Syenite becomes irrelevant in this matter because the author structured the story in such a way that the reader only becomes certain they are just one character when Damaya's plotline ends, more than halfway through *The Fifth Season*.

This questioning of the world on Essun's part makes her an antagonist, according to Mendlesohn's taxonomy. It starts with her destroying Tirimo when leaving to find Uche: "And then the valley floor splits open. The initial jolt of this is violent enough to knock everyone standing to the ground and sway every house in Tirimo. Then those houses judder and rattle as the jolt smooths into a steady, ongoing vibration" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 57). Essun doesn't destroy the town completely, but with a new Fifth Season coming, it will be nearly impossible to rebuild, especially since the wells will dry eventually.

But in the community of Castrima Essun starts challenging the political system. It is a community unlike any other in the Stillness. Castrima itself defies the social conventions in the *Broken Earth*. When Essun arrives, she is greeted by Ykka, the leader of the comm:

> 'Ykka,' she says. You realize it's a name. Then she adds, 'Ykka Rogga[17] Castrima. Welcome. And you are?' You blurt: 'Rogga?' You use this word all the time, but hearing it like this, as a use name, emphasizes its vulgarity. Naming yourself rogga is like naming yourself pile of shit. It's a slap in the face. It's a statement—of what, you can't tell. (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 267-8)

An orogene like Ykka leading a community is something unheard of. But Castrima is a sanctuary for orogenes, for here they can coexist with the stills. Essun is welcomed but

she does not fit in. Mendlesohn refers to this as a subversion of the portal-quest: "the novel requires the protagonist to become ever more comfortable with the fantasyland she has entered" (*Rhetorics* 55). First, Essun doesn't see herself as a rogga, which every orogene in the community does. That is why, when Essun destroys the only means for the community to survive, the strain between still and orogene becomes stronger.

On the other hand, Essun was only trying to help the comm: "Locking all those stone eaters into the crystals. You meant to save everyone, but Castrima was a machine – a very old, very delicate machine that you didn't understand. And now you're topside, traipsing through the ashfall" (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 21). And so, it is possible to see that Essun works both in the role of hero and anti-hero. Ultimately, by trying to save the world, Essun is categorized within the principles of portal-quest fantasy, in which the hero fulfils the quest and is rewarded. However, saying Essun fulfilled her quest is not entirely true, because she didn't:

> So… you give up. I ache with the look on your face, because I know what it costs you to give up Alabaster's dream – and your own. You so wanted to make a better world for Nassun. But more than anything else, you want this last child of yours to live… and so you make a choice. To keep fighting will kill you both. The only way to win, then, is not to fight anymore. (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 385)

From the very beginning of the story, the reader feels compelled to think of Essun as the heroine, the one who meant to save the world. But by giving up, Essun gives her daughter the power and opportunity to be the one doing it.

At some point in the story, Nassun also acted as an antagonist. She decided not to bring the moon back into orbit, but to crash it against the Earth (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 344). Unlike Essun, Nassun is the embodiment of the subversion to the portal-quest fantasy. She is not interested in saving the world or in the epic quest to end the Seasons. All she wants is to save Schaffa, the only person who didn't mistreat her. And that is the reason she wants to end it all. This is where she and her mother clash. The narrator even stops the narrative to justify Nassun's choice:

> (She is such a good child, at her core. Don't be angry with her. She can only make choices within the limited set of her experiences, and it isn't her fault that so many of those experiences have been terrible. Marvel, instead, at how easily she loves, how thoroughly. Love enough to change the world! She learned how to love like this from somewhere.) (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 344)

Nassun's decision, therefore, is influenced by the harsh experiences she faced during her childhood, her mother's training and her brother's murder. Portal-quest fantasies are deeply associated with prophecies concerning the heroes. The fact that there isn't one in the *Broken Earth* indicates that the supposed hero might not be the actual hero. By giving up the power of the Obelisk Gate to Nassun, Essun showed heroism, but the ultimate deed was Nassun's. This subverts the portal-quest by revealing the real heroine only in the climax of the story. Essun's decision of dying for Nassun was the determining factor in the accomplishment of the epic task. It was Essun's redemption, which made Nassun choose:

> Because the world took and took and took from you, too, after all. She knows this. And yet, for some reason that she does not think she'll ever understand… even as you died, you were reaching for the Moon. And for her. . . . And in the cold stone silence, alone, Nassun chooses. Yes. (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 387)

Therefore, Nassun reverts to a heroine of the portal-quest fantasy. And like the heroes of epic fantasies, she was meant to accomplish the task because, by being Essun's daughter, she had the power to do it even without the prophetical sign saying that she would. Moreover, Essun's redemption as an apology and Nassun's acceptance of it both play into the restoration and healing of the world, a characteristic that is typical of the portal-quest fantasy.

Conclusion

The analysis of Jemisin's work uncovers a possible tendency in fantasy literature that breaks the genre's boundaries and defies the traditional principles that had ruled fantasy for a long time. Examples of this include Brandon Sanderson *Mistborn* novels (2006-2008), Evan Winter's *Burning* series (2019), or several of China Miéville's works, such as the *Bas-Lag* series (2000-2004) or *Un Lun Dun* (2007). All of these demonstrate original ideas concerning fantasy and the deviation from more established principles like those seen in portal-quest fantasy, embodied in popular works such as the *Lord of the Rings*.

The authors who try to strive for innovation in fantasy contribute to a subversion of some of the theories that create categorizations to organize the genre to facilitate its study. That was Farah Mendlesohn's main purpose with *Rhetorics of Fantasy*, not to establish rules or definitions, "but to consider the genre in ways that open up new questions" (xv). N. K. Jemisin's *Broken Earth* trilogy belongs in the group of authors who promote Gary K. Wolfe's theory of the evaporating genre, as mentioned earlier in this

article. Jemisin's novels escape the principles of more conventional fantasies, seen, for example in the shifting roles of the characters in the story, making the novels harder to classify specifically in one group and demonstrating the multiple facets that her works incorporate.

Finding a place for the *Broken Earth* trilogy within Mendlesohn's taxonomy revealed that there is a constant shift between categories, showing that the novels take a more innovative approach in the genre. On the other hand, the trilogy seems to rely much on the principles of the portal-quest fantasy, especially in terms of the narrative techniques employed by the author, such as the aspects of the narration that contribute to a better understanding of the world by the reader. Still, the stability of the portal-quest is broken with the protagonists, Essun and Nassun, who seem to walk on the frontier between the portal-quest and its own subversion. The confusion over who the real heroine is and over the quest, delivered very late in the story, makes the *Broken Earth* very unseemly of Mendlesohn's first category. Moreover, aspects such as the intrusion of orogeny in the world or the thinning typical of immersive add to the mixture that makes the novels more difficult to categorize in only one group.

In short, the way the narrative of the *Broken Earth* is constructed highlights the presence of the whole taxonomy of fantasy in the novels. The elements provided outside the text (map and appendices), and, in part, the characters indicate a portal-quest, whereas the fantastic elements (orogeny and Father Earth) represent intrusions that must be dealt with. The characteristics of immersive fantasy seem to be more present within the story, with the changing nature of the characters and the way information is delivered to the reader. It can be argued, then, that the story marks a passage through the whole taxonomy, shifting heavily between the portal-quest and immersive categories to land firmly in the first as the plot draws to a close. However, rather than having a submission to only one of the groups of Mendlesohn's taxonomy, N. K. Jemisin plays with it to create her world. But to maintain the contact with the more traditional aspects of epic fantasy, Jemisin relies on some of its most structural aspects to convey the idea of a portal-quest fantasy, albeit with a certain degree of subversion.

The aim of this article was to understand how the taxonomy of fantasy can be used to understand the relation between the fantastic and the narrative, using N. K. Jemisin's novels as the focus for analysis. It can be concluded that, while Jemisin clearly subverts some of its aspects by drawing elements from, at least, three of the four categories, the essential characteristics of each group are still very firm. But it can also be concluded that the difficulty of categorizing the *Broken Earth* within a single group demonstrates not only its flexibility but also the large scope of fantasy as a genre,

especially as authors make a more conscious attempt to stray from the principles of fantasy usually regarded as traditional.

Works Cited

Attebery, Brian. *Strategies of Fantasy*. Indiana University Press, 1992.

Clute, John and John Grant. *The Encyclopedia of Fantasy*. Orbit, 1999.

Dery, Mark. "Black to the Future: Interviews with Samuel R. Delany, Greg Tate, and Tricia Rose." *Flame Wars, The Discourse of Cyberculture*, edited by Mark Dery, Duke University Press, 1994, pp. 179-222.

Jemisin, N. K. *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* Orbit, 2018.

---. *The Fifth Season*. Orbit, 2015.

---. *The Obelisk Gate*. Orbit, 2016.

---. *The Stone Sky*. Orbit, 2017.

Mendlesohn, Farah. "Toward A Taxonomy of Fantasy." *Journal of the Fantastic in the Arts*, Vol. 13, No. 2 (50), 2002, pp. 169-83.

---. *Rhetorics of Fantasy*. Wesleyan University Press, 2008.

Okorafor, Nnedi. "Writers of Colour". *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 179-89.

Senior, W. A.. "Quest Fantasies." *The Cambridge Companion to Fantasy Literature*, edited by Edward James and Farah Mendlesohn. Cambridge University Press, 2012, pp. 190-9.

Wolf, Mark J. P. *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation*. Routledge, 2012.

[1] This article was produced with the support of a PhD scholarship granted by Fundação para a Ciência e Tecnologia (2020.05334.BD).

[2] A Fifth Season can involve any kind of catastrophic event. For instance, the Boiling Season consisted of an "eruption [that] launched millions of gallons of steam and particulates into the air, which triggered acidic rain and atmospheric occlusion over the southern half of the continent for three years" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 452).

[3] Mendlesohn will later refer to this type as liminal fantasy.

[4] The magic powers bestowed by entities such as gods or Dark Lords often work as an intrusion in many fantasy worlds, providing a shifting between immersion and intrusion. Other examples of this can be found in Tolkien's *Lord of the Rings* with the One Ring (a magical object forged by the intruder Sauron) and in Robert Jordan's *The Wheel of Time* series (1990-2013) with the True Power (a form of magic that comes from the Dark One, an invader in the world).
[5] The world of the *Broken Earth* is an imaginary world independent from ours. The terms Primary World and Secondary World were first developed by Tolkien in his essay "On Fairy Stories", delivered as a lecture in 1939. The term Primary World refers to the real world in which the author lives, and Secondary World to the invented setting in which the fantasy story takes place.
[6] Wolf adds that "depending on their purpose, worlds have these structures to varying degrees, and less developed worlds can lack some of them altogether" (155).
[7] "Ordinary people can't take care of…of children like her [and] she almost killed a boy at school" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 32).
[8] Rings determine the orogene's power, ten being the highest.
[9] Normally called comms.
[10] A node maintainer works in a node station to control any movements of the earth that might damage any communities in the vicinity. A node maintainer is usually a child who is kept in merciless conditions: "The body in the node maintainer's chair is small, 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" (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 139).
[11] This is the case with many epic fantasies like *The Lord of the Rings*, *The Fionavar Tapestry* (1984-1986) or *The Wheel of Time* (1990-2013).
[12] To bring the moon back, one must tap into the power of the Obelisk Gate.
[13] Orogeny and the Fifth Seasons are a consequence laid by Father Earth when the moon drifted from the Earth: "The job you have to do is the easier of the two, you think. Just catch the Moon. Seal the Yumenes Rifting. Reduce the current Season's predicted impact from thousands or millions of years back down to something manageable – something the human race has a chance of surviving. End the Fifth Seasons for all time" (Jemisin, *The Stone Sky* 11).
[14] Essun lost children and Nassun was traumatized by her mother's violence.
[15] The concept of thinning is related to how the land is affected and threatened by wrongness. In the novels, this can be seen with the Fifth Seasons, which transform the land into "a parody of itself" (Clute and Grant, "Thinning" 942).
[16] "Here are many other such cairns around the world: a thousand ruined cities, a million monuments to heroes or gods no one remembers, several dozen bridges to nowhere." (Jemisin, *The Fifth Season* 8).
[17] Rogga is an insulting form of addressing an orogene.