

Broken Earth, Unbroken Cycle: Understanding Intergenerational Trauma in N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season*

Name: Nicholas Karlberg

SFU Faculty/Major: Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences, English

Presentation Description:

N.K. Jemisin's *The Fifth Season* (2015) tells the story of a world quite literally tearing itself apart and a woman who must learn to withstand the chaos outside and within herself. I explore how Jemisin's uses language and narrative structure to make statements about intergenerational trauma, body politics, and race relations.

Abstract:

The Fifth Season (2015) by N.K. Jemisin tells the story of a woman born with the ability to control tectonic activity beneath the earth's surface, a power known as orogeny. This is both a gift and a curse, as she holds in herself both the potential for protection and destruction. In the novel, orogenes like her are feared by some and exploited by others. As a result, their lives are marked by a number of traumatic conditions.

In my presentation, I will discuss how orogene trauma is perpetuated on an intergenerational scale by oppressive power structures within the novel, leading to the construction of a traumatic identity that shapes all aspects of orogene life. In particular, I will identify three areas in which trauma and oppression intersect to form cycles of violence and death predicated on ideas of alterity and racial difference. First, using Michelle Balaev's theory of place, I will show how the natural environment in Jemisin's novel represents more than just physical location, as it is also a site in which individual realities and cultural expectations meet, and thus an integral factor in the formation of personal identity. For orogenes, this identity is inherently traumatic because they share in the volatility and brokenness of their planet's landscape. Next, I will explore Michel Foucault's theory of modern biopower to explain how orogene bodies are exploited by powerful institutions in the novel, both at the level of the physical body, which Foucault calls an anatomopolitics of the human body (his first model of biopower), and at the reproductive level, which Foucault calls a biopolitics of the species body (his second model of biopower). Last, I will examine Kali Tal's notions of cultural codification and the mythologization of trauma to illustrate how orogenes in Jemisin's novel are subject to a language system that reduces them to the unknowable and strange other and deprives them of the right to put their traumatic experiences

into words, thus eliminating any possibility of relieving the intergenerational burden that shapes their existence.