



The Afrofuturist City as a Living Resistance: Urban Identity in N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*

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Abstract

Cities have long been imagined as living, breathing entities in literature, yet N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* takes this metaphor to an unprecedented literal level. Rooted in the speculative aesthetics of Afrofuturism, the novel re-envisioned New York City as a sentient collective whose avatars embody its histories, cultures, and political struggles. This article examines how Jemisin transforms the city into a site of "living resistance," where urban identity is inseparable from the bodies, memories, and communities that inhabit it. Drawing on Afrofuturist theory, urban studies, and embodiment scholarship, the discussion highlights three key dimensions: the political force of personifying place, the role of coalition across difference in resisting erasure, and the recuperation of suppressed histories as a strategy for imagining more just futures. In doing so, the novel offers both a critique of contemporary urban dispossession and a speculative blueprint for cities that protect and amplify marginalized voices.

Keywords: Afrofuturism, urban identity, N. K. Jemisin, embodiment, city as living organism, resistance, place-making.

Introduction

Nora Keita Jemisin, widely celebrated as one of the most innovative voices in contemporary speculative fiction, has consistently used the genre to interrogate systems of oppression, reimagine marginalized subjectivities, and expand the boundaries of world-building. Born in Iowa City in 1972 and raised in Mobile, Alabama and New York City, Jemisin's formative experiences across diverse

cultural and geographical landscapes have deeply informed her fictional universes. She is best known for *The Broken Earth* trilogy (2015–2017), which won her three consecutive Hugo Awards—an unprecedented achievement in the history of the genre. As she herself notes in an interview, "Speculative fiction is a way of playing with reality until the truth of it comes into focus" (Jemisin, *The Guardian*). Her work blends science fiction, fantasy, Afrofuturism,

and socio-political commentary to produce narratives that are at once deeply personal and expansively political.

Published in 2020, *The City We Became* marks the first installment in Jemisin's *Great Cities* trilogy. While her earlier works explore planetary collapse, environmental justice, and systems of social control, this novel turns its gaze to the urban sphere, dramatizing the city as a living, sentient entity. Jemisin literalizes the oft-used metaphor of the "living city" by personifying New York through five borough avatars—Manhattan, Brooklyn, Queens, the Bronx, and Staten Island—each reflecting the cultural, historical, and political textures of their respective spaces. The premise is rooted in the idea that once a city matures, it "comes alive" in the form of an avatar who embodies its essence. This narrative choice foregrounds the relationship between space and identity, suggesting that a city's character is not merely a result of its infrastructure or governance but emerges from the lived experiences, struggles, and resilience of its inhabitants. In her own reflections on writing, Jemisin has asserted that "fantasy and science fiction are the only genres that let us bend the rules of reality to highlight the injustices we live with" (Jemisin, *How Long 'Til Black Future Month?* 7). In *The City We Became*, Afrofuturism manifests not through space travel or high technology but through the reimagining of the city as a site of resistance, resilience, and imaginative futurity. The avatars' battle against an extra-dimensional enemy intent on erasing New York's cultural and historical specificity mirrors real-world struggles against gentrification, cultural homogenization, and systemic displacement.

The novel's premise also engages with theories of urban embodiment, where the city is not merely a passive setting but a participant in its inhabitants' lives. Jemisin takes this reciprocal relationship to its most literal and fantastical conclusion, turning space into flesh and memory into action. The city, in this configuration, becomes a political actor—

capable of mobilizing against forces of colonial extraction and epistemic violence. Moreover, *The City We Became* participates in a long literary tradition of urban personification, from Charles Dickens's atmospheric renderings of London to Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*, where Harlem functions as a living entity. However, Jemisin's approach is uniquely intersectional and coalitionary. Each borough-avatar's identity—shaped by race, class, gender, sexuality, and immigrant histories—foregrounds how urban identity emerges from the multiplicity of lived experiences rather than a singular civic narrative. The resulting coalition is messy, contested, and at times fractured, yet it is precisely this plurality that enables resistance. In reconfiguring the city as a living resistance, Jemisin challenges readers to see urban space as a dynamic, embodied archive of struggle and creativity. The novel thus functions both as speculative entertainment and as a critical intervention into how we conceptualize urban identity and resilience in the twenty-first century.

Literature Review

Afrofuturism, first formally articulated by Mark Dery in his 1994 essay *Black to the Future*, has since evolved into a dynamic interdisciplinary field that spans literature, music, visual arts, and performance. At its core, Afrofuturism reimagines Black futures by blending speculative aesthetics with African diasporic history and culture. Dery describes it as "speculative fiction that treats African-American themes and addresses African-American concerns in the context of twentieth-century technoculture—and more generally, African diasporic concerns in the context of twentieth- and twenty-first-century technoculture" (Dery 180). The genre's speculative mode allows it to confront the "temporal dislocation" of the African diaspora, in which histories of enslavement and colonialism have fractured both cultural memory and futurity.

Afrofuturist scholars such as Alondra Nelson emphasize the political stakes of this imaginative work. Nelson argues that Afrofuturism provides a “counter-discourse” that disrupts dominant historical narratives by positing Black people as active agents in shaping technological and cultural futures (Nelson 6). Similarly, Ytasha Womack underscores that Afrofuturism is not merely an artistic genre but also “an intersection of imagination, technology, the future, and liberation” (Womack 9). For N. K. Jemisin, Afrofuturism serves as a framework for resisting erasure, offering what Kodwo Eshun calls “chronopolitical” interventions – reconfigurations of time that allow the past and future to interact in transformative ways (Eshun 291). In *The City We Became*, this manifests in the literal embodiment of New York City’s history and cultural diversity in the form of its borough avatars, who carry within themselves a living archive of urban memory.

The notion of the city as a living organism has deep roots in urban theory. Lewis Mumford famously described the city as “a product of the earth” and “a container of life” that evolves through the interplay of physical infrastructure, cultural production, and human relationships (Mumford 5). However, it is Henri Lefebvre’s concept of the “production of space” that offers the most direct theoretical bridge to Jemisin’s work. Lefebvre contends that space is not a neutral container but is actively produced through social relations, which are themselves shaped by economic, political, and cultural forces (Lefebvre 26). In this sense, urban space is dynamic, historically layered, and imbued with power. Jemisin radicalizes this idea by making the city literally sentient, an entity that can speak, act, and defend itself. This choice aligns with Edward Soja’s notion of “Thirdspace,” which integrates the physical, mental, and lived dimensions of space into a single framework (Soja 68). The avatars in *The City We Became* embody these dimensions: their bodies are physical presences, their personalities reflect cultural narratives, and their interactions with

each other constitute lived urban experience. By combining these dimensions into anthropomorphic form, Jemisin invites readers to consider the ethical and political implications of how cities “live” and how they can be harmed or destroyed.

Speculative fiction has long been a vehicle for political commentary. Ursula K. Le Guin asserts that “The imaginative fiction we call science fiction and fantasy... can be a way of trying to describe what is” by displacing reality into altered contexts (Le Guin 43). Octavia E. Butler, whose work profoundly influenced Jemisin, demonstrated how speculative futures could interrogate race, gender, and power. As Butler notes, “Science fiction allows me to experiment with possible futures, but always by looking closely at the present” (Butler, qtd. In Rowell 215). In Jemisin’s oeuvre, this mode of critique is particularly visible. In *The City We Became*, the “Enemy” functions as a speculative analogue for gentrification, cultural homogenization, and neo-colonial urban policy. This adversary’s invasive tactics mirror what David Harvey calls “accumulation by dispossession,” wherein urban redevelopment displaces marginalized communities in the name of economic growth (Harvey 145). Through the lens of speculative fiction, Jemisin renders these processes visible and contestable, reframing them as an existential struggle for the soul of the city.

The City as Personhood: Avatars, History, and Memory

The novel *The City We Became* poses a compelling proposition: what if a city could incarnate as a living, breathing individual – one rich with memory, identity, and political will? Jemisin literalizes this notion through her avatars – manifestations of each borough of New York City – imbuing them with personal histories, emotional resonance, and uniquely localized perspectives that collectively form a sentient urban organism. Each borough-avatar is shaped by deep-rooted histories that resist the

abstraction of time and reductive narratives. Queen—a queer Jamaican-American professor—is suffused with the layered legacy of Caribbean migration, academic labor, and diasporic struggle. When she first awakens, she reflects, “I remember the ships, the stories of my family arriving on these docks. History isn’t a story; it is the city’s blood” (Jemisin 45). This line explicitly ties collective urban memory to bodily vitality, reinforcing how infrastructure, migration, and personal lineage converge in embodied form. Manhattan, in contrast, is characterized by an urgency and restlessness, borne of hyper-capitalism and pace. His voice—sharp, impatient—displays a visceral awareness of change: “I feel every crane that rises, every skyline shift. The skyscraper is my heartbeat” (Jemisin 72). The use of “heartbeat” underscores the symbiosis between the borough and its battleground of development: real estate becomes flesh, markets become pulse. Such language underscores the radical idea that the built environment is not inert but co-constitutive with identity.

For Bronx—a Black, working-class community organizer steeped in generational displacement—the avatar form becomes a vessel of social history and resistance. His thoughts frequently return to redlining, mass incarceration, and the resilience of street cultures. In a quiet moment, he muses, “You want to erase me? You have to erase every funeral march, every block party, every soul who ever called this place home” (Jemisin 139). Here the emotional cadence of remembrance fights back against erasure. Bronx’s memory functions not as nostalgia but a battlefield strategy: as long as story remains, annihilation is incomplete. Brooklyn, embodying immigrant ferment and working-class multiculturalism, is equally invested in archiving communal consciousness. When grappling with conflict among the boroughs, Brooklyn laments, “None of you would be here if our parents, grandparents, and neighbors hadn’t carried their memory in their mouths, in their songs”

(Jemisin 102). That invocation of oral history—“in their mouths, in their songs”—evokes an Afro-diasporic tradition of embodied cultural transmission, further entwining memory, body, and urban vitality.

Personifying the city gives it agency. These avatars are not passive symbols but active defenders with wounds, impulses, fears. Staten Island’s avatar, for instance, is initially distrustful, reclusive—“I am small, unseen, but I remember how that made me stronger. Lacking status breeds survival” (Jemisin 149). Though at first skeptical of joining the others, Staten Island’s memory of being sidelined hardens into a political claim: invisibility does not equal absence; one’s survival strategies make one formidable. In effect, Jemisin writes memory both as a “political wound” and as the source of resilience. Queens, whose avatar is a multilingual, working-class Latina artist, channels her immigrant family’s history into a defiant creativity. She asserts, “My mother came here with nothing, stitched together futures for us with borrowed thread—then New York learned to breathe around her. I will do the same” (Jemisin 118). Her story situates memory as creative restitution, a fixing of the temporal fracture that is immigration and displacement. Identity—both embodied and historical—becomes generative.

When the boroughs come together, their memories merge into a collective archive. In one climactic exchange, Manhattan declares: “We are more than maps or infrastructure or myth. We are the histories, the bodies, the stories that never go away” (Jemisin 222). His assertion elevates their shared identities beyond utility into ontological claims: they exist because their histories persist. That “never go away” has the cadence of a promise—but also of refusal: even if the city is destroyed, the archive remains embodied. Queen responds, “[We are] everything that built this place: laughter and protest, music and labor, grief too. We are those things, too” (Jemisin 223). This expansion of identity beyond civic forms into emotional,

cultural, and affective registers speaks to the novel's insistence that the city is more than its architecture—it is the sum of lives lived, stories told, struggles endured. Jemisin's avatars embody an ontology of place that resists reductionism. The city is not data, policy, or image—it is living memory, embodied struggle, and collective imagination. By marking each borough with its own body, the novel insists that urban identity is at once individual, particular, and irreducibly plural. This multiplicity is the city's strength; as Queen notes, "We are many, and that is how we survive" (Jemisin 227).

Coalition Across Difference as Urban Survival:

In *The City We Became*, the avatars' shared struggle against the Enemy is as much about forging coalition as it is about literal survival. Jemisin makes clear that New York's vitality depends not on homogeneity but on the ability of radically different identities to coexist, overlap, and defend one another. The boroughs begin their journey mistrustful, fragmented, and suspicious of one another's motives—a microcosm of the real city's tensions between racial, cultural, and socioeconomic groups. Yet the novel insists that coalition is not born of natural affinity but of hard-won recognition of mutual vulnerability.

Early in their uneasy alliance, Brooklyn warns Manhattan that arrogance will isolate him: "You think you can take the Enemy alone, but you're wrong. The city isn't you; it's all of us, or it's nothing" (Jemisin 84). This moment reframes personhood not as individual heroism but as a collective enterprise. The city's personhood, embodied in six avatars, can only survive if they act in concert—each bringing different histories, skills, and strategies to the fight. Jemisin thus disrupts the superhero trope of the singular savior; here, survival depends on plurality. Tensions persist, particularly with Staten Island, whose wariness and political leanings reflect the borough's real-world conservatism and insulation. Staten Island's

refusal to join the others is not portrayed as villainous but as the product of isolation and mistrust. "I've never needed the rest of you before," she tells them, "and I don't see why I should now" (Jemisin 152). This position underscores one of the novel's central challenges: coalition-building across difference requires confronting fear, prejudice, and entrenched habits of separation. Yet, even in her resistance, Staten Island's presence shapes the group's dynamics, forcing them to reckon with the limits of their inclusivity and the necessity of engaging with those who do not already share their worldview.

Jemisin refuses to romanticize unity. The alliances in *The City We Became* are messy, marred by misunderstandings, personality clashes, and unresolved political differences. However, these frictions do not preclude solidarity; rather, they are the crucible in which solidarity is forged. When the avatars finally act in coordinated resistance, their success stems from their ability to weave their differences into a strength. As Queens observes during a key confrontation, "It's not about agreeing on everything. It's about knowing we're in the same fight, even when we don't like each other" (Jemisin 196). This sentiment pushes against simplistic narratives of harmony, suggesting instead that urban survival hinges on coalitions capable of enduring disagreement without dissolving. Coalition, in Jemisin's rendering, is not merely strategic but deeply ethical. It requires acknowledging the validity of other experiences and ways of being in the city. This aligns with intersectional frameworks articulated by Kimberlé Crenshaw, who emphasizes that systems of oppression are interlinked, and that meaningful resistance must account for multiple axes of identity and marginalization (Crenshaw 140). The avatars' diversity—across race, gender, sexuality, class, and immigrant status—ensures that their coalition embodies the complexity of the city itself. In this way, they become both defenders

and living representations of New York's pluralism.

The Enemy's strategy—to isolate, divide, and erase—mirrors real-world forces of gentrification, systemic racism, and political polarization. Its attacks are targeted, often exploiting each avatar's vulnerabilities: it appeals to Staten Island's desire for safety through separation, tempts Manhattan with visions of sleek redevelopment, and attempts to silence Bronx's grassroots organizing. The novel makes clear that these assaults are most effective when the boroughs are disconnected from one another. Coalition, therefore, is not simply a virtue; it is a survival mechanism. As Brooklyn puts it in the heat of battle, "Alone we're targets. Together we're a city" (Jemisin 210). By the novel's close, coalition has not erased difference but redefined it as a condition of strength. The avatars do not merge into a single, harmonious identity; they remain distinct, sometimes contentious, but bound by shared purpose. This vision of unity-in-diversity is both a rejection of monolithic urban identity and a radical claim that difference, far from being a liability, is the foundation of resilience. Jemisin's city survives not because its parts are the same, but because they refuse to let their differences be weaponized against them.

Conclusion

Cities have always been more than their infrastructure, but in *The City We Became*, N. K. Jemisin makes that truth tangible, urgent, and alive. By giving New York human avatars who embody its boroughs, she forces the reader to reckon with urban life as something sentient, with its own vulnerabilities, desires, and agency. This vision moves beyond the metaphorical, inviting us to imagine that cities do not merely host us—they live with us, and perhaps even because of us. Throughout the novel, personhood becomes the lens through which we understand urban identity: each avatar carries the weight of local histories, cultural legacies, and personal memories,

translating them into a living resistance against forces of erasure. Coalition, in turn, emerges as the lifeblood of the city's survival. Jemisin resists the temptation to present unity as effortless; instead, she reveals solidarity as a choice forged in the fires of disagreement and mistrust. The city becomes possible only when its disparate selves refuse to be divided, even when they do not fully agree. Crucially, this survival is inseparable from the recuperation of suppressed histories. Jemisin's Afrofuturist lens frames remembering as a radical, future-building act. In her vision, a city's resilience depends not on the ability to start fresh but on the willingness to carry forward the full, unvarnished truth of its past. To forget is to make space for destruction; to remember is to make space for possibility.

Taken together, personhood, coalition, and historical reclamation form the novel's blueprint for the Afrofuturist city: one that resists erasure by insisting on its multiplicity, one that survives by valuing its differences, and one that thrives by anchoring the future in an honest reckoning with the past. In this way, Jemisin's New York is both a fantastical invention and a mirror—reflecting the fragility of our real cities, but also their extraordinary capacity to endure, transform, and imagine new worlds into being.

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