

Abstract

N.K. Jemisin, McArthur fellow and four-time Hugo Award winner, is an expert in crafting alternate realities. Through personification of landscape, her work exposes racial division in America using the site of the metaphorical body as a contested space. In her 2020 novel, *The City We Became*, Jemisin explores contemporary racial and ethnic disparity in the United States, suggesting that its true significance finds meaning in the diversity of its cultural, historical and contemporary existence.

Jemisin's novel was published during a time of significant racial tension within America; an issue astutely negotiated through the sci-fi genre, exploring the magnitudes of white racial anxieties within a divided nation. Indeed, *The City We Became* exposes how the sci-fi genre itself has suffered from these same anxieties, and therefore becomes an apt site for their interrogation. Jemisin has first-hand experience of these issues, though her accoladed success has been dismissed by her fellow authors as 'diversity pandering'. Despite this, Jemisin continues to create and explore alternate realities which have at their forefront a refreshing diversity closely resembling our own world and, through using landscape as a site of metaphysical contestation, provoke essential discourse about contemporary racial division in America.

This article will explore how, by reshaping the American landscape through science-fiction to include the racial and ethnic diversity of its population, Jemisin both highlights the absence of such diversity in the history of the genre, and provokes contemporary discussion about systematic racism within the contested body of the United States.

'The Ethics of Quantum Colonialism': Navigating American Racial Anxiety in N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became*

The conflict between racial equality and white anxiety is the central point of interrogation of N.K Jemisin's 2020 novel, *The City We Became*, an American sci-fi novel which depicts the literal birth of New York City and its interdimensional battle to exist against an insidious force from another reality. *The City We Became* suggests that New York City is more than its urban physicality; instead, its existence is dependent of the continued diversity of its people. Residents find communal belonging in their shared historical diasporas, and in this new 'immigrant mecca' (Foner 30) they become embodiments of the city, representing a home sustained by the cultural distinctness of its people. Fighting against this diversity, an otherworldly being (embodied in avatar-form and known as the 'Woman In White') attacks the city, not merely physically but through political pro-white narratives and redevelopment projects, undermining and erasing New York City's cultural complexity, and manipulating a narrative of racial and economic otherness so that she can thrive in its place. While Jemisin's novel presents an alternate sci-fi reality, the real-world significance of its political message is crucial. Through interrogating contemporary racial and cultural conflicts, the novel explores New York City as a microcosm of contemporary American existence. *The City We Became* mirrors contemporary racial discord in America, focusing its critique on a city which has an inordinate stake in pursuing cultural acceptance. In doing so, Jemisin suggests that progress requires change, and in order to embrace what the United States has become, it must first eradicate the racial injustices of its past.

Historically, white America traces its history back to its Puritan, European roots, to a pilgrimage to the New World spurred on by a belief in the manifest destiny of God's chosen people. Richard Hauck argues that 'the mythical American prototype...began in confidence by deliberately cutting his European ties and then became lost on his errand in the wilderness when the promised land changed from here to "somewhere"' (Hauck 9). Early north American settlers hoped for a new and glorious land. However, the reality was harsh and unforgiving, and primary settlements saw significant casualties from illness and starvation. Early settlers developed their philosophical and physical insecurities into a narrative of endurance anchored in religious belief. Samuel P. Huntington correlates American national identity with the same theological determinism that underpinned the manifest destiny of its first settlers, suggesting that America thrives under one monotheistic idealism. In his book *Who Are We? Challenges to America's National Identity* he argues that:

Dissenting Protestantism is essential to America's [identity]. Americans are overwhelmingly committed to both God and country, and for Americans they are inseparable. In a world in which religion shapes the allegiances, the alliances, and the antagonisms of people on every continent, it should not be surprising if Americans

again turn to religion to find their national identity and their national purpose.
(Huntington 365)

However, this negates the complexity of not only contemporary American life, but also its history, as the roots of America exist in multiculturalist discourse, in racial and religious difference.

N.K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* recognises the identity of America formed and sustained through this cultural diversity which is frequently ignored by critics such as Huntington. In the text, New York City is embodied by one, central hero: a young, homeless, gay man who is described as 'definitively Black' (Jemisin 2) - a description which in almost every respect defies Huntington's post-Puritan ideal. Furthermore, each of the boroughs also develops their own, personalized avatar. For the Bronx - the oldest district in New York City - this is Bronca, an almost seventy-year-old Lenape lesbian who fought through the Stonewall riots and 'faced down armed police alongside her brothers and sisters in AIM' (125). The American Indian Movement was founded in 1968, originally in urbanised areas, to address and combat issues of poverty and police brutality against Native Americans. In such a way, Bronca represents an enduring resistance to white nationalist power in America.

Jaimes and Halsey argue that 'it is women who have formed the very core of indigenous resistance to genocide and colonization since the first moment of conflict between Indians and invaders' (Jaimes 311). They highlight movement leaders such as Marie Lego, Janet McCloud (Tualip), and Ramona Bennett (Puyallup) who led the way in the 60s and 70s in campaigning for fishing and land rights for indigenous people, stating that the vital role which women play in resistance is essential to the movement. Bronca is an embodiment of that movement. The self-styled 'scourge of Stonewall' has kicked back against police – a representation of a white, American state – for most of her life, and now 'those steel-toed boots dwell permanently in her soul' (Jemisin 125). Furthermore, when the birth of the city has to bestow knowledge on one of its avatars, it is Bronca who is chosen, as the eldest of the group, to receive the information on how cities come to exist and be born. Jemisin gives recognition to the historical validity of the indigenous non-monotheistic American experience, an American identity older than that of white Europeans, but intrinsic in the shaping of contemporary American identity. Bronca's strength comes from her history in the city and from her ancestors. She 'has legs bolted to a million foundations...where a thousand generations of Bronca's mothers grew and thrived, which has been invaded and poisoned and built over again and again – but it survives still. Survives *strong*' (259). Bronca's Lenape heritage intrinsically connects the historical significance of the landscape to a contemporary New York, and reaffirms the validity of the city as a site of discourse surrounding American identity politics.

Daniel Arreola argues that urban sites like New York City and its boroughs are fundamental in understanding a wider cultural, American identity:

To analyse the identity of a city is to begin to understand human association with place and how localities become defined by varied interests. The identity of a city is not necessarily the same as the image that individuals perceive. Neither is it exactly a mental map nor a sense of place. City identity involves the meanings projected by a landscape...Urban identity is inevitably a constructed idea that is tied to a real or ideal landscape (Arreola 518)

New York City poses particular significance in this respect. Described as the 'quintessential immigrant city' (Foner 29), it draws an ethnically varied plethora of people into the 'bright light and bluster' of its landscape (Jemisin 20). The passage of the Immigration and Nationality Act in 1965 facilitated the mass movement of a diverse range of people to New York City. A 2010 study showed that, although immigrants from Dominican Republic, Mexico, Jamaica and China made up the largest four ethnic groups in New York City, they 'were only a little over a third of all the foreign born, and no other country accounted for more than 5 percent (Foner 33).' The extrapolation of this data suggests that New York City is an urban landscape characterized by its diversity. This is supported by William B. Helmreich in his book *The New York Nobody Knows: Walking 6,000 Miles in the City*. He argues that the districts, such as Richmond Hill in Queens, act as microcosms for the wider multiculturalism of the city. He talks anecdotally of shops displaying signs showing that they 'Carry Full Line of Spanish, Guyanese, Indian, & Bangladesh Ethnic Products' and states that, despite the cultural and ethnic disparities between New York citizens, this diversity is ultimately imbued with a sense of community and understanding between residents:

Although they have their disagreements, they get along remarkably well. Their efforts to maintain their identity do not occasion any anxiety, or much concern, by city government or anybody else. Their differences are simply a fact of life in this incredibly varied metropolis...The proximity almost forces people to learn about and get to know each other. They learn from one another that dealing with one's ethnicity in the American context is a complex issue but one that all incoming groups must face. (Helmreich 297)

Helmreich's assertion that cultural diversity does not breed dissonance, but rather enhances acceptance, is essential in understanding New York City as an urban symbol for the great 'melting pot' of America (a common colloquialism adapted from Israel Zangwill's 1908 play). N.K Jemisin's *The City We Became* utilizes the symbolic cultural connotations of this space to interrogate American discourse surrounding racial anxieties and discord and, in particular, to engage with Great Replacement theory. The novel's interdimensional Woman in White, aims to destroy the city through acts of cultural assault against non-white races. Her attacks are prompted by fears of her own impending destruction if the city continues to thrive, and her attacks are enacted through racial silencing, displacement and mockery funded by a privileged and wealthy white upper class.

The recent escalation in the Black Lives Matter movement in America has demonstrated relevance of *The City We Became*. Despite the multicultural ideology of urban landscapes such as New York City, racial disparity and white anxieties continue to exist, as white Americans become increasingly aware that their privilege exists as a benefit of systematic racial inequality. The death of George Floyd through asphyxiation by a police officer reaffirmed this inequality, highlighting the conflict between America's tolerant, welcoming, and diverse identity, and the fatalistic and racially-motivated actions of the state. Indeed, as the protest movement gathered pace, a narrative of white American discord began to emerge. These varied in intensity: news outlets like Fox News lobbied scorn on those looting and rioting, there were multiple accounts of white Americans calling police to report Black Lives Matter signs and, in California, effigies and nooses were found hanging from trees in suspected intimidation tactics. In New York City, protesters told stories of police brutality, including of two police cars that accelerated into crowds (Wortham). However, alongside these acts of violence, New York City attempted to reassert its diversity through street art, including unveiling five new Black Lives Matter murals. Critics were quick to point out that legislative change was required, not street art. Nevertheless, New York City appeared to be taking tentative steps to embrace a global movement which would have intrinsic ramifications for its own diverse populace (Spivak).

Part of New York City's racial disaffect can be explained by the physical trauma of its recent history. The attack on 9/11 permanently changed the landscape of New York City, both in vision and in substance. In the year after the 2001 attack, hate crimes against the Muslim population in America rose by 1,600% as the collective trauma of a nation turned into racially-motivated anger (Jha 82). The loss of life in the attack was devastating. However, American vehemence was also increased by the scarring of the physical skyline: the twin towers, were, for most, a symbol of American identity and culture. Baudrillard argues that skyscrapers are an inherently American concept, a reflection of conflict over their own identity:

[America] invents the only great modern verticality in its buildings, which are the most grandiose manifestations within the vertical order and yet do not obey the rules of transcendence, which are the most prodigious pieces of architecture and yet do not obey the laws of aesthetics, which are ultra-modern and ultra-functional, but also have about them something non-speculative, primitive, and savage – a culture (or unculture) like this remains a mystery to us.

Baudrillard continues to state that skyscrapers are testaments to an American apathy, to a society which 'gives itself neither meaning nor an identity' (Baudrillard). Yet, here Baudrillard misinterprets America's identity conflict as an absence of its locus. In fact, American identity is marked by its many conflicts. This is not a lack of identity, but rather an identity defined by complexity.

Despite the attack prompting a significant rise of racism in America, the assault was interpreted as an attack on a symbol of multicultural freedom. In the wake of the 2001 attack, the NYC Recovers were formed to rebuild the city, a multicultural and ethnically diverse group consisting of schools, churches, non-profits, and organizations, formed in the belief that organizations are 'integral to the myriad communities that comprise the regional ecosystem, had the ability to assess the needs of their constituents, and [are best positioned to] institute appropriate remedies' (Fullilove 482). Despite the growing rise of racism, the residents of New York City continued to recognise that multicultural and ethnic diversity was essential to its recovery. Jemisin therefore chooses New York City as her setting for *The City We Became* precisely because of its symbolic function as a microcosm of American diversity, an acknowledgment of the conflict and comradery which form a nation's identity:

Its sewers extend into places where there is no need for water. Its slums grow teeth; its art centers, claws. Ordinary things within it, traffic and construction and stuff like that, start to have a rhythm like a heartbeat if you record their sounds and play them back fast. The city...quickens. (Jemisin 8)

For Jemisin, the noise and life of the city produce a living, breathing body, something whole and greater than its disparate parts. The avatar for New York is told that 'stockbroker racquetball and schoolboy handball, ballet and merengue, union halls and SoHo galleries. You will embody a city of millions. You need not be them, but know they are a part of you' (9). New York City defies definition by any one group; rather it is the amalgamation of all which causes the city to become 'a thing that breathes and swallows endlessly, never filling' (3). Jemisin defines the city as infinite in volume mirroring Emma Lazarus's famous poem adorning the Statue of Liberty, 'A mighty woman with a torch.../Glows world-wide welcome/...Send these, the homeless, tempest-tost to me/I lift my lamp beside the golden door!' (Lazarus). The avatar for New York City embodies these ideals, and Jemisin's New York City becomes represented by its inclusion, not division. Indeed, the immigrant history imbued in places such as Ellis Island and the Statue of Liberty further serves to reinforce New York City as an apt symbolic site for interrogating the diversity of cultures and ethnicities which form contemporary American existence.

Nancy Foner explains that, 'it is not just that New Yorkers are used to immigration and ethnic succession. Because of the continued inflows – as well as the huge size of the present foreign-born population – the vast majority of New Yorkers have a close immigrant connection' (Foner 33). New York's FDR Drive (a parkway in Manhattan) is described by Jemisin as 'an artery, vital with the movement of nutrients and strength and attitude and adrenaline', a literal lifeblood providing a constant source of new people to and from the city (Jemisin 15). Again Jemisin demonstrates the vitality of diversity, and further suggests that the movement of people makes the city cohesive. New

York City's avatar states, 'I feel myself upon the firmament, heavy as the foundations of a city. There are others here with me, looming, watching – my ancestors' bones under Wall Street, my predecessors' blood ground into the benches of Christopher Park' (17). The places mentioned are of historical racial and sexual significance: in 1711, Wall Street became the site for the city's first slave market, and Christopher Park was the location of the Stonewall Riots. However, even before the 1969 uprising, Christopher Park was 'a favorite hangout for a diverse group of (often homeless) gay street youth and those who might identify today as transgender' (NYC LGBT Historic Sites Project). Again, the avatar's own personal identity of a young, homeless and gay black man affirms his suitability as the city's avatar. Jemisin demonstrates that the historical physical and political structure of New York City is brimming with a resistance to inequality and the protection of diversity. Further, Jemisin demonstrates that this diversity protects the city. When the avatar faces his first battle against the otherworldly invading force, he retaliates using the boroughs as defence:

When it comes at me, I hip-check it with the BQE, backhand it with Inwood Hill Park, drop the South Bronx on it like an elbow...I shower the Enemy with a one-two punch of Long Island radiation and Gowanus toxic waste...Just to add insult to injury? I backhand its ass with Hoboken, raining the drunk rage of ten thousand dudebros down on it like the hammer of God. Port Authority makes it honorary New York, motherfucker; you just got Jerseyed. (Jemisin 18)

The defences the avatar uses to protect itself against this unknown enemy are physical manifestations of New York City's diversity, and the avatar acts as a battling midwife, defending the city during labour until 'the tether is cut and we are here. We become! We stand, whole and hale and independent, and our legs don't even wobble.' (18) The birth of a city, defended and defined by its diversity, makes it strong enough to bear its own vitality. Yet, the city's multiculturalism is too great to exist under one avatar, and five other avatars form in districts around to battle the enemy, which has insidiously taken foothold on within New York.

Perhaps the most interesting of these district avatars is Manhattan, an outsider who, on arrival to the city, develops amnesia and forgets who he was before. Manny is described as the 'generic all-American boy (non-white version)' (31), and throughout the text his nondescript physical characteristics are commented on by other characters. However, there are some aspects of his outer appearance worth noting. His 'preppy' mid-twenties look is 'professorial' with 'sharp cheekbones', and overall, he is a self-confessed 'good-looking guy' (30). However, this lack of description is not the absence of identity, but the amalgamation of a multifaceted racial history. As Queen's avatar, Padmini, describes:

What Manhattan is now, white people run so much of it, but it's literally built on the bones of Black people. And Native Americans and Chinese and Latinos and whole

waves of European immigrants and...everybody. That must be why you look so...everything (191).

This generic identity, coupled with his professional attire and good looks, make him both palatable and non-threatening in appearance. Jemisin portrays her characters astutely; while Manhattan's history is diverse, it also maintains the outward appearance of an attractively romanticised New York City. When Manny first confronts the tentacles of the Enemy erupting from FDR, he borrows an umbrella, climbs onto the roof of the cab, and directs his cab driver Madison (symbolic of Madison Avenue) to drive through the ethereal being, leaving a 'Checker cab cutout like something from a kid's cartoon' (48). The fact that this scene occurs only moments after Manny arrives in New York City underlines the significance of the farcical whimsy of the encounter. As stated earlier, Daniel Arreola argues that urban landscapes are both real and idealized. In this scene, Manny's new arrival portrays the idealised, tourist-attraction veneer of New York City, a place full of Checker-cabs, driven by Madison Avenue advertising, and full of boldness, farcicality, and bravery. Indeed, if New York City is composed of 'bright light and bluster' (20), then Manhattan's Times Square can be argued as the place where the city wears its heart on its sleeve. Yet Manny is also aware that he is dangerous. He notes, despairingly, that he is 'every slave broker. Every slumlord who shut off the heat and froze children to death. Every stockbroker who got off rich through war and suffering' (81). Although he is unsure of his own pre-New York identity, he becomes certain that his past self, his history pre-contemporary New York City, was one of violence. Indeed, this selective awareness of a violent and dangerous history underneath a socially amenable appearance is indicative of the borough itself, whose bloody transgressions are often muted in favour of its standing as an economic powerhouse.

Brooklyn summarizes Manny as 'smart, charming, well-dressed, and cold enough to strangle you in an alley' (79). Yet, even these less than scrupulous characteristics are shown to be of benefit to New York City. In a shared vision, Manny and Brooklyn see where the New York City avatar is sleeping, waiting to be awoken by the districts. Manny's response to this vision is adoration:

I'm his, he thinks suddenly, wildly. I want to be...oh God, I want to be his. I live for him and will die for him if he requires it, and oh yes, I'll kill for him, too, if he needs that, and so for him and him alone I will be again the monster that I am [Author italics] (196)

It is important to note that no other avatar in the text has this same obsessive devotion to New York City, and Jemisin signifies here that, despite the bloody and violent history of Manhattan, its benefit has always been to the development of the city's greatness. If Manhattan is an idealized New York then, in turn, the borough also could be said to idealize its own landscape. Manny, put simply, is a man 'falling in love with a city' (203).

Not all the boroughs are as enamoured as Manny and, in particular, Staten Island stands alone in opposition to the aims of the group. Jemisin recognises that Staten Island's historical connections to the greater city have been turbulent. Despite the consolation of its borough into greater NYC in 1898, and sufficient infrastructure to unite the island to the rest of the city, it has remained questionably separatist. While the movement to secede from New York City had been rising since the early 1980s, it was not until the 1990s, under the term of mayor David Dinkins, that a vote to become an independent city was cast. While 65% of Staten Island residents supported the motion, it was inevitably blocked in the State Assembly, and Staten Island remained a reluctant part of New York City (Kashiwagi).

For Jemisin, this otherness breeds insecurities and fear on both sides: Staten Island is 'the forgotten one, and the despised one when they bother to remember' (98). Aislyn is the avatar for the borough, pronounced as 'an Americanization of Aislyn, rather than its softer Irish pronunciation' (102), thereby transforming the title into a bastardized form of Island. Indeed, Aislyn is, physically and psychologically, an island – she is isolated from the group, the city, and its cultural diversity. She is the only white avatar, the daughter of a racist, abusive Irish cop father and a near-mute, demure mother whose own racial anxieties and bullying tactics have left her with a 'contamination as deep and toxic as lead' (106). Aislyn's vulnerability to the insidious rhetoric of the Woman in White is, in most respects, prompted by a fear of non-white, non-islanders, and a reassurance of people who are similar to her in belief and ideology. Even when the Woman in White admits to causing a bridge collapse in New York City during her battle with the primary avatar, Aislyn reconciles this information with her own racial perceptions of identity;

Aislyn is staring at the Woman, all her unease forgotten amid shock and horror. *Terrorist!* her mind cries...and rejects. Terrorists are bearded Arab men who mutter in guttural languages and want to rape virgins. This woman is just crazy (103).

Aislyn's bias outweighs her misgivings, and when the Woman whispers her name in Aislyn's ear 'her skin prickles and itches and grows hot all over' (107), still she continues to trust this new friend based on her outward 'white' appearance and familiar racist rhetoric. However, the Woman in White, as an ethereal being, has a dislike for *all* citizens of New York City, as they threaten her own existence:

Half the people on this island absolutely dread crossing that water every day...prissy chink bitches who barely speak English but make seven figures gambling with *your* 401(k), and feminists and Jews and trannies and nnnnnNegroes and *liberals*, libtards everywhere, making the world safe for every kind of pervert. (99)

The Woman in White seeks to reaffirm a conservative, racist mind-set of an overrun, lawless America, whose problems stem from the acceptance of minority equality. Her racial rhetoric is a manipulative tactic used to coerce Aislyn to her cause, and ultimately destroy the city. Indeed, the

gender of the Woman in White is also significant. The perceived vulnerability of white womanhood has been historically used as a weapon against Black communities.¹ If New York City is a symbolic site of multicultural diversity, then the Woman in White is conversely a symbol of white supremacist anxieties infecting an ignorant and fearful middle-class America.

White Replacement Theory finds its origins on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean. In America, contemporary white genocide theory has been documented since 1995, when neo-Nazi David Lane suggested that white people were being slowly exterminated in favour of other races. However, this theory has since been amalgamated with the 'Great Replacement' theory espoused in Europe. Renaud Camus first coined the term the 'Great Replacement' in 2011 in his book *De l'Innocence*. His theory suggested that the white population in France, and other white European countries, was being replaced by an influx of non-white people at the assistance of 'replacist elites', to eventually make white populations a minority in Europe. These views have been widely criticised as unscientific and misleading, with manipulated statistics which 'simply objectify and dignify racist prejudices' (Landis 372). Regardless, his first book and subsequent political writings have become doctrine to a subset of radical white nationalists. Indeed, racially-motivated terrorist attacks have been linked to the works throughout the world. The Norwegian mass shooter Anders Breivik wrote a 1500-page manifesto on the fear of white extermination by mass immigration, later inspiring the El Paso shooter in Texas and the Christchurch shooter in New Zealand whose manifesto, titled 'The Great Replacement', began with the phrase, 'It's the birthrates. It's the birthrates. It's the birthrates' (Schwartzberg). To date, there has been no evidence put forward that white populations are statistically in decline (Moses 201-213). However, the conspiracy theory has been promoted by a number of public figures; most notably, and perhaps most concerning, by former US President, Donald Trump, who suggested that white South African farmers were being systematically robbed of their land and killed (Marcotte). Despite its lack of statistically or scientific validity, the Great Replacement theory is intrinsic to the understanding of racial tensions in the United States, where even the figurehead of the nation expressed this unfounded racist rhetoric.

Jemisin is all-too aware of this discourse. Her position as a black female sci-fi writer in a white-male dominated genre has resulted in allegations against her, and other writers, as beneficiaries of diversity-pandering. Jemisin's recent position as a MacArthur fellow, and her achievement as the first writer in history to win four Hugo Awards in succession has received white nationalist attention. A protest organized by a collective of white male writers, including Theodore Beale (who styles himself

¹ For example, birdwatcher Chris Cooper was falsely accused of intimidation in Central Park when he asked a white woman to leash her dog as per regulations. See Brooke Gladstone's Podcast *The Weaponization of White Womanhood* (WNYC Studios) for further discussion on this topic.

'Vox Day'), named the 'Sad Puppies' and the 'Rabid Puppies', argued that the Hugo Award is becoming less-male and less-white, and that Jemisin in particular, and other non-white writers, are 'half-savages' (Berlatsky). Jemisin continues to refute these ideologies, noting how real-life resistance to racial attacks influences her writing:

I have no particular interest in maintaining the status quo. Why would I? The status quo is harmful, the status quo is significantly racist and sexist and a whole bunch of other things that I think need to change...I see a revolution...I see unorthodox change and I see it being effective. And that gives me additional material to possibly write with. (Jemisin)

Jemisin's infusion of racial discourse within her writing is overt; dealing with issues such as slavery, patriarchy and queer identity politics. However, *The City We Became* is the first of her works to overtly confront Great Replacement Theory and white anxieties. The Woman in White described as having a 'more-Aryan-than-thou aesthetic' (Jemisin 233) and, although her avatar appearance changes frequently, she is always described as 'the same woman as before' (283) in mind-set, notably always racially white. Furthermore, her attempts to destroy the city are classist and economically exclusionary, using money and power to eradicate non-white culture and experiences under the guise of the 'Better New York' foundation, repossessing Brooklyn's brownstone house under the guise of unpaid taxes, and promising 'unrestricted funds' to Bronca's art gallery if she displays work with overtly racist subject matters (240). Indeed, the group who Bronca rejects, the Alt-Artistes', parody the Great Replacement narrative espoused by the Puppies who protested against Jemisin;

The Artistes' video...is almost a masterwork of insinuation. At no point do they come right out and say that Bronca rejected them because they're white men; that's unprovable, and actionable. They say everything else though. That Bronca is an out lesbian and Indigenous-rights activist with an Ivy League PhD ("I thought Indians were supposed to be poor," sneers Fifteen). (244)

The Alt Artistes' complaints about white erasure are alike in aspect to what Jemisin has experienced first-hand, complete with similar racist rhetoric. Yet the 'erasure' of their culture by Bronca is a fallacy. Instead of their artwork reflecting a white experience, it uses obscenity to negate the experience of racial and ethnic minorities:

This is crap. A collage of lynching photos, zoomed in on dead or agonized Black faces...A triptych of charcoal line art daubed with watercolour in the first, a dark-skinned woman with comically exaggerated lips, nipples, and vulva lies tied...a line of men with cocks in hand – or knives, at random – wait their turn beside her. And, in all three images, while the men take their turns, the emotionless woman spews quotes from well-known feminists of colour. (141)

For the Alt-Artistes, the ridicule of the horror of lived minority experience is synonymous with their own cultural identity. Through not acknowledging their flagrant and racist mockery as legitimate art,

Bronca faces accusations of white erasure and diversity pandering – a silencing of the voices of white artists in favour of other races and ethnicities, a rhetoric similar to that used in Great Replacement Theory.

However, the Alt Artistes are funded and, in many ways manipulated by the Woman in White. Much of the Woman in White's control stems from tendrils which latch onto people and places and infect them towards her cause. When Bronca uses her avatar powers to stop the Alt Artistes from burning down the gallery, she realises belatedly 'It was in them...it has grown into the electrical system and begun crawling up inside of the stairwell walls, damaging children's murals along the way' (259). Again, Jemisin notes here the erasure of culture and art as a primary site of violence against non-white groups. Benhabib has suggested that, 'culture is the context within which we need to situate the self, for it is only by virtue of the interpretations, orientations and values provided by culture that we can formulate our identities, say 'who we are', and 'where we are coming from' (Benhabib 18). Culture is instrumental in the formation, expression, and exploration of identity and, in the multicultural abundance of New York City, it becomes a way to share and expand diversity through knowledge and understanding. The Alt Artistes' racist, misogynistic, anti-Semitic, and homophobic artwork situates their culture as one in opposition to all that deviates from their own identities. Indeed, the Woman in White's vernacular also confirms an intention of cultural erasure. Manny notes 'she doesn't get English because English draws a distinction between the individual self and the collective plural, and wherever she comes from, whatever she is, that difference doesn't mean the same thing. If there's a difference at all' (Jemisin 181). For the Woman in White, there is no difference between the collective and the individual because her existence is one of homogeneity, in direct opposition to the cultural diversity of New York City. Yet she is also aware that there is power in embracing diversity, telling Aislyn, 'you eat each other's cuisines and learn new techniques...you wear each other's fashions and learn new patterns...and because of it you grow stronger. Even just one new language infects you with a radically different way of thinking!' (342). The strength of the city is fully actualized through the sharing of culture, and the Woman in White's homogeneity is relatively weak in comparison. Therefore, it is not simply that the Woman in White represents white culture, but rather that she represents a reactionary aggression arising from white anxieties surrounding Great Replacement theory. This is a vital distinction, as in the text her extermination is real (unlike the aforementioned alt-right fears surrounding the eradication of white people in favour of other races), as the birth of a city results in 'the deaths of hundreds or thousands of other closely related universes, and every living thing in them' (306).

Noah Berlatsky notes that 'Jemisin's stories almost always involve a flawed order, and the efforts (also flawed) to overthrow it' (Berlatsky). Jemisin herself states in her novel *The Fifth Season*

that 'The goal is survival, and sometimes survival requires change' (Jemisin ch.11). The avatars in *The City We Became* also ascribe to this belief; although they struggle with their complicity in the destruction of other universes, they accept that 'many things die so something else can live' (Jemisin 308). Although it could therefore be argued that the Woman in White's assault on New York City is survivalist if not altruistic (saving millions of other universes), her position is corrupted by her drive for homogeneity. She has already destroyed other cities as they were being born, and her continued racist rhetoric and targeted co-option of white bodies suggests that she is the ethereal manifestation of a white supremacist culture which seeks to remove anything non-homogenous to its own existence. When her true form is revealed as the city of R'lyeh – the mysterious Lovecraftian home of Cthulhu, it becomes clear just how dangerous this white supremacist culture is, lurking in 'the empty spaces where nightmares dare not tread' (391).

The success of Lovecraft's legacy in spite of his prevalent racism has been discussed and debated by writers, fans and academics alike.² David Simmons argues that Lovecraft's 'racially prejudiced comments belie a deeper and considerably more multifaceted engagement with concepts of the non-Western *Other*, a stance that is attracted to that which it is simultaneously repulsed by' (Simmons). Lovecraftian racism is abject at its root – entailing some amalgamation of desire and repulsion of otherness. However, Simmons fails to note that many of those races present in America during Lovecraft's writing were not *non-Western* but generationally established American citizens. Lovecraft's America, while not as diverse and multicultural as today, nevertheless contained a multiplicity of races and ethnicities among its citizens. The otherness which Lovecraft reviles is not geographically orientated, but intrinsically connected to race. This is demonstrated in his letters, when he writes to Clark Aston Smith that his story 'The Horror at Red Hook' was inspired by 'the gangs of young loafers & herds of evil-looking foreigners that one sees everywhere in New York' (Lovecraft 27). Indeed, Houellebecq argues that Lovecraft's two-year residence in New York City transformed his racism into the 'brutal hatred of a trapped animal who is forced to share his cage with other different and frightening creatures' (Houellebecq 106). Again, it is Lovecraft's own racial insecurities and WASP white supremacy which influence his perception of the Other as a frightening being.

However, it is his abject disdain of the multiculturalism of New York City, in particular, which Jemisin interrogates within *The City We Became*. When the Alt Artistes show Bronca a painting which insidiously begins to overwhelm their own dimension, it is based on Lovecraft's own perceptions:

Took me a minute, but I get it now. 'Dangerous Mental Machines,' hah...That was Lovecraft's fun little label for folks in Chinatown – sorry, 'Asiatic filth.' He was willing to concede that they might be as intelligent as white people because they knew how

² It is not my intention to add to this discourse, but simply state its relevance in relation to Jemisin's work.

to make a buck. But he didn't think they had souls...this shows you New York *as he saw it*, the chickenshit little fuck, walking down the street and imagining that every other human he met *wasn't* human. So, gentlemen, again, what part of 'we don't do bigotry' do you not understand? (Jemisin148-149)

While Lovecraft's racism is overt, Jemisin specifically identifies his loathing of the diversity of New York City in her critique. More importantly Bronca, as the eldest of the boroughs and the one endowed with the history of the city, is the avatar who rejects his interpretations. While 'we don't do bigotry' refers to the gallery staff, it also more importantly is a rejection by New York City itself, from an avatar who runs a non-profit devoted to the cultural protection of multiracial expression.

Furthermore, Jemisin's appropriation of Lovecraft's R'lyeh as a homogenous, interdimensional enemy bent on the destruction of New York City's ethnic diversity is a direct response to critics' intentional disregard of his racist rhetoric. The tendrils which overrun the city are invisible except to those who are directly affected by their negative actions. The avatars see how the tendrils are transferred from person to person, whether intentional or unintentional, and how they spread the infection. The Woman in White states that these 'guide-lines...encourage preexisting inclinations, and channel the energies...into more compatible wavelengths' (333). Only those who are already inclined to racial bias are affected, and these tendrils become a notable marker of a much larger racial problem, albeit only visible by the avatars themselves. This is a direct reflection of contemporary American issues: despite the rise of the BLM movement in the wake of the deaths of Eric Garner, Trayvon Martin, Ahmad Aubery, Breonna Taylor and George Floyd³, government officials repeatedly stated there is no systematic racism within the American system (Beggin). Yet, much like the avatars, the people who do recognise the system have begun to fight back through protests, and sometimes violence. As Jemisin puts it 'I think our society right now is enduring change in a painful and bloody way that is not necessarily a war' (Berlatsky). The avatars of *The City We Became* are also not seeking out a war, but engaged in a similar battle to protect their freedoms and gain their equality against a destructive white force. It is also interesting to note that R'lyeh is where Cthulhu resides sleeping, a mythological monster-god noted in 'The Call of Cthulhu' as a constant source of all mankind's subconscious anxieties. The only avatar who feels these anxieties is Aislyn and, despite her conflicts about the racial prejudice of her own family upbringing, she eventually joins R'lyeh as a follower.

As stated earlier, Jemisin imbues her novels with a complexity that transcends simplistic binaries, and the resolutions to her stories are often equally as intricate as their subject matter. Despite the primary avatar being awoken by the remaining four and Veneza, Bronca's friend and avatar for New Jersey (as Bronca puts it, 'a city that's in spitting distance...*might as well be New York*).

³ I have chosen here to only list the most media prominent of cases. There are, sadly, many more.

Right?) (Jemisin 426), R'lyeh retains her foothold on Staten Island, remaining a shadow over the borough. The threat posed by white anxieties about multiculturalism therefore becomes distanced, but never quite removed from the city. Furthermore, despite the warning that the avatar boroughs would be consumed by the primary avatar, the awakening of New York City contradicts this, and still retains representatives for each individual borough. While these resolutions are not concrete in their finality, neither are they unsatisfactory. Indeed, his final act reaffirms the thesis of Jemisin's novel: New York City *is* New York City because of its multiculturalism – too expansive in its diversity to ever really have its locus portrayed through one type of identity.

There is a reason Jemisin has become the only author in history to win three concurrent Hugo Awards for Best Novel, why *The City We Became* won the 2020 BSFA Award, and why a plethora of accolades consistently follow her publications. The astuteness of her engagement with contemporary socio-political issues through the sci-fi genre, and her seemingly effortless engagement with character diversity continue to create novels which enlighten, inform, and challenge preconceived notions of what accessible and inclusionary speculative fiction can achieve. Furthermore, her ability to defy binary conflict-and-resolution dynamics produces stories which interrogate real-world issues. As Bronca states 'reality isn't binary' (165). The universes created by Jemisin are as complex and multifaceted as our own, and *The City We Became* transcends genre to become a reflection of contemporary American existence; a narrative of cities living and dying through the cultural anxieties and triumphs of their people. Jemisin demonstrates, through incisive discourse and engaging prose, that the complexities of the 'ethics of quantum colonialism' are not so different to our own (147).

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