



URBAN BODIES, VEGETAL METAPHORS: REWILDING THE ANTHROPOCENE CITY IN JEMISIN'S THE CITY WE BECAME

Reshmy R

Assistant Professor, PG Department of English, Christ Nagar College, Maranallooor,
 Thiruvananthapuram, University of Kerala

Abstract

N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* reframes the modern metropolis as a living, embodied ecology, using vegetal metaphors to destabilize dominant anthropocentric models of urban existence in the Anthropocene. This paper explores how Jemisin conceptualizes New York City as an "urban body" that operates much like a complex plant organism—rooted, interconnected, and constantly adapting to environmental and political pressures. The narrative's persistent use of botanical imagery—rhizomatic borough connections, parasitic threats, regenerative growth, and invasive colonizing forces—foregrounds urban space as a dynamic, multispecies assemblage rather than a purely human-controlled environment. The antagonistic Enemy, reminiscent of invasive fungal or root-rot systems, embodies the ecological violence of homogenization, gentrification, and extractive urban development. By contrast, the city's avatars enact forms of resistance that mirror plant survival strategies: community-rooting, symbiosis, resilience, and collective adaptation. Through these metaphors, Jemisin effectively "rewilds" the city, repositioning urban life within a broader, vegetal framework that highlights interdependencies across species, infrastructures, and imaginaries. By reading the city as both organism and ecosystem, the study demonstrates how vegetal metaphors in *The City We Became* open pathways for more ethical, inclusive, and sustainable understandings of metropolitan life. The novel thereby enriches contemporary debates within plant studies, urban ecocriticism, and the politics of the Anthropocene.

Keywords : Anthropocene, Ecocriticism, Homogenization, Rhizomatic

Introduction

Cities are often conceptualized as the quintessential symbols of human dominance—spaces of concrete, steel, and technological mastery that appear disconnected from the rhythms of the natural world. Yet recent scholarship in the environmental humanities challenges this binary, arguing that urban spaces are vibrant ecological systems populated by plants, animals, microbes, infrastructures, and humans in dynamic interrelation (Houston et al., 2018; Schliephake, 2019). The Anthropocene—a proposed geological epoch in which human activities leave irreversible marks on the planet—has further catalysed debates about how cities must be reimagined within ecological frameworks that decentre human agency. Within this theoretical landscape, the plant turn or vegetal poetics brings attention to the radical alterity of plants—their nonhuman modes of time, growth, communication, and survival—and examines how literature negotiates these modes (Marder, 2013).

N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020) appears, at first glance, to be a novel rooted in urban fantasy rather than ecological metaphor. However, Jemisin reconceptualizes New York City as a living organism, a structure that grows, adapts, and struggles for survival. While not overtly botanical, the novel employs deeply ecological and vegetal metaphors, positioning the city as an emergent life-form shaped by networks, roots, symbiosis, and interdependent nodes. The city-avatars—human embodiments of the boroughs—function like mycorrhizal root tips: semi-autonomous agents that maintain collective health through distributed sensing and reciprocal cooperation.

Jemisin's novel participates in a broader eco-critical conversation by presenting a speculative urban ecology that parallels vegetal life. Through analyzing the novel alongside contemporary scholarship in urban ecology, vegetal thinking, and posthuman ecocriticism, this study contends that *The City We Became* offers a radical reimagining of city-space—not



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as anthropocentric territory but as a multispecies, more-than-human assemblage. In doing so, Jemisin's fiction reveals the possibilities of rewilding the Anthropocene city through vegetal metaphors and relational ethics.

N. K. Jemisin is one of the most influential voices in contemporary speculative fiction. Her work is renowned for challenging genre boundaries and confronting issues such as racism, ecological crisis, social inequality, and the politics of space. Jemisin is the first author in history to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel three consecutive times (2016–2018) for *The Broken Earth* trilogy, a series noted for its sophisticated treatment of geology, climate change, and environmental trauma. Her fiction often addresses the vulnerabilities of ecosystems—physical, political, and emotional—revealing how social injustices, colonial histories, and environmental destruction are deeply interconnected. *The City We Became* extends these concerns into the urban sphere, imagining cities as sentient beings whose survival depends on collective resilience, cultural memory, and networked solidarity. Jemisin's works are thus invaluable to ecocritical discussions, particularly those involving the agency of environments and the relationality between human and nonhuman systems.

Urban Ecology and the More-than-Human City

Urban ecology recognizes cities as ecosystems composed of biological, built, and social elements (Alberti, 2016). Plants—whether spontaneous flora, cultivated landscapes, or invasive species—play crucial roles, from modulating climate to shaping sensory and affective environments (Aronson et al., 2017). Recent discussions of “novel urban ecosystems” emphasize hybrid systems formed through human and nonhuman interactions (Kowarik, 2011; Shackleton et al., 2024). These theories dismantle the nature/culture divide and depict cities as evolving life-forms. In Jemisin's novel, New York functions similarly to an organism in an ecological network—reactive, adaptive, vulnerable to infection, and dependent on both diversity and cooperation. Its avatars represent distributed “organs” or nodes functioning like plant systems, allowing the city to sense, respond, and evolve.

The Plant Turn and Vegetal Thinking

The “plant turn” in contemporary theory marks a shift toward recognizing plants not merely as passive background elements in ecological discourse but as complex agents with their own modes of being, relation, and resistance. Michael Marder's (2013, 2018) philosophy of “vegetal life” is foundational in this movement. He argues that plants model an ontology that is fundamentally **non-hierarchical, distributed, and collectivized**, challenging long-standing Western philosophical traditions that privilege human exceptionalism, vertical structures of power, and centralized forms of agency. Unlike animals and humans, whose mobility forms the basis of traditional conceptions of agency, plants' rootedness produces alternative ways of living—based on **decentralized growth, lateral expansion, interdependence, and porous boundaries**.

Marder proposes that vegetal life demonstrates a form of subjectivity grounded in **shared vulnerability, openness, and continuous becoming**. Plants grow by responding to their environment rather than dominating it; their agency lies in **adaptive entanglement**, a mode of existence that resists rigid binaries such as self/other, centre/periphery, or human/nature. This makes plant ontology inherently political. Its relationality foregrounds cooperation over competition, collective flourishing over individual accumulation, and mutual support instead of exclusion. In this sense, vegetal being becomes a critique of anthropocentric, capitalist, and extractive modes of life that structure the Anthropocene.

These ideas resonate powerfully with N. K. Jemisin's *The City We Became* (2020), especially in her representation of the borough-avatars whose powers emerge not from isolated individuality, but from their ability to root themselves in the city's collective identity. Their strength depends on their capacity to **form connections—rhizomatic alliances—across borough boundaries**, mirroring the way plant networks communicate, share resources, and resist external threats. Jemisin's city is therefore imagined not as a mechanical grid but as a living, breathing, growing organism whose vitality depends on interconnection and mutual aid. Plant metaphors—**roots, branches, shoots, grafting, entanglement, and underground**



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networks—become narrative tools for envisioning cities as ecological assemblages rather than as neoliberal infrastructures built on privatization and fragmentation.

Deleuze and Guattari's (1987) concept of the **rhizome** further deepens this reading. The rhizome is a model of non-linear, non-hierarchical organization characterized by multiplicity, heterogeneity, and continual transformation. Rhizomes grow horizontally—not upward like trees—and therefore symbolize systems that resist hierarchy, centralized control, and rigid classification. Such structures echo the social fabric of Jemisin's New York, where borough-avatars must operate as a **distributed network**, each rooted in a specific locality but interconnected through shared cultural, historical, and affective ties. The city thus becomes a **rhizomatic organism**, a system of nodes and pathways where the health of the whole depends on the strength of relationships rather than the dominance of a single centre.

This vegetal framework offers an alternative political future: one grounded in **solidarity, mutual interdependence, and collective resistance** to destructive Anthropocene forces. By invoking plant life and rhizomatic thinking, Jemisin reimagines the city as a space where more-than-human models of cooperation and resilience can reshape urban politics. In doing so, the novel aligns with the broader “plant turn,” which seeks to decentre human authority and promote ecological ways of inhabiting and imagining the world

Symbiosis as Political Ethics

In *The City We Became*, N. K. Jemisin uses the idea of symbiosis—a biological concept describing mutually beneficial relationships among organisms—to propose a political ethic of coexistence. In ecological systems, symbiosis is not merely cooperation; it is a relational mode of survival where different organisms depend on one another's presence to maintain equilibrium. When applied to urban spaces, symbiosis becomes a metaphor for the ways in which cities survive only through the interconnected activities of diverse human and nonhuman agents.

Jemisin's borough avatars initially struggle to work together because they represent different histories, cultures, and political identities within New York. Their conflict mirrors the fragmented social landscape produced by neoliberal urbanism, which prioritizes individual advancement, market competition, and privatization over community welfare. Neoliberal logics treat cities as economic engines rather than living ecosystems, generating alienation and eroding communal infrastructures. This failure of solidarity among boroughs parallels ecological collapse, in which species or systems fail when the interdependent relationships binding them are disrupted.

When the avatars come together, however, their alliance becomes a model of *ecological resilience*. In ecosystems, resilience is the ability to adapt, withstand disturbances, and regenerate; it emerges not from singular strength but from networked cooperation. Jemisin's narrative dramatizes this ecological principle by showing how the boroughs gain strength not through individual power but through synergistic interdependence. Their collective energy enables them to resist the Enemy—the narrative's embodiment of forces such as gentrification, settler colonialism, and cultural erasure.

Thus, symbiosis becomes not only an environmental metaphor but a political ethic, offering an alternative to hierarchical structures of governance. Instead of rigid top-down systems, Jemisin imagines a city organized through reciprocity, mutual vulnerability, and shared agency. The result is an “ecology of resistance”—a form of political action grounded in the relational ethics of plant life and ecological networks. In this way, Jemisin critiques atomistic, neoliberal models of urban life and gestures toward more sustainable, cooperative, and just forms of urban existence.



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The City as a Living Organism: Vegetal Metaphors in Jemisin's Novel

Although New York's life-force is articulated through avatars rather than plants, the logic of the city's embodiment is distinctly vegetal. The boroughs operate as interconnected "root nodes," each absorbing, translating, and transmitting life-energy. Their interconnectedness mirrors plant rhizomes and mycorrhizal networks, which allow trees and plants to communicate, share nutrients, and respond to threats (Simard, 2021). The city cannot exist without this distributed structure—just as a plant cannot survive without the interdependence of its roots, stems, and leaves. Although New York's life-force is articulated through avatars rather than plants, the logic of the city's embodiment is distinctly vegetal. The boroughs operate as interconnected "root nodes," each absorbing, translating, and transmitting life-energy. Their interconnectedness mirrors plant rhizomes and mycorrhizal networks, which allow trees and plants to communicate, share nutrients, and respond to threats (Simard, 2021). The city cannot exist without this distributed structure—just as a plant cannot survive without the interdependence of its roots, stems, and leaves. Jemisin frequently stresses that the city does not simply "appear"; it grows, matures, undergoes stress, and is vulnerable to attack. This mirrors vegetal temporality, which challenges linear or anthropocentric notions of time. Plants grow incrementally, respond slowly, and occupy deep temporal scales. The city's "becoming" reflects slow violence and slow resilience, echoing Rob Nixon's (2011) concept of environmental time. Although *The City We Became* features cosmic antagonists and extradimensional threats, its central conflict is ecological: New York must resist a colonizing entity seeking to overwrite its character with sterile, uniform order. The Enemy resembles invasive species that eradicate diversity—whether biological or cultural. In this sense, the novel dramatizes rewilding as both ecological and cultural renewal. Diversity, multiplicity, and rootedness—key principles in ecology—are framed as essential for survival. Jemisin reimagines infrastructure not as inert machinery but as living tissue—bridges that pulse with energy, subway lines that vibrate, and buildings that sense disturbances. This mirrors material ecocriticism, which argues that matter itself participates in narrative and political processes (Iovino & Oppermann, 2014). The boroughs must learn cooperation, much like plants in symbiotic ecosystems. Their failures echo ecological collapse; their solidarity mirrors ecological resilience. This "ecology of resistance" critiques neoliberal urbanism, which promotes individualism over community. The Enemy in Jemisin's novel deploys tendrils, infestations, and white, fungal-like growths—evoking invasive species or fungal epidemics. The whiteness—sterile, consuming, homogenizing—symbolizes monoculture, which ecological theorists warn is ecologically and politically dangerous (Tsing, 2015). The Enemy's goal is not destruction but replacement: erasing diversity to impose a uniform, antiseptic landscape. This echoes critiques of colonial urban planning, gentrification, and capitalist infrastructures that displace cultural and biological diversity. Jemisin's representation of cities as living beings engages with Afrofuturist themes of resistance, survival, and speculative renewal. Afrofuturism frequently imagines alternative ecological relations, centering Black and marginalized perspectives (Eshun, 2003; Yaszek, 2018). By situating New York's life-force in communities of colour, Jemisin aligns ecological resilience with cultural and racial multiplicity. Urban ecology becomes a site of decolonial struggle.

Conclusion

Jemisin's *The City We Became* offers a visionary framework for rethinking urban futures in the Anthropocene. By invoking vegetal metaphors, distributed embodiment, and ecological symbiosis, the novel repositions the city as a **more-than-human assemblage**—an ecosystem shaped by interdependence rather than domination. This narrative strategy disrupts anthropocentric conceptions of agency, urging readers to see cities not as static infrastructures but as **living, adaptive organisms** that depend on diversity, vulnerability, and collaborative survival.

Through the lens of vegetal thinking, the novel imagines political models grounded in **lateral, non-hierarchical connectivity**, echoing philosophies of rhizomatic growth. Through posthuman ecocriticism, it reveals how urban life is intertwined with forces—cultural, ecological, material—that exceed human control. And through symbiosis as political ethics, it presents solidarity not as an idealistic aspiration but as an ecological imperative for resisting oppressive, extractive systems. *The City We Became* invites us to envision **rewilded urban futures** in which cooperation, pluralism, and ecological responsiveness reshape how we inhabit cities. Jemisin's speculative imagination points toward a hopeful



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Anthropocene politics—one in which the boundaries between human and nonhuman, city and organism, politics and ecology dissolve into new forms of shared flourishing.

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