

HEATHER THAXTER

DEPOSITING “STRANGENESS”: APPLYING THE PRINCIPLES
OF DETRITUS TO THE NARRATIVIZATION OF CITIES
IN N. K. JEMISIN’S SHORT FICTION, “THE CITY BORN GREAT”
AND “SAINTS, SINNERS, DRAGONS, AND HAINTS,
IN THE CITY BENEATH THE STILL WATERS”

INTRODUCTION

N. K. Jemisin’s fiction often portrays cities as living entities which are in constant tension with the humans who occupy the living space. Through these interactions, the city “becomes” the sum of its individual parts or, as Jemisin expresses it in “The City Born Great”, the “strangeness” deposited by its inhabitants. As this strangeness takes many forms due to the diversity and temporal context of the population, the city can be interpreted as both a repository and a modifier. Starting from this premise, by applying the principles of detritus as being critical to system stability provides a way of understanding the city as an anthropomorphic entity with its own identity. There is much we can extrapolate from Jemisin’s fictional worlds which address the impact of human utility and waste by interpreting cities as being more than places to live, more than centres of industry and commerce, but as entities that modify reality. Human presence within the living space of the city leaves impressions that result in this modification. The topography of the city only partially reveals the reality of its existence; rather, it is those liminal spaces which capture the traces of different realities.

In *American Cities in Post-Apocalyptic Science Fiction* (2021), Robert Yeates makes the point that cities are “constructed from the violent plunder-

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ing and reshaping of the natural world” and these city spaces are sites of a constant struggle between structural decay and reclamation (14). Yeates also refers to the human endeavour of the deliberate destruction of old structures to make way for the new. Therefore, those who inhabit the city (past and present) can be understood as being integral to the process of detritus and rebirth materially, biologically, and in the context of this literary critique, metaphorically. Two stories from Jemisin’s collection of short fiction *How Long ‘til Black Future Month?* (2018), “The City Born Great” and “Saints, Sinners, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters” provide two real-life cities, New York and New Orleans, as the settings for a metaphorical application of the natural cycle of detritus as a way of critically analysing the recurring motifs of waste and debris integral to each city’s evolution. Further, the socio-historical political influences which designate *who* is considered waste will be unearthed and then mapped onto the living space of the city which, according to James Donald, “exists as representation and projection and experience” (180). By combining the metaphorical with the material, the city itself is narrativized.

THE SPATIO-TEMPORALITY OF WASTE

The following quote from N. K. Jemisin’s short story “The City Born Great” suggests the utility of the city as a living entity is that of a repository, a place in which things are stored or rest

as more and more people come in and deposit their strangeness and leave and get replaced by others, the tear widens. Eventually it gets so deep that it forms a pocket, connected only by the thinnest thread of ... something to ... something. Whatever cities are made of. (20–21)

This “tear in the fabric of reality” is a useful starting point in a discussion about waste and its spatio-temporal relationship to human organisation and the ordering of events and objects, and by extension the architecture of the city as an organised living space. In her seminal text, *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*, Mary Douglas points out that the transitional spatio-temporal point of an object’s moving from being of use to it becoming waste is dangerous (160). As humans, we categorise and order everything in an attempt to add meaning to societal and cultural structures, so this stage of in-betweenness whereby, in Douglas’s words, “their

half identity still clings to them and the clarity of the scene in which they obtrude is impaired by their presence" (160) seems to imply that transgressing those barriers or dividers of categorisation is disruptive, and therefore potentially dangerous to the symbolic structure. At least, that is, until the new status or identity has come into being. In both short stories, this "tear" or in-between stage caused by the weight of so many deposits of strangeness, relates to the emergence of the city as having its own identity: "a living, thinking entity shaped like a big-ass city" ("The City Born Great" 21). To contextualise this concept in relation to the critical analysis of Jemisin's short fiction, William Viney's theory of use-time and waste-time is helpful.

When considering the use value of an object, a sense of use-time or the life of the object comes into operation. Tellingly, we use the same terminology to refer to both animate and inanimate objects when referring to the expiry of their use as the life span of an object is usually determined by its utility in relation to human life and activity. When it loses its usefulness, either through wear or abandonment, its status changes to waste. According to Viney, this transition between utility and waste is temporal and can be defined as going from use-time to waste-time, but this does not mean the object or matter loses its potential to be useful in another way. The very existence of the waste matter reveals its temporality; what it has been used for in the past, what it is now, and what it may become in another iteration. Viney argues that "waste-time can be defined as a state of material being that is marked by temporal disorientation. The cessation of use creates a temporal threshold, a fragile partition between the time of use and the time of waste" (10).

To understand this partition between use-time and waste-time, consider one of the key features of the city: buildings. At what point in time does a building go from being of use to being of no use (waste)? Even when a particular functionality of a building becomes redundant, "its utility [is] being held in suspended animation in a waiting room of use-time" to use Viney's terminology (10). Buildings can be demolished to make way for new developments (gentrification), or they may be repurposed for a new function (from residential to commercial). In the intervening period when they are left abandoned and fall into disrepair, there is sense of in-betweenness of use and waste. They are no longer used for their original purpose and may be perceived as having become waste for that reason. This idea of temporal disruption alludes to a sense of disorder, incompleteness, or liminality. However, the partition between use-time and waste-time is tenuous. The empty building may become occupied by rough sleepers, who are often considered

as waste by society in general, thereby demonstrating the way the principle of use-time to waste-time can be applied to individuals who have been deemed useful in a specific context before becoming what is considered waste when they can no longer serve that purpose. In both the stories under analysis the protagonists are labelled as waste: the nameless homeless kid who was kicked out by his mother and does whatever he can to survive in “The City” (19–20); and Tookie, the poor kid whose status determines his future prospects when teachers consider him a “waste of time to educate, waste of space on this earth” in “Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters” (374–75). Throughout their individual sojourns through their respective cities, these protagonists (waste matter) can be understood as being within that liminal space undergoing processing for another iteration of use. Significantly, buildings play a key role in both narratives. In “The City”, the buildings respond to the protagonist’s singing and painting with growls and sighs, thereby representing the life and soul of the emerging city. In “Sinners”, “all the houses had been strangely truncated, like mushrooms only half-emerged from rippling gray soil” (376), highlighting the liminal space between life and destruction.

Returning to the example of how empty buildings demonstrate the in-betweenness of use-time and waste-time, buildings and any material artefacts that remain within them still occupy space. Their existence both represents and are reminders of human activity, thereby serving as what Aldo Rossi terms the locus of collective memory. Seungkoo Jo interprets this concept as the city “act[ing] as a wax tablet that gathers up the traces of lived experience” (234). Using Jemisin’s phrase “depositing strangeness”, the identity of the city evolves from these traces or deposits which continually undergo the process of detritus.

THE PROCESS OF DETRITUS AS A MODIFIER OF “STRANGENESS”

Although detritus is defined as the biological and biochemical process of decomposition, Moore et al.’s concept of detritus acting as both a habitat and a habitat modifier (586) is particularly significant in the context of analysing Jemisin’s literary representation of the city as a living entity. The process of detritus increases system stability because detritus is central to energy flow within systems. Moore et al. highlight the need

to recognize the intimate links between detritus and other components of living systems, as well as, the heterogeneity and ontogeny of detrital resources. Our concept of ontogeny ... encapsulates both the heterogeneous nature of detritus that is inherent in its constant state of flux and change that results from variation in sources, and the changes it undergoes during decomposition. (588)

The variants of the components involved in the ontogenesis of detritus can be understood both literally and metaphorically in relation to the city. As an entity, the city is comprised of living and non-living matter in various stages of decomposition and rebirth. Interpreting the city as detritus—both a habitat and a habitat modifier—is fitting in that it is “a reservoir of energy which influences the structure and dynamics of the living species that depend on it” (Moore et al., 589). Metaphorically, in this present context, the variation of sources can be applied to the “strangeness being deposited in the city”. The strangeness is deposited by living matter (humans) but is inorganic and abstract, and I would argue this strangeness can be defined as the various traits that make up the very essence of humanity. In this context, these variants can be applied to the heterogeneity of detritus. This can be demonstrated by using Moore et al.’s diagram (below) to apply the principles of detritus to metaphorical readings of “The City” and “Sinners”.

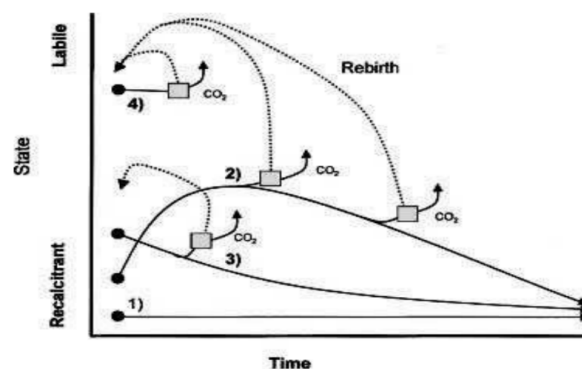


Figure 1. The ontogeny of detritus from creation (the death of organic material) to breakdown (Moore et al. 588). The accompanying table defines each stage of the process as outlined by Moore et al.

The four stages of ontogeny of detritus	
•	Recalcitrant materials such as lignins (hard substance) undergo minimal processing as they move from creation to humic substances
•	Complex components for which physical processing results in increase in overall lability before the most labile materials are scavenged, utilized, and respired leaving humic substances
•	Lower molecular weight material becomes more recalcitrant until it forms humic substances
•	Highly labile material, typically monomeric, that is rapidly scavenged, utilized and respired

As the first category (recalcitrant materials) is more resistant to change and remains relatively unaffected by the process, we can metaphorically attribute the negative human traits of bias and discrimination. This can be identified in “The City”, particularly in the following passage:

We’re sitting in a café. I’m sitting with him because he bought me breakfast. The people in the café are eyeballing him because he’s something not white by their standards, but they can’t tell what. They’re eyeballing me because I’m definitely black, and because the holes in my clothes aren’t the Fashionable kind. I don’t stink, but these people can smell anybody without a trust fund from a mile away.
(15)

Racial and economic divisions are visibly mapped onto the living spaces of the city. While public spaces have the potential to facilitate the interaction of a heterogeneous public, such biases restrict accessibility and inclusion, either conceptually or literally. The protagonist, acting as a flaneur, inwardly responds to this personal conceptual exclusion by making a poem about being “a rich white girl who notices a poor black boy in her coffee shop and has an existential crisis” (“The City” 16), thus revealing the degree to which discrimination underpins the city’s foundations.

The rediscovery of New York’s African Burial Ground in 1991 provides bio-anthropological evidence of racial discrimination dating back to the eighteenth century. Genetic anthropologist Carter Clinton’s examination of the 419 skeletal remains excavated from the site along with grave soil samples containing bacteria reveals the health and lifestyles of historic African American populations (0:42–0:48). This examination is especially significant because in Clinton’s words “we are not only contributing to science but

also contributing to history" (4:03–4:06). Similarly, anthropologist and Scientific Director of NYC's African Burial Ground, Michael L. Blakely, who was the principal investigator of the analysis of these remains, explains that the evolution of the city is directly based on the trade and production resulting from chattel slavery (Chang). Blakely's findings reveal increased mortality rates and decreased fertility rates within this historic population, due to the process of dehumanization and commodification involved in the practice of slavery (Blakely 65). The existence of this burial ground (originally designated Negroes Buriel[sic] Ground) which had been covered over by government buildings and a parking lot (GSA) had been erased from history for three hundred years, thus highlighting this demographic as a "disposable commodity" (Blakely 65).

In "The City", the protagonist feels that as a black youth he is deemed disposable. He is fearful of the "monsters" (16), cops who chase him throughout the narrative. At a later juncture in the story, the very real and present danger of institutional racism is highlighted when the protagonist is wrongfully accused of stealing, "[e]very cop in the area will be gunning for every black male aged whatever now. I gotta get out of the area" (25). Given New York's inglorious history from the introduction of enslaved Africans in the 17th century by Dutch traders (Oosterhoff) to the present day racially motivated murders by those with institutional authority (Mathias and Schwartz), the metaphorical application of bias and discrimination is fitting for this first element of the ontogeny of detritus. These recalcitrant materials, in this case, recalcitrant ideologies, resist change. Therefore, such deposits remain present in the system, presenting as metaphoric humic substances.

This resistance to change the status quo of white privilege and hegemonic violence is countered through a timeline of civil rights activism up to the most recent protest movement, BlackLivesMatter, founded in response to "police killings and other brutality against Black people" (Konadu and Gyamfi). The positive trait of social activism resonates with the second category of ontogeny in which complex components not only undergo change more easily and more divergently, but they also have a greater effect on other elements within the process. The unnamed protagonist represents those involved in social activism, "[a]ll I want to do is paint, man, because it's in me and I need to get it out. I need to open up this throat ... I spend the next two days going all over the city, drawing breathing-holes everywhere, till my paint runs out" ("The City" 17, 18). The protagonist "can clear the city's

breathing ... because I'm the midwife" (21). His activism is born out of necessity and is fraught with a fear of being destroyed as he battles against the "Enemy" who seeks to block his mission. This activism is a key element in assisting the city coming into its own identity. In a literal way, the forums set up for descendants of those buried in the African Burial Ground gave them a voice (Blakely 63), thereby opening "breathing holes".

Those in the third category of ontogeny do not make much impression and do not change much either, so we could attribute idiosyncrasies to this category. Human foibles add to the character of the city, but they don't necessarily make any lasting mark. The final variety is the only one which does not end up as humus (the brown or black complex variable material resulting from partial decomposition), so personal opinion can be applied, metaphorically. This element can be open to scavengers and so essentially picked off, hence not leaving a trace (humus). What I am suggesting here is that these deposits of strangeness are waste: the traces of the individuals who have lived in and who have left the city to be replaced by others. The detritus is fuelling and influencing the structure of the city; the city is in a state of constant trophic flux, undergoing transformation at the rate of each individual component.

TRANSFORMING COMPONENTS

The unnamed protagonist of "The City" is considered as waste by those around him, but this poor, homeless, black youth is "chosen" by the city to assist with this transformation, its birth as an established entity that has "become a thing of its own" (21). When he is told by his mentor and protector, Paulo, that the city has chosen him and lives depend on him, the youth's first thought is "[w]hat good does it do to be valuable, if nobody values you?" (22). It is significant that Paulo was once a boy of the favelas (urban slums on the outskirts of Rio De Janeiro and Sao Paulo built on rubbish tips). The description of Paulo as being "a sparkling jewel with filth-crusting facets" (23) supports the idea of detritus being a modifier. Having already undergone this process, Paulo directs the protagonist's facilitation of the city's birth.

Returning to the concept of liminality, these gaps and holes allow the city to breathe while in this state of transition. These temporal gaps between use-time (on the outside) and waste-time (on the inside) can be understood as windows to the past, portals to the narratives of the detritus seemingly con-

fined to the ruins of history, and yet the humus remains. The protagonist senses that shift:

I feel myself upon the firmament, heavy as the foundations of the city. There are others here with me ... my ancestors' bones under Wall Street, my predecessors' blood ground into the benches of Christopher Park. No, *new* others, of my new people, heavy imprints upon the fabric of time and space. (30)

In her book *The Literature of Waste: Material Ecopoetics and Ethics* (2015), Susan Signe Morrison makes the point that "history values what to remember and memorialize and condemns what is to be junked." However, that which has been discarded, deemed waste or of no value, haunts the narrative sequence (57). The eponymous wall mentioned in the quote from "The City" was erected by enslaved people brought from Africa by Dutch invaders in the mid-17th century. The wall was a defence against both the British and retaliatory attacks by Native Americans whose people had been slaughtered and had their land stolen (Smith 211). The materiality of detritus occupies a space, even if it is hidden or has already changed form, such as the bones and blood referred to in the quote. In this way, the "waste" haunts the narrative of the city, especially when it is literally unearthed, as in the case of the African Burial Ground.

In "The City", this haunting extends to a blurring of real locations and unreal dream spaces (22). The protagonist is caught between "a place of transition ... and the contractions of possibility" (29) until he finally announces, "there's no gap between me and the city anymore" (30). His activism has enabled him to be at one with the city. During this supernatural process he needs to defeat an undefinable, unnameable Enemy to enable the city's coming into being. This menacing, ghostly, "uncurling thing" lying in wait to attack and to snuff out the spark also haunts New Orleans in the second short story "Sinners".

INTERTEXTUAL HAUNTINGS

There are many similarities with both stories, including an intertextual reference to New Orleans as "having failed ... but survived" ("The City" 21). This reference suggests that New Orleans is not at the stage of "being" that New York was in the previous story, indicating a slower rate of the process of detritus than that of New York. The "strangeness" has not yet be-

come a modifier of the habitat. The eldritch exerts its power “turning people ugly” (“Sinners” 389), especially when storms churn up the fear and discrimination that is already simmering beneath the surface. Claimed by the French in 1682, the foundations of New Orleans were built in 1717 on the backs of enslaved Africans and Native Americans (Jackson). Although younger than New York, New Orleans is held back by the supernatural, superstitious nature of its foundations as suggested by the reference to haints, and the presence of lizards who resemble dragons with “batlike wings, the colour of rusty, jaundiced clouds” (“Sinners” 374). Myth and folklore haunt the structure of the city and combined with bias threaten its development. There are no openings for the city as, at this moment in the narrative, there is no one to facilitate this process. Populous cities such as New York offer better employment opportunities and become cultural hubs, but the disparate demographic spread of the population of New Orleans lacking a solid infrastructure erodes cohesion and growth, thus mirroring the geographical instability. The protagonist, Tookie, is also a poor, black youth who can be understood as representative of those who are forced into existing on the periphery of society with little or no prospects. The system prevents growth, so the marginalized are deemed as having no use (waste). They have not begun the process of change which releases utility of a different kind because they are confined to a literal space (specific residential areas) whereby their potential is stunted, if not removed entirely. In a 2010 study examining the displacement of the population post-Katrina, factors were identified for the reasons the hurricane caused such destruction and loss of life: lack of funding and poor construction meant flood defences such as the outdated levees were easily breached by the surging waters, and a “history of residential segregation based on race and socioeconomic status” increased that vulnerability (Fussell et al., 21). The title of the story emphasises the effect of such factors as the city is *beneath* the *still* waters and current is necessary to prevent stagnation. Similarly, constant flooding dampens innovation. The menace beneath the waters, “unseen, something large and dark” (378), “a mean thing, [that] smelled” (382) is obstructive and threatening. The system that creates Tookie’s situation resonates with the metaphorical application of the first element of ontology because discrimination is resistant to change, such is the degree of embedded ideology. “Teachers thought him stupid and good for nothing, waste of time to educate, waste of space on this earth” (“Sinners” 374–75). However, Tookie recognises this narrative for what it is—“I got tired of hearing that shit after a while” (375). As a sidenote, I would

suggest that while the name Tookie is slang for buttocks, thereby linking the idea of waste, it may also be a nod to the New Orleans-born reformed founder of the notorious Crips gang of LA. For those groups within the population who are forced to occupy "waste" spaces (literally and ideologically), the process of initiating change is more difficult, although not impossible.

Despite this, Tookie becomes socially active when he too feels at one with the city, "[b]ut the city was *his*, low creature that he was, and it was his duty to defend it" ("Sinners" 394). By letting go of the Hate that disturbs his thoughts causing him to hate himself and others, he draws on "the strength and breath and patience of the city" (396). Thus, the second element of ontogeny can be metaphorically applied, due to the complex factors that are involved in activism. Similarly, the last two elements highlight the idiosyncratic nature of the characters and their personal opinions that are as fluid as the waters around them which eventually dissipate.

In conclusion, Jemisin's stylistic approach of addressing ecological and racial issues by situating them within speculative, supernatural narratives, facilitates critical interpretation such as the one I have presented. The ontogeny of detritus is a fitting model to metaphorically apply to the strangeness deposited in both cities in the novels and consider an alternative way of perceiving the realities and traces of human existence. The tears in the fabric of reality reveal the underlying issues that can raise a city or stunt its development. I interpret these tears as the liminal spaces in which waste is deposited both metaphorically, as with ideologies affecting specific demographics, and literally in the case of abandoned buildings or hidden cemeteries. Mary Douglas posits that the presence of waste impairs its environment, due, in part, to its status of in-betweenness. However, I see this transitional state as essential in enabling new potential to inhabit that space. In both stories, the emergence of each respective city is reliant upon those considered waste. Characters who are discarded and deemed to have no value are the essential elements in the process of detritus and through their actions change is initiated. The living spaces of the city are haunted by traces of human interaction, including those who fall through the cracks, and these traces modify the narrative reality of past and present. Likewise, the topography of the city records narrativized realities, which at times may be hidden in plain sight or buried, deliberately or otherwise. Unearthing the narratives which occupy these liminal spaces is only possible by acknowledging the status of waste as a necessary disruptor of the symbolic system.

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Summary

N. K. Jemisin's speculative short fiction often portrays cities as living entities which are in constant tension with the humans who occupy the same space. In particular, "The City Born Great" and "Saints, Sinners, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still Waters" highlight recurring themes of waste as integral to that interaction. By metaphorically applying the principles of detritus as being critical to system stability, waste becomes essential to a cycle in constant flux between humans and the cityscape. During this process, "[cities] make a weight on the world, a tear in the fabric of reality" ("The City" 20). This liminal space serves as a portal that releases the strangeness deposited in the city by past inhabitants and meshes with present deposits to mould the city's character.

Keywords: detritus; cities; liminality; N. K. Jemisin; speculative short fiction

GROMADZENIE „DZIWNOCI”: ZASADY RZĄDZĄCE DETRYTUSEM W ANALIZIE
NARRATYWIZACJI MIAST W OPOWIADANIACH N. K. JEMISIN
„THE CITY BORN GREAT” I „SAINTS, SINNERS, DRAGONS, AND HAINTS,
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Streszczenie

Spekulatywne fikcje N. K. Jemisin często przedstawiają miasta jako żywe organizmy będące w ciągłym napięciu z zamieszkującymi je ludźmi. Dwa tytułowe opowiadania akcentują kwestię odpadów jako integralny element tej interakcji. Wykorzystując w sposób metaforyczny zasady rządzące detrytusem, które są konieczne dla stabilizacji systemu, odpady stają się niezbędne w cyklicznej interakcji pomiędzy miastem a ludźmi. W trakcie tego procesu „[miasta] tworzą wyrwę w tkance rzeczywistości” („The City” 20). Wytworzona w ten sposób przestrzeń liminalna staje się portalem dla dziwności nagromadzonej w mieście przez niegdysiejszych mieszkańców, która wchodzi w interakcję z teraźniejszością, kształtując charakter miasta.

Słowa kluczowe: detrytus; miasta; liminalność; N. K. Jemisin; fikcja spekulatywna