

This essay examines N.K. Jemisin's "Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints in the City Beneath the Still Waters," exploring how folklore and supernatural imagery reveal the racial and class inequalities exposed by Hurricane Katrina.

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Haints, History, and the Haunted City: Jemisin's Post-Katrina Fantasy

Cities in America are haunted in many ways. They aren't haunted by spirits alone, but also by the deep histories of injustice, survival, and trauma experienced by many. In her short story *Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints in the City Beneath the Still Waters*, N. K. Jemisin transforms a post-Katrina New Orleans into both a literal and metaphorical haunted place. She uses folklore and supernatural imagery to turn the floodwaters into carriers of cultural memory, emphasizing the unequal impact of the disaster on the city's marginalized communities. In this story, Jemisin uses folklore and haunting to highlight cultural memory, revealing how Hurricane Katrina's devastation intensified long-standing racial and class inequalities. Jemisin's narrative demonstrates how the story's supernatural elements emerge directly from real historical trauma and map a clear connection between the flooded urban landscape and the communities most affected. Through this blending of myth and lived experience, Jemisin shows how urban fantasy can expose social injustice and preserve cultural histories that are often silenced or erased by dominant narratives.

The narrative demonstrates the deep relationship between cultural memory, physical place, and social inequality, with Jemisin transforming these core themes into supernatural elements within her work. By showing how the narrative's ghosts and monsters are rooted in real

historical pain, we can see that the supernatural in Jemisin's work is not only a form of escapism but also serves as a powerful representation of the trauma carried by marginalized communities long after the waters receded.

Our protagonist, Tookie, has his first encounter with the winged lizard early in the story, at a moment when he is still attempting to make sense of the drowned city around him. This scene matters because it signals the shift from realism into a folkloric and supernatural world that reflects the psychological impact of the storm. When Tookie sees the creature from his porch, "A lizard strolled by on the worn dirt-strip that passed for a sidewalk, easy as you please," Jemisin immediately blurs the boundary between natural and supernatural, grounding the storytelling in both fantasy and collective trauma (Jemisin). The imagery of the creature, with its unsettling mix of wings, scales, and human-like awareness, creates a sense of fear that mirrors the chaos and vulnerability of post-Katrina New Orleans. The winged lizard becomes a manifestation of lingering trauma that echoes the neglect, abandonment, and structural racism that shaped the impact of this disaster. The creature's haunting presence reflects the cultural memory of those who were most harmed, linking its monstrous persona to the real devastation of Katrina, bringing forth images of destroyed neighborhoods and flooded streets. In this way, Jemisin uses supernatural folklore to expose unequal suffering and give form to the pain carried by marginalized communities.

Jemisin's descriptions of the drowned city appear throughout the story, but one of the most powerful moments occurs when Tookie surveys the flooded streets and realizes the scale of destruction around him. In a passage where the Tookie is taken in the damage, he notes "Dourgenois Street transformed into a river. Driven by the still-powerful wind, the water was up to his waist... All the houses had been strangely truncated, like mushrooms only half-emerged

from rippling gray soil” (Jemisin). Jemisin turns New Orleans into a haunted urban landscape, populated not only by the echoes of human suffering but also by Haints, spirits that carry the memory of lives lost and traumas endured. The imagery of stagnant water, rotting buildings, and eerie silence turns the flooded city into both a literal and symbolic grave. Water in this becomes a complex symbol. It signifies decay and danger, as well as the erasure of communities whose losses were minimized or ignored. The Haints themselves act as guardians of this cultural memory, ensuring that the experiences of marginalized residents are neither forgotten nor overlooked. This moment also reflects the racial and class disparities that shaped Katrina’s true impact. The neighborhoods that suffered the most were historically Black and low-income areas (Kaiser Family Foundation). By transforming the drowned landscape into a ghostly presence, Jemisin reinforces that Katrina was not just a natural disaster but a social one. The clusters of devastation in specific districts in New Orleans align with this textual haunting, highlighting how the city’s memory is also tied to systemic inequality and preserved through both myth and lived experience.

Hauntings often reveal more than just fear, frequently exposing the memories that were embedded in places where trauma has occurred. Bell argues that haunting functions as a form of cultural memory embedded in physical spaces, showing how places themselves remember trauma where “some spirit, inhabits and possesses it to some degree” (Bell 820). In other words, ghosts are not just supernatural figures but can also be something that marks the history of human suffering carried by people and communities. Jemisin’s Haints work in the same way, appearing throughout the drowned city to embody the experiences of marginalized residents. Her narrative again brings forth images of destroyed neighborhoods and flooded streets, reflecting this concept, showing how trauma is physically and symbolically present in the landscape and

devastation in New Orleans. By connecting the supernatural in the story to real historical devastation, Jemisin preserves the memory of communities often ignored in official accounts. This supports the idea that folklore and haunting give voice to erased histories while also highlighting inequality.

Stories, myths, and symbols emerge from Jemisin's work as tools for communities to make sense of trauma and maintain collective memory. Bronner emphasizes that folklore is a living practice that adapts to cultural needs, especially during crises. He claims that "folklore is a mirror of a cultural reality" and that it brings people together by addressing common cultural and societal concerns that arise from a specific time period or collective experience (Bronner 30). In Jemisin's story, the winged lizard, Haints, and other folkloric creatures function as embodiments of this process, preserving knowledge of the disaster and the struggles of those affected. Her narrative shows how myth can emerge from real-world experiences even in our modern world. This demonstrates that Jemisin uses folklore as a dynamic, culturally responsive means of documenting and preserving marginalized voices, and in so doing shows that supernatural elements reflect both memory and inequality.

Jemisin skillfully blends the supernatural with the real, and Ekman explains that urban fantasy uses this fusion of magic and reality to expose social issues that realism alone often obscures. In this genre, the world is divided into "parts in which reality behaves differently or follows different rules" (Ekman), allowing magic to reveal truths about systemic injustice. In Jemisin's story, the monsters and Haints make visible the racial and economic inequalities that made some people more vulnerable during Hurricane Katrina. Tabone expands this view by noting that Jemisin often uses Afrofuturist strategies to reclaim erased histories, blending myth and futurity to center Black experiences. He argues that, like "critical race theorists," she

highlights the harm caused when speech that devalues marginalized communities is defended as a democratic principle (Tabone 369). Katrina's flood maps, displacement routes, and destroyed neighborhoods echo these themes by situating Jemisin's supernatural elements directly alongside the real historical trauma of Katrina. Together, Ekman and Tabone support the idea that Jemisin uses speculative techniques to preserve cultural memory while illuminating inequality.

Literature very clearly has the power to preserve cultural memory, and Jemisin's story keeps the experiences of Katrina's victims alive in ways official accounts often fail to. By weaving haunting and myth into the flooded landscape, she exposes unequal suffering and systemic neglect that went unacknowledged by so many. Here, the supernatural becomes a tool to highlight whose pain is remembered and whose is erased, demonstrating how literature can confront injustice when history alone cannot. Examining data on the hardest-hit neighborhoods clarified how closely Jemisin ties the supernatural elements to marginalized communities and their trauma. Placing folklore, haunting, and disaster data side by side showed how the story blends myth with lived experience to comment on inequality.

Jemisin's story ultimately demonstrates how folklore, haunting, and speculative fiction can illuminate truths about history, inequality, and cultural memory. Through close reading, and different scholarly perspectives, it becomes clear that the supernatural elements in the narrative carry the weight of real trauma and real communities that were disproportionately harmed by Katrina and neglected in the weeks and months following. By connecting myth to actual history, the story ensures voices that are often excluded from official narratives are still heard. Literature, as this project shows, can speak for those whom history has overlooked.

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