**The Speculative Fictions of Legal Personhood: Reimagining Jurisdiction in N.K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became***

**Mark C. Jerng**

Abstract

N.K. Jemisin’s *The City We Became* revolves around two main fantastical tropes: (1) Its main characters are avatars for each of the five boroughs of New York City, embodying the characteristics of thousands of people and “becoming” a city; (2) It channels superhero team-up conventions as its characters must learn to use their “superpowers” and protect millions of people from an inter-dimensional threat. Both of these speculative tropes capture significant legal *realities*. The first corresponds to the legal reality in which persons are always much more than bounded individuals: they legally extend out to others in a complex and racialized dance of power, dominion, responsibility and liability that has its developments from slave law through property law, tort law, the legitimation and expansion of corporate personhood, and anti-discrimination jurisprudence. The second explores legal realities of jurisdiction – the space and time, the boundaries of cities, towns, municipalities, and nations, among other entities, in which “formally defined legal powers are exercised.” Jemisin’s intersection of the superhero team-up convention with the becoming of a city critiques the ways in which the powers of jurisdiction are often exercised in racial directions and reimagines discourses of jurisdiction and collectives.

This talk has two parts. The first part draws together various examples from legal analysis, Supreme Court opinions, and critical race understandings of U.S. law and state power in order to demonstrate the ways in which speculation works *within* legal writing. This synthesis highlights in particular how a primarily white-identified legal personhood is legitimated through speculative constructions of reality and jurisdictional identities. It helps us see how certain private actors are not just singular individuals, but are rather “super-powered” through the enforcement of social relations, while at the same time certain forms of collectivity are given standing while other forms are not. The second part analyzes N.K. Jemisin’s central representation in *The City We Became*:personifying a city. I argue that Jemisin meditates on the ways in which legal personhood is extended and groups are formed across times and spaces that are not simply given but rather generated through the force of jurisdiction. If some persons have already legally been given superpowers, then Jemisin uses speculative fiction to re-imagine collectives.