The City We Became

INTRODUCTION

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF N. K. JEMISIN

N.K. Jemisin was born in 1972 in Iowa City, Iowa. Though raised in Mobile, Alabama, she frequently visited New York City as she was growing up. She graduated from Tulane University with a B.S. in psychology and from the University of Maryland with a Master's in Education. She has published nine solo novels: the Inheritance Trilogy, comprised of *The Hundred Thousand Kingdoms* (2010), *The Broken Kingdoms* (2010), and *The Kingdom of Gods* (2011); the Dreamblood Duology, comprised of *The Killing Moon* (2012) and *The Shadowed Sun* (2012); the Broken Earth Trilogy, comprised of *The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017); and *The City We Became* (2020), whose sequel *The World We Make* will be published in 2022. In addition, she has co-authored a Mass Effect video game franchise tie-in novel with video-game writer Mac Walters, *Mass Effect: Andromeda Initiation* (2017), and published a book of short stories, *How Long 'til Black Future Month?* (2018). A popularly and critically acclaimed science-fiction writer, N. K. Jemisin has won Locus, Nebula, and Hugo Awards for her work. Most notably, every installment of her Broken Earth Trilogy won a Hugo Award for Best Novel. Currently she lives in New York City.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT

In *The City We Became* (2020), great cities (cities with idiosyncratic histories and cultures) can become sentient and choose a human avatar from among their residents to represent them. If a city's birth fails and the city's avatar dies, a massive disaster ensues. The novel cites several real historical disasters as examples of cities dying at birth. Ancient examples include Pompeii, a Roman city in Italy destroyed by Mount Vesuvius's volcanic eruption in 79 C.E., and Tenochtitlan, the Aztec capital that the Spanish conquered in 1521 and on whose ruins they built Mexico City. Modern examples include Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the city of New Orleans, Louisiana, in 2005. The novel also references the 2010 earthquake that seriously damaged Port-au-Prince in Haiti. In addition to attributing real historical disasters to cities' avatars' deaths, the novel—set during New York City's "birth"—also alludes to several important events in New York City's history. For example, one major character, Manny, visits a rock called Shorakkopoch in Inwood Hill Park that memorializes Dutch colonist Peter Minuit's1626 purchase of Manhattan Island from the indigenous Lenape people. Another major character, Bronca, participated in the 1969 Stonewall riots, famous demonstrations for LGBT rights precipitated by a police raid on the Stonewall Inn, a gay bar in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. Finally, at the novel's end, the protagonists celebrate not July 4 but July 9, 1776—the day George Washington received a copy of the Declaration of Independence in New York City and ordered it publicly read.

RELATED LITERARY WORKS

N. K. Jemisin is a science-fiction/fantasy author whose novel *The City We Became* (2020) critiques racism in the genre-fiction tradition. The novel repeatedly refers to the influential—but notably racist—science-fiction/horror writer H.P. Lovecraft (1890 – 1937). For example, the true name of the novel's antagonist, the Woman in White, is "R'lyeh," which is the name of the dead city that houses the cosmic monster Cthulhu in H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 short story "The Call of Cthulhu." In the same vein, "Dangerous Mental Machines," a painting the Woman in White's minions show to Bronca is "Dangerous Mental Machines," references a derogatory description of Asian New Yorkers that H.P. Lovecraft used in one of his personal letters. H.P. Lovecraft is not the only famous science-fiction/fantasy author Jemison alludes to in *The City We Became*. At one point, the Woman in White reenacts the wizard Gandalf the Grey's confrontation with the Balrog from the 2001 film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's *The Fellowship of the Ring* (1954). As Gandalf becomes Gandalf the White after his confrontation with the Balrog, *The City We Became* may be using the villainous Woman in White's identification with Gandalf to subtly critique the *racial* whiteness of the science-fiction and fantasy traditions overall. Another novel that critiques racism in science fiction, fantasy, and horror is Matt Ruff's *Lovecraft Country* (2016). Like *The City We Became*, Ruff's novel uses racist aspects of H.P. Lovecraft's fiction to discuss U.S. racism more generally. In addition to discussing real-world racism, *The City We Became* may be using the science-fictional concept of city growth destroying neighboring dimensions as an allegory to explore real-world climate change. Likewise, critics widely consider N. K. Jemisin's science-fiction Broken Earth trilogy—*The Fifth Season* (2015), *The Obelisk Gate* (2016), and *The Stone Sky* (2017)— to be a commentary on climate change.

KEY FACTS

- **Full Title:** The City We Became
- **When Written:** 2016–2019
- **Where Written:** New York City
- **When Published:** 2020
- **Literary Period:** Contemporary
- **Genre:** Science Fiction

- **Setting:** New York City
- **Climax:** Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza wake up New York City's avatar and drive the Woman in White's infection out of their boroughs.
- **Antagonist:** The Woman in White
- **Point of View:** First Person, Third Person

EXTRA CREDIT

Cats! N. K. Jemisin owns a cat named King Ozymandias, whose name may refer to the poet Percy Bysshe Shelley's (1792 – 1822) famous sonnet "Ozymandias" (1818).

Records at the Hugo Awards. N. K. Jemisin is the first and only person to win the Hugo Award for Best Novel three years in a row, in 2016, 2017, and 2018.

PLOT SUMMARY

In a New York City café, Paolo is explaining to a homeless young Black graffiti artist (New York City's avatar) that cities sometimes come alive and select one of their human residents to be their avatar. During a city's birth, the avatar must protect their city from a great Enemy (the Woman in White). Later, the Enemy attacks, but the avatar defeats her using the city's power. Then he faints and vanishes.

Meanwhile, a young Black man (Manny) exits the train at Penn Station and realizes he has amnesia—he can't remember his own name. He sees "Manhattan" on a sign and decides to be "Manny." Manny senses the city is in danger. He pays a cab driver to take him to FDR Drive, where a massive growth of white **tendrils** is erupting. Manny mounts the cab, tells the driver to speed toward the growth, and summons an energy blanket around himself, incinerating the tendrils.

Later, a white woman with a tendril on her neck accuses Manny of being a drug dealer. The woman transforms into the Woman in White. She disappears before Manny can figure out what she wants. An elegant Black woman (Brooklyn Thomason) approaches Manny and asks him if he knows what's going on. She tells him she's been seeing tendrils everywhere, and she senses he's Manhattan. When Manny eventually guesses whose avatar the woman is, she tells him her name really is Brooklyn—which shows Manny not all avatars have amnesia. Manny tells Brooklyn about the Woman in White, whom he suspects controls the tendrils. They sense another borough's avatar manifest and go to Queens to find it.

On Staten Island, Aislyn Houlihan is trying to board the ferry to Manhattan when a Black person accidentally touches her breast. Aislyn runs screaming from the terminal. Outside, the Woman in White approaches her and tells her she's Staten Island's avatar. Though Aislyn thinks the Woman is crazy, they end up bonding over racist humor. The Woman offers to protect Aislyn from New York City's avatar. She tells Aislyn she can use the white tendrils to summon her. Elsewhere, Paolo, sensing the enemy, texts an international number for help.

Bronca Siwanoy is in the bathroom of the Bronx Art Center, where she works, when the Woman in White threatens her from a closed stall. Bronca transform into the Bronx and kicks in the stall door, but it's empty. Bronca receives historical knowledge about living cities and their Enemy, as if the knowledge has been downloaded into her brain.

Manny searches online for strange events in Queens and sees a picture of a woman (Padmini Prakash) whom he and Brooklyn sense is Queens's avatar. Brooklyn gets a text of a mural signed "Da Bronca," a.k.a. Bronca Siwanoy, and she and Manny sense that Bronca is the Bronx's avatar.

At the Center, Bronca reviews racist paintings by a group called the Alt Artistes. When she tells them she won't exhibit their art, they unveil a painting of ominous paint-creatures that come alive and attack her. The Center's receptionist Veneza grabs Bronca, and the painting reverts to just a painting. Bronca spots a tendril on one of the Alt Artiste's ankles and asks him who he works for. He tells her his boss will confront Bronca soon. After the Alt Artistes leave, Bronca drives Veneza home to Jersey City and tells her that creatures from another dimension are trying to kill New York City.

Manny and Brooklyn arrive at Padmini's apartment. They explain the situation to her and her relative Aishwarya. Manny realizes Padmini's building is invulnerable to the Woman in White because it's quintessentially Queens. Brooklyn suggests they rest at her place for the night, which should also be safe. Suddenly, Manny has a vision of New York City's avatar asleep in an abandoned subway station and feels, intensely, that he and New York City's avatar belong to each other. When he comes to, he realizes Brooklyn and Padmini have had the same vision. They speculate that if all five boroughs' avatars gather, they'll be able to locate New York City's avatar. Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini take a Lyft to Bedford Stuyvesant, where Brooklyn owns two brownstones. After they leave, Paolo finds Padmini's apartment building and talks to Aishwarya. When he tells her he's "São Paolo," she realizes he's another city's avatar and tells him Padmini, Brooklyn, and Manny will find Bronx's avatar in the morning. Paolo decides to find Staten Island's avatar.

At the Center, Bronca encounters the Woman in White, who introduces herself as Dr. White from the **Better New York Foundation** and offers the Center a $23 million dollar donation to exhibit the Alt Artistes' work. After the Woman leaves, Veneza tells Bronca the Alt Artistes have published her home address online. Bronca and Veneza decide to sleep at the Center. That night, Bronca wakes up to strange noises and runs to the gallery. She hears the Woman in White's voice sobbing and calling herself a "good creation." In the gallery, the Woman appears and offers to prolong Bronca's life if Bronca helps her

find New York City's avatar. When Bronca refuses, the Woman vanishes. The next morning, Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini arrive at the Center.

Back on Staten Island, Aislyn finds her father Matthew in their kitchen with a new houseguest, Conall McGuinness, who has a tendril on his neck. That night, Aislyn finds Conall sitting shirtless in her backyard. He has a swastika tattoo on his chest. Conall sexually harasses Aislyn. When she tries to leave, he grabs her. Aislyn uses her borough's energy to subdue him, then she leaves her home. Paolo drives up and tells Aislyn to get in his car. The Woman in White appears and summons tendrils to protect Aislyn from Paolo. When Paolo asks the Woman why she's attacking cities after their births, the Woman says that her people have suffered an "assault." Hearing the word "assault" activates Aislyn's racism toward non-white men like Paolo. She concludes Paolo must have hurt the Woman. She emits an energy wave, badly injuring Paolo.

At the Center, Bronca explains to Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini that they need to find Staten Island's and New York City's avatars. They can try to locate New York City's avatar by entering "cityspace" together. When Padmini asks about cityspace, Bronca explains that parallel dimensions are real and that cities, at their birth, puncture the walls between them. She also admits that cities' births destroy nearby dimensions. Though Padmini is horrified, she and the other avatars agree they cannot let the Woman in White annihilate New York City. Entering cityspace, they have another vision of New York City's avatar in an abandoned subway station. Bronca recognizes the tiles on the walls. When the avatars exit their vision, a man enters carrying an unconscious Paolo. The man introduces himself as Hong (a.k.a. Hong Kong), and claims that a borough's avatar has attacked Paolo. Manny realizes Staten Island's avatar is the culprit. Meanwhile, Bronca realizes the tiles she saw in the vision were Guastavino tiles, which exist in only a few places. Manny and Veneza conclude New York City's avatar must be in the defunct Old City Hall Station.

Aislyn leaves for work and finds a white pillar in her yard. She sees a tendril and summons the Woman in White. The Woman appears, and Aislyn asks about the pillar. The Woman says it adapts her dimension to humanity's. She explains that cities' births destroy neighboring dimensions and that her reality's inhabitants find cities "monstrous."

At the Center, Hong explains that if New York City's avatar doesn't consume the boroughs' avatars, the Woman in White may destroy the city. When Bronca, Manny, and Veneza go outside to investigate, they find an empty lot full of tendrils. A nearby poster informs them that the Better New York Foundation is going to build pricey condos on the lot. They research the Foundation online and realize the Woman in White is using nonprofits like the Foundation to weaken big cities prior to their births. Back at the Center, Manny explains this discovery to the others. Paolo urges the avatars to sacrifice themselves to save the city. Brooklyn points out their sacrifice might not work without Staten Island's avatar, so they split into two teams to find Staten Island's and New York City's avatars. Veneza offers to help, but Bronca insists she leave the city. As Veneza drives away, she hears a noise in her backseat.

On Staten Island, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Hong sense Staten Island's avatar. They drive to Aislyn's house and find the Woman in White in the yard. Thrown into cityspace, they see the Woman is a city from another dimension. The Woman tells them her name, "R'lyeh," and says she'll fight them rather than let them reach Aislyn. Meanwhile, Manny and Paolo find New York City's avatar in Old City Hall Station. When Manny tries to touch the sleeping avatar, an invisible wall stops his hand.

Back on Staten Island, Aislyn runs into her front yard. Though she recognizes that Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini are other boroughs, she's furious to see a "foreign" man, Hong, trampling her garden—so she emits an energy wave that throws them into the street. Aislyn tells the other avatars the Woman in White is her friend. Then the Woman opens a dimensional doorway, shows them Veneza unconscious in a monster's mouth, and orders them to leave Aislyn alone. Aislyn, convinced the Woman in White is her sole ally, banishes the others with a massive energy wave. Having isolated Aislyn from the rest of the city, the Woman in White infects Aislyn with a tendril—and tendrils begin growing all over Staten Island.

Aislyn's energy wave throws Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza onto Wall Street. They look around for Hong but can't find him, so they go to Old City Hall Station, where they try and fail to touch New York City's avatar. Suddenly, Veneza transforms into the avatar of Jersey City. Manny asks the others: "Who are we?" New York City's avatar opens his eyes and says: "We're New York." In cityspace, New York City's power burns away the Woman in White's infections everywhere except Staten Island.

Several weeks later, New York City's avatar stands on the Coney Island boardwalk with Paolo and watches the boroughs' avatars celebrate. When Manny senses New York City's avatar watching him, he meets his eyes and then looks away. New York City's avatar realizes that Manny is very attracted to him. Paolo tells New York City's avatar that Hong has summoned all the living cities to a meeting in Paris, where they will discuss the Woman in White's ongoing occupation of Staten Island. After Paolo leaves, New York City's avatar joins the boroughs' avatars.

CHARACTERS

MAJOR CHARACTERS

Manny (Manhattan) –Manny, one of the novel's protagonists, is Manhattan's avatar. He's likely in his late 20s, and he has "yellowy brown" skin, brown eyes, glasses, and a handsome yet

"nondescript" face. Though Black, he's racially ambiguous; people often assume he's whatever race they are. At the novel's beginning, he moves to New York City—likely from the Midwest, as he as a "Midwestern accent"—to begin a Ph.D. in political theory at Columbia University. When Manhattan chooses Manny as its avatar, however, Manny loses his memories. Suffering from amnesia, Manny initially acts according to instinct, travelling to the FDR Drive and destroying ominous white **tendrils** planted there by the Woman in White, an entity from a parallel dimension attacking the city. Protecting the city makes Manny feel that he belongs in New York. Yet later, when the Woman in White uses a racist white woman to spy on and intimidate Manny, Manny terrorizes the woman—and realizes he used to hurt people for money in his past life. For a while, Manny feels ambivalent about embodying Manhattan's violent history and his own violent skillset. Yet when Manny, Brooklyn Thomason, and Padmini Prakash have a vision of New York City's avatar trapped in a coma after battling the Woman in White, he falls immediately in love with New York City's avatar and decides to use his violent skillset to rescue the other man. After Manny, Brooklyn, Padmini, the Bronx's avatar Bronca Siwanoy, and Jersey City's avatar Veneza wake New York City's avatar from his coma and defeat the Woman in White, Manny makes his attraction to New York City's avatar clear. However, Manny's obsessive devotion discomforts New York City's avatar. Sensing this, Manny fails to make the first move. Manny represents New York City and Jersey City's ability to incorporate new members into their existing communities and, as New York's "enforcer," their moral ambiguity in a science-fictional world where cities' births destroy untold parallel dimensions.

Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx) – Bronca, a nearly 70-year-old Lenape woman, is the director of the Bronx Art Center, where she works with Yijing, Jess, and Veneza. When Bronca was 11, men in her neighborhood sexually harassed her—until she kicked one of them in the knee with her steel-toed boot. At age 17, she kicked "a police informant" at the 1969 Stonewall riots in the same way. Before coming out as a lesbian, Bronca was married to a closeted man named Chris Siwanoy; after both Bronca and Chris came out, they divorced but stayed friendly. Bronca has a son, Mettshish, who lives in California and whose partner is pregnant. When the novel introduces Bronca, she is struggling with insecurities about her age and artistic career. Yet when the Woman in White appears at the Center to threaten Bronca, Bronca fearlessly confronts her—leading the Bronx to choose Bronca as its avatar. Because the Bronx has the longest history of any New York City borough, Bronca receives the gift of historical knowledge about living cities, their avatars, and their battle with the Woman in White. Despite knowing she should find the other boroughs' avatars and help them, Bronca feels tired, old, and burdened by family duties—so she initially chooses not to help. When the Woman in White sends a right-wing artists' collective, the Alt Artistes, to attack Bronca with a painting that is also an interdimensional portal, her coworker Veneza saves her. Bronca warns Veneza not to get involved. When Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini find Bronca at the Center, she instinctively dislikes them. Yet after talking with Veneza, whom Bronca considers "an amazing friend," about loving New York City, Bronca agrees to cooperate with the other boroughs' avatars to save the city. At the novel's end, Bronca has conquered her dislike of the other boroughs and become part of their community. Bronca represents both the importance of art to cities' vitality and the power abuse victims can reclaim by fighting back against their abusers.

Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island) – Aislyn Houlihan, a 30-year-old Irish American woman, lives on Staten Island with her controlling, abusive father Matthew and her mother Kendra. At New York City's birth, Staten Island chooses Aislyn to be its avatar. Though terrified of Manhattan due to her father's racist warnings about Manhattanites, Aislyn attempts to board the ferry to Manhattan and find the other boroughs' avatars—but she panics and flees when a Black person accidentally touches her breast. The Woman in White approaches Aislyn, tells her the other boroughs' avatars have abandoned her, and offers to "help" her. She tells Aislyn that Aislyn can summon her through the **tendrils** she's been seeding throughout the city. When tendril-infected Conall McGuiness tries to sexually assault Aislyn, she turns against the Woman in White. When São Paolo's avatar Paolo tries to fetch Aislyn to join the other boroughs, she's willing to go with him. Yet when the Woman in White appears and accuses Paolo of an "assault" against her people, the word "assault" triggers Aislyn's stereotypes about non-white men like Paolo. Immediately convinced that Paolo has hurt the Woman, Aislyn uses Staten Island's power to blast him unconscious. Later, the Woman explains to Aislyn that cities' births destroy neighboring dimensions and that she's trying to destroy New York—but that she likes Aislyn and wants to protect her. When Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Hong come to Aislyn's house to ask for help, the Woman heads them off—and Aislyn, believing the Woman is her only friend, betrays the rest of the city. Afterward, the Woman infects Aislyn with a tendril and uses Staten Island as a base camp, even after the rest of the city has expelled her. Aislyn represents how external forces (like the Woman in White) can use prejudice to turn members of a community (like the boroughs' avatars) against each other. As a victim of her father's abusive control and the Woman's manipulation, Aislyn also illustrates how abuse victims sometimes believe abusers who claim to be protecting them.

The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh) – The central antagonist, the Woman in White is an entity from a parallel dimension seeking to destroy New York City and, ultimately, humanity. She fights New York City's avatar, Manny, Bronca,

Brooklyn, and Padmini but manipulates Aislyn into joining her cause. At the novel's beginning, the Woman in White appears as a tentacled monster known as the Enemy who attacks New York City at its birth. When that attack fails, the Woman in White uses **tendrils** to infect New Yorkers and occasionally possess their bodies. The people—all white women—whom the Woman possesses transform into white-haired, white-clothed people. Disguised as a white woman, the Woman weaponizes white racial privilege to wage war against humanity from within. In human form, the Woman is chatty, off-kilter, and humorous, misusing English idioms and making pop culture references. She expresses affection and pity for humanity. She also develops a heartfelt if manipulative friendship with Aislyn and sympathizes with Bronca's struggle as a marginalized person. Yet, the Woman also detests humanity for creating cities, which tear through parallel dimensions at their birth, destroying those dimensions and their inhabitants. Ironically, the novel eventually reveals that the Woman is herself an avatar of an alien city, R'lyeh (named after a city in H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 story "The Call of Cthulhu"). The novel implies that an alien species from a parallel dimension created R'lyeh/the Woman in White to have a soldier against humanity and its cities who intimately understood them. At the novel's end, the cities' avatars defeat the Woman temporarily. However, the Woman infects Aislyn and Staten Island with her tendrils, successfully maintaining her foothold in humanity's dimension. The Woman's utilitarian embrace of evil methods to achieve what she believes to be good ends (preventing cities from destroying nearby dimensions) evokes the novel's ethical perspective that a person's ends cannot justify their means. Meanwhile, the Woman's manipulation of human racism illustrates how malevolent outside forces can use prejudice to divide and conquer diverse communities.

Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn) – Mother to Jojo and daughter to Clyde, Brooklyn Thomason is a tall, elegant Black woman with a "honey-blond-dyed cap of curls" who ended her career as rapper MC Free to become a lawyer and then a New York City councilperson. At New York City's birth, Brooklyn (the borough) chooses Brooklyn Thomason to be its avatar. After Brooklyn sees Manny on TV and recognizes him as another borough's avatar, she finds him, and saves him from the Woman in White's **tendrils**, which she destroys with the symbolic power of music. Like Bronca, Brooklyn hesitates to get involved with New York City's battle against the Woman in White—both because of her responsibilities to Jojo and Clyde, and because she senses the city wants her to become rapper MC Free again, an identity she abandoned to focus on her family and on political reform. Eventually, Brooklyn teams up with Manny, Padmini, and Bronca to protect New York City and her family. Brooklyn and Bronca initially dislike one another, yet when Bronca brings up MC Free's anti-lesbian lyrics, Brooklyn apologizes. She explains that early in her rap career, she mimicked the anti-woman, anti-gay abuse she received from men in the music industry, though she eventually realized she shouldn't copy toxic men. Brooklyn's coming to political consciousness after both suffering and perpetuating sexism and homophobia shows how abuse victims can use their anger to reform the world—but only if they direct the anger at the correct target: their abusers. At the novel's end, Brooklyn and her family celebrate New York City's survival with Manny, Bronca, Padmini, Veneza, and New York City's avatar.

Padmini Prakash (Queens) – Padmini is a 25-year-old Indian immigrant living with her parent's cousin Aishwarya in Jackson Heights, Queens. Padmini loves theoretical mathematics, but she's studying for a master's degree in financial engineering and working on Wall Street to ensure that she receives good job and a work visa after graduation. Though Padmini hates her job and dislikes New York City—she only works and studies there to fulfill her family's expectations—Queens chooses her as its avatar at the city's birth. Just as becoming an avatar gives Bronca knowledge of history, becoming an avatar gives Padmini an intuitive mathematical and metaphysical understanding of the Woman in White's attacks. After Padmini saves her neighbor Mrs. Yu's grandsons from the Woman's **tendrils**, Manny and Brooklyn locate Padmini and recruit her to help them save the city. When Bronca explains to Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn that cities' births destroy neighboring dimensions, Padmini responds passionately, calling herself and the other avatars "mass murderers." Yet she quickly decides that she prefers to destroy other dimensions rather than allow the Woman in White to destroy humanity. Meanwhile, when Hong and Paolo explain to Padmini, Manny, Brooklyn, and Bronca that New York City's avatar must eat them to save the city, Padmini initially reacts with horror and disgust—though she eventually decides to sacrifice herself to save humanity. Luckily, though, saving humanity doesn't end up requiring such a sacrifice. The novel concludes with Padmini, Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, Veneza, and New York City's avatar celebrating their victory over the Woman in White on Coney Island. Padmini's inconsistent application of utilitarian principles—she's unwilling to sacrifice billions of humans to save billions upon billions of sentient entities in other dimensions, yet she's willing to sacrifice herself to save billions of humans—suggests that the novel's protagonists are not acting according to logical, consistent ethical principles.

Veneza (Jersey City) – An assistant at the Bronx Art Center where Bronca, Yijing, and Jess work, Veneza is a half-Black, half-Portuguese former art school student from Jersey City, New Jersey. Bronca considers Veneza a great friend and something of a daughter figure. When a right-wing art collective called the Alt Artistes, infected by the Woman in White's **tendrils**, attacks Bronca with an interdimensional portal hidden inside a racist painting, Veneza saves her. Because Veneza senses the Woman in White's presence in a way Bronca's other colleagues do not, Bronca tells Veneza the

truth about the interdimensional attack on New York City, though she warns her to stay out of the fight. Nevertheless, Veneza uses her online savvy to protect Bronca and her colleagues from the Alt Artistes' online harassment and, later, helps figure out that the **Better New York Foundation** is part of a global organization seeking to gentrify and thus weaken cities before their births. Before the final confrontation with the Woman in White, Bronca insists that Veneza leave the city for her safety. Veneza complies, but one of the Woman in White's minions kidnaps her. When Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Hong arrive at Aislyn's house to seek her help in the battle against the Woman in White, the Woman threatens Veneza's life. Aislyn, horrified but loyal to the Woman, banishes Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, Hong, and Veneza from Staten Island. Afterward, Veneza travels with Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini to join Manny to try to wake New York City's avatar from his coma. Without Aislyn's help, though, the other four boroughs can't wake New York City's avatar—until Veneza transforms into the avatar of Jersey City, an honorary though not official part of New York. With Veneza's help, the others wake New York City's avatar and drive the Woman in White out of every part of the city except Staten Island. Veneza's transformation into an honorary borough represents how, in the novel, true community is about solidarity in diversity rather than mere legal and political definitions.

New York City's Avatar – New York City's avatar is a thin young Black man, a talented graffiti artist, homeless after his mother threw him out of the house (possibly for being gay). His father is dead, and his mother's boyfriend used to hit him. As the novel begins, São Paolo's avatar Paolo is explaining to New York City's avatar that cities can come alive and choose a human avatar to represent the city and protect it against the Woman in White. While Paolo is teaching New York City's avatar, they have a brief sexual liaison. During New York City's birth, New York City's avatar successfully defends the city against the Woman in White but then falls into a coma and disappears. After his disappearance, each of New York City's five boroughs chooses its own avatar to protect the city, revive New York City's avatar, and expel the Woman in White. When Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini find each other, they have a vision of New York City's avatar comatose in a derelict subway station. Immediately upon seeing New York City's avatar in the vision, Manny falls in love with him. Later, Paolo and Hong reveal to Manny, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Bronca that New York City's avatar may have to eat the boroughs' avatars to revive himself and defeat the Woman in White, which disgusts Padmini. Eventually, with Veneza's help, Manny, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Bronca do revive New York City's avatar and isolate the Woman in White's influence on Staten Island. This shows that New York City's avatar's need to "eat" the other boroughs' avatars was only a metaphor for their need to become "conjoined" spiritually. The ability of New York City's avatar to incorporate the boroughs' avatars into himself *without* destroying them illustrates how a good community respects its individual members' diverse identities. When the novel ends, New York City's avatar is celebrating with the boroughs' avatars and contemplating a possible future relationship with Manny.

Paolo (São Paolo) – The avatar of São Paolo, Paolo is a "stylish" Brazilian man who uses cigarettes and business cards as symbols of his city. Born in a *favela* (slum neighborhood) of São Paolo, Paolo became its avatar in the 1960s, when Brazil's military dictatorship attempted to raze the city's favelas. Though he has repeatedly warned the other living cities that their enemy (the Woman in White) has changed tactics, they ignore his theory that she caused the stillbirths of New Orleans and Port-au-Prince. As the youngest living city's avatar, the other living cities task Paolo with helping New York City's avatar to understand his role and aid New York City's birth. While teaching New York City's avatar, Paolo has a brief sexual liaison with him. After New York City's avatar disappears, Paolo realizes that the city's boroughs have chosen their own avatars. He asks Hong—Hong Kong's avatar, with whom Paolo has a combative but possibly romantic relationship—to come help. When he learns from Aishwarya that Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn have found one another and know where to find Bronca, Paolo decides to recruit Staten Island's avatar Aislyn. Though Aislyn is initially willing to go with Paolo, the Woman in White triggers Aislyn's racist beliefs about non-white men like Paolo and turns Aislyn against him—at which point she blasts him unconscious with her borough's power. Hong retrieves an unconscious Paolo and brings him to the Bronx Art Center. After Hong and the borough's avatars succeed in reviving Paolo, Paolo goes with Manny to find New York City's avatar while the others travel to Staten Island to recruit Aislyn. After Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza wake New York City's avatar and defeat the Woman in White, Paolo invites them all to a meeting of living cities in Paris, says goodbye to New York City's avatar, and leaves.

Hong (Hong Kong) – The avatar of Hong Kong, Hong is a tall, frowning Asian man who wears business suits and looks 50-something, though he is actually around 200 years old. Before he became Hong Kong's avatar, he lived as a human being during the Opium Wars of the mid-19th century. Though he may have romantic feelings for São Paolo's avatar Paolo, he and Paolo have a tense relationship. For instance, when Paolo suggested that the Woman in White somehow sabotaged the births of New Orleans and Port-au-Prince, Hong unwisely dissuaded Paolo from investigating his hunch—an intervention Paolo resents. Paolo contacts Hong early in the novel about New York City's birth and the Woman in White's attacks, but Hong doesn't appear until later in the novel, when he brings an unconscious Paolo to the Bronx Art Center and confronts Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini about Aislyn's betrayal of the city. Dismissive of the boroughs' avatars' feelings, Hong

bluntly reveals to them that New York City's avatar may need to eat them to save the city. When he joins Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini to recruit Aislyn, Aislyn banishes him from Staten Island and transports him back to Hong Kong. At the end of the novel, he has organized a meeting of all living cities in Paris, to which Paolo invites New York City's avatar and the boroughs' avatars.

Matthew Houlihan – Aislyn's father and Kendra's husband, Matthew is a controlling, abusive man who, constantly warns Aislyn against leaving her own borough, monitors how many miles she drives, and may have installed a GPS tracker in her car. He still mourns Kendra's first pregnancy, which he believes would have been a son called Conall. Though Matthew believes Kendra miscarried, she in fact had an abortion because she wanted to go to Julliard and knew Matthew would never accept her working while a mother. A **police** officer, Matthew is both bigoted and corrupt. Early in the novel, he racially profiles a man and fabricates an assault charge against him. Later, the novel reveals that he fixed parking tickets for the head librarian at a Staten Island library to get Aislyn hired for a job for which she lacked the required qualifications. After he invites his friend, neo-Nazi Conall McGuiness, to stay at the family home, Conall tries to sexually assault Aislyn. Aislyn doesn't tell Matthew about the attempted assault because she's heard him mocking rape victims in the past. Matthew's controlling, abusive behavior toward Aislyn—which he justifies as "protection"—and the racism he has instilled in her condition her to accept the Woman in White's manipulations and to reject the boroughs' avatars, all non-white, who ought to be Aislyn's allies. The novel's most prominent police officer character, Matthew is a prime example of how police officers in the novel symbolize abusers who claim to be protecting or defending their victims.

Kendra Houlihan – Aislyn's mother and Matthew's wife, Kendra is a housewife in her 50s with pale skin, black hair, and "sad" eyes. As a young woman, she became pregnant by Matthew and, shortly after, received a scholarship to Julliard to study as a concert pianist. Knowing Matthew would not accept a working mother, Kendra aborted the pregnancy and told him it was a miscarriage. However, Matthew's grief made Kendra feel so guilty that she gave up her dream of attending Julliard. For the most part, she now passively accepts her husband's controlling, angry behavior and abuses alcohol on a weekly basis. Wanting better for Aislyn, Kendra secretly ordered pamphlets from colleges outside Staten Island when Aislyn was planning to apply. After Aislyn becomes Staten Island's avatar, Kendra tells Aislyn about her dream of becoming a concert pianist and her abortion and urges Aislyn to leave Staten Island.

Strawberry Manbun – A tall, bearded white man with a "strawberry-blond manbun," Strawberry Manbun is the unofficial leader of the Alt Artistes, a right-wing art collective that attempts to convince Bronca to exhibit their bigoted paintings at the Bronx Art Center. After she refuses, they unveil a painting full of anti-Asian racism that is also a portal to a dangerous parallel dimension. After Veneza saves Bronca from this painting, Bronca spies a white **tendril** infecting Strawberry Manbun and asks who sent him. Later, Strawberry Manbun and a few other members of the Alt Artistes attack the Center at the Woman in White's behest. When Bronca cleanses the Center of the Woman in White's tendrils with a Bronx-derived energy wave, she also destroys the tendrils manipulating the Alt Artistes, who collapse. Because Bronca knows the Woman in White can only infect and manipulate people who are "sympathetic" to her, she has no qualms about calling the **police** on Strawberry Manbun and his cronies. Though the police are reluctant to arrest Strawberry Manbun and the others—all of them are white men from privileged backgrounds—Bronca and Veneza provide video evidence of the Alt Artistes' crimes, and the police take them away. Strawberry Manbun and the Alt Artistes represent both the dangers of bad, bigoted art and the protections that privilege affords white, affluent men.

Conall McGuiness – A neo-Nazi friend of Matthew Houlihan's, Conall is a young man with a waxed mustache, glasses, and many tattoos, one of which is a swastika. When he comes to stay with the Houlihan family, Aislyn notices that one of the Woman in White's **tendrils** is attached to the back of his neck. Later that night, Aislyn unexpectedly encounters him, drunk, in her fenced back yard. He demeans, sexually harasses, and attempts to assault her. Aislyn summons the power of Staten Island to throw him through the backyard fence and walks away from the house. Conall's assault initially makes Aislyn doubt both her father's worldview and the Woman in White's benevolence. When Paolo comes to find and help Aislyn, the Woman in White appears and accuses Paolo of "assault" against her people. Aislyn's recent assault and her racist stereotypes about non-white men like Paolo combine to make her suspicious and angry, and she attacks Paolo. Aislyn's negative reaction to Paolo after Conall's assault illustrates how Aislyn's racist upbring causes her to misdirect justified anger at her abusers toward non-white and foreign people.

Yijing – A coworker of Bronca, Jess, and Veneza at the Bronx Art Center, Yijing dislikes and fights with Bronca—who retaliates against her by "slut-shaming" her, alluding to her previous sexual liaison with Raul, the Center's board development chair. Yet when members of a racist right-wing art collective, the Alt Artistes, publish Bronca's home address online, Yijing offers to let Bronca stay with her. Yijing thus shows how principled political solidarity with other marginalized people can trump personal dislike.

Jess – Jess runs the "experimental theater program" at the Bronx Art Center, where Bronca, Yijing, and Veneza also work. A Jewish woman who had two grandparents die in the Holocaust, Jess is immediately suspicious that the right-wing art collective seeking to exhibit in the Center, the Alt Artistes,

may be neo-Nazis or otherwise violently bigoted.

Raul – Raul, a sculptor of Chicano heritage, is the development chair of the board of the Bronx Art Center, where Bronca, Yijing, Jess, and Veneza work. He is also a one-time sexual partner of Yijing's. When the Woman in White offers the Center an enormous donation on the condition that they exhibit work by the Alt Artistes and take down graffiti art by New York City's avatar, Raul tries to convince the Center's board to support Bronca in her refusal. When the other board members want to fire Bronca for refusing the donation, Raul calls her to let her know what's happening.

Aishwarya – A cousin of one of Padmini's parents, Aishwarya lives with her husband, her child, and Padmini in Jackson Heights, Queens. After Padmini leaves Queens with Manny and Brooklyn, Paolo comes looking for them. Aishwarya tells Paolo that Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini have found one another and are searching for the Bronx's avatar Bronca, a revelation that prompts Paolo's decision to go find Staten Island's avatar, Aislyn.

Bel Nguyen – A "lanky" British Asian man, Bel is a Ph.D. candidate in political theory at Columbia University and Manny's roommate in his Inwood apartment. He likes nature due to good childhood experiences in Yorkshire near his grandmother's house—experiences that ended when his grandmother rejected him after he came out as trans. After Manny arrives at the apartment, he confesses his memory problems to Bel, who suggests they talk a walk to Inwood Hill Park for fresh air. At the park, the Woman in White appears to threaten them, initially mistaking Bel for Paolo and Manny for New York City's avatar. After she realizes who they are, she vanishes but leaves behind **tendrils** to attack them. Brooklyn arrives, saving Manny and Bel from the tendrils.

Madison – A "very young white woman," Madison grew up in Chelsea with her two mothers, who named her after Madison Avenue because they used an IVF clinic nearby to conceive her. She drives an antique Checker cab for special events. When Manny, acting on instinct, needs to reach FDR Drive to battle the Woman in White's **tendrils**, he convinces Madison to drive him. After they succeed in destroying the tendrils on FDR Drive, Madison drives Manny to his apartment in Inwood and makes a blatant pass at him. Though Manny finds Madison attractive, he decides to turn her down gently for reasons unclear even to himself. She accepts his refusal cheerfully. Near the novel's end, Manny sees her driving the Checker cab again and convinces her to drive him and Paolo to City Hall Station, where New York City's avatar lies comatose. Madison illustrates how, in the novel, native New Yorkers tend to help the city's avatars instinctively.

Clyde Thomason – Clyde Thomason is Brooklyn Thomason's father and Jojo's grandfather. During the economic struggles of the 1970s, he bought two Brooklyn brownstones for $60,000. Now a wheelchair-user, Clyde lives in one brownstone, renovated for accessibility, with Brooklyn and Jojo; he often rents the other, traditional brownstone to tourists. Because the traditional brownstone is quintessentially Brooklyn (the borough), it is invulnerable to the Woman in White. To combat this, the Woman uses her nefarious nonprofit, the **Better New York Foundation**, to buy the brownstone against the Thomasons' will on a legal technicality.

Mrs. Yu – Padmini's neighbor in Jackson Heights, Queens, Mrs. Yu is an elderly Chinese woman who suffers from osteoporosis and owns a backyard swimming pool. To capture Padmini, the Woman in White boobytraps the bottom of Mrs. Yu's swimming pool with **tendrils** while Mrs. Yu's two grandsons are playing in it. Padmini comes to save them, exposing herself to danger.

MINOR CHARACTERS

Jojo – Brooklyn Thomason's daughter and Clyde Thomason's granddaughter, Jojo is a 14-year-old student at Brooklyn Latin. Her father died of cancer. Her full name is Josephine, after famous 20th-century performer Josephine Baker.

THEMES

In LitCharts literature guides, each theme gets its own color-coded icon. These icons make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. If you don't have a color printer, you can still use the icons to track themes in black and white.

CITIES AND GENTRIFICATION

The City We Became, a science-fiction novel, uses an extradimensional alien invasion of New York City to show how gentrification makes cities depressingly homogenous and destroys the idiosyncratic lifestyles they can offer residents. In the novel, great cities that "develop a unique enough culture" eventually come to life and choose a human avatar from among their residents to embody them. New York City is in the process of being born when extradimensional aliens, bent on preventing cities from coming alive, send an emissary known as the Woman in White to sabotage New York City's birth. After fighting the Woman in White, New York City's avatar falls into a coma—which, mysteriously, causes each of the city's boroughs to choose an avatar of its own. As the avatars embodying New York City's various boroughs investigate the Woman in White, they discover that she is using a nonprofit called the **Better New York Foundation**—itself owned by a mysterious global company called TOTAL MULTIVERSAL WAR, LLC—to gentrify various parts of the city: stealing Brooklyn brownstones from its original owners, Brooklyn Thomason and her family; pressuring Bronx art gallery director Bronca Siwanoy to take down photographs of

local graffiti and put up pretentious, racist art by white men; razing a long-standing Bronx burger restaurant and evicting the people who lived above it to build expensive condos; and so on. The Woman in White also uses mysterious **tendrils** to infect both people and objects vulnerable to her influence. Notably, people and objects less connected to the essence of New York City are more vulnerable—so gentrification, by displacing long-term residents and local businesses in favor of transient professionals and multinational corporations like Starbucks, weakens New York City in the face of the Woman in White's attacks. Thus, the novel uses an imaginative science-fictional premise to illustrate how gentrification makes cities less unique, resilient, and "alive."

COMMUNITY, DIVERSITY, AND PREJUDICE

The City We Became suggests that communities gain strength from diversity—so long as they do not ask, due to prejudice, for community members to give up their diverse individual identities. In the novel, cities with idiosyncratic histories and cultures eventually come to life and select a human avatar to embody them. Sometimes, if a city has distinctive neighborhoods or other sub-areas, those sub-areas will also select "sub-avatars" to embody them during the city's birthing process. At New York City's birth, New York City's avatar repels an attack from an extradimensional invader known as the Woman in White—only to fall into a coma, leaving the city vulnerable. At this point, each of New York City's five boroughs (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island) selects a sub-avatar; these five embodied boroughs must find and revive New York City's avatar to protect the city before the Woman in White destroys it. Clearly, the novel's plot suggests that the diverse people embodying the boroughs not only can but *must* cooperate—form a community—to defeat the Woman in White, saving their own lives and the lives of all New Yorkers. Moreover, prejudice is the greatest threat to their survival, as the Woman in White uses humans' racism and other forms of bigotry to divide and conquer. In particular, she convinces Staten Island's avatar, a racist, xenophobic white woman named Aislyn, to turn against the other avatars, all of whom are non-white.

Yet, while emphasizing community's importance, the novel hints that community can destroy individuality. This implication comes through most clearly when the Bronx's avatar Bronca, Brooklyn's avatar Brooklyn, Manhattan's avatar Manny, and Queens's avatar Padmini learn that usually, when a city's birth is complete, its "primary avatar" consumes its sub-areas' avatars, killing them. This fact suggests that "community" is not always a good thing—joining a community and accepting a group identity can lead to one's individuality being destroyed, figuratively or literally. Ultimately, New York City's avatar does not devour and annihilate the embodied boroughs—but the novel hints that this good outcome only occurs because he lacks prejudice and can accept a diversity of races and genders into his identity. Thus, the novel highlights both the importance of community and the necessity of accepting diversity to have a truly *good* community.

ETHICS AND NATURE

In *The City We Became*, the antagonist, the Woman in White, uses utilitarianism—the ethical philosophy that one should seek the greatest good for the greatest number—to justify evil deeds. Meanwhile, the protagonists sometimes justify their ethically dubious preferences by appealing to nature and the natural instinct to survive—but, at other times, they argue that their ethical obligations to save others' lives should override survival instincts. The Women in White's dubious self-justifications and the protagonists' inconsistency suggest that both utilitarianism and natural instincts are inadequate guides to ethical behavior. In the novel, humans' reality exists in a "multiverse" of parallel dimensions. Great cities are living things that choose a human avatar to represent them at their birth; unfortunately, city's births also puncture the boundaries between dimensions, destroying the dimensions bordering humanity's. The Woman in White is an alien from another dimension who seeks to destroy cities and, eventually, humanity's reality altogether. She believes her cause is just, because cities kill more intelligent lives in other dimensions than exist in humanity's dimension—yet she uses evil tactics, such as exploiting human racism and illicitly influencing humans' behavior by infecting them with mysterious **tendrils.** Readers may sympathize with her ends—saving more lives than she destroys—yet by illustrating how repulsive her means are, the novel suggests that there is something very wrong with her ethical reasoning.

Meanwhile, the novel's protagonists, human avatars representing New York City's boroughs, are horrified to discover that the city's birth destroyed entire dimensions—but the Bronx's avatar Bronca quickly convinces Brooklyn's avatar Brooklyn, Manhattan's avatar Manny, and Queens's avatar Padmini that it's as natural for parallel dimensions to die so cities can live as it is for humans to eat meat. The boroughs resume their quest to defeat the Woman in White despite knowing that cities' births kill myriad intelligent lives. Yet when Bronca, Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini come to believe they'll have to sacrifice their own lives to save humanity, they decide that it makes sense to sacrifice four to save billions—a decision that dismisses natural survival instincts and replicates the Woman in White's utilitarian logic, while ignoring that the same logic would require them to sacrifice billions of humans to save billions of billions more lives in parallel dimensions. Read carefully, then, the novel suggests that neither its antagonist nor its protagonists yet have an adequate ethical outlook.

BELIEFS, CONCEPTS, AND STEREOTYPES

The City We Became suggests that people's beliefs and concepts determine how they perceive reality—by making beliefs and concepts literally capable of transforming material reality in its science-fictional universe. Beliefs and concepts, including stereotypes, can be positive, neutral, or destructive, which means that what one believes *really matters*. In the novel, all life exists in a "multiverse" of parallel dimensions. Choices, beliefs, ideas, stories, and so on can cause new dimensions to split off from old ones, so that new realities are constantly proliferating. Arguably, the science-fiction trope of a multiverse created by choices and beliefs makes literal the idea that every person, due to their unique set of beliefs and experiences, figuratively lives in their own world.

In the novel, beliefs and concepts can transform the material world even within a single dimension. In the dimension in which the novel takes place, cities come alive once enough residents, through their history and culture, "tell enough stories about it"—at which point the city chooses a human avatar to represent and protect it. A city's human avatar embodies the *concept* of that city. When New York City comes alive and chooses not only a primary avatar but also five avatars to represent each of its boroughs (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island), it chooses people who could be the quintessential New Yorker or the quintessential resident of that borough—in other words, people who fit stereotypes. The city's avatars are then able to use city- or borough-specific stereotypes to access the city's power. In one memorable scene, the Bronx's avatar Bronca activates the stereotype of aggressive New York drivers by going 70 in a 25 mph speed zone—which summons the city's power to protect her car from alien attackers. While stereotypes about New York City drivers are relatively harmless, not all stereotypes are. In another scene, an extradimensional alien invader called the Woman in White uses a painting representing virulently racist stereotypes about residents of Chinatown to summon paint monsters that attack Bronca. Though fantastical, this scene implies that negative stereotypes can lead to real-world violence. Thus, beliefs, concepts, and stereotypes have real power to affect reality—in the science-fictional world of the novel and, the novel implies, in the reader's world as well.

ART

The City We Became implicitly argues that to be great, a city must foster good art. In the science-fictional world of the novel, great cities—that is, cities with sufficiently distinctive histories and cultures—come alive and choose one of their human residents as their avatar. Internally diverse New York City actually chooses six avatars: a primary avatar representing the whole city, and five avatars representing each of its boroughs (the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island). Notably, several of the humans who represent the city's essence are current or former artists: New York City's avatar is a graffiti artist; the Bronx's avatar Bronca paints murals and directs the Bronx Art Gallery; and Brooklyn's avatar Brooklyn is a former rapper who performed under the stage name MC Free. Their art helps them strengthen the city, find each other, and protect themselves from attacks. New York City's avatar paints graffiti throats that help the city breathe as it begins to come alive; a mural of Bronca's representing the city enables Brooklyn and Manhattan's avatar Manny to identify her; and Brooklyn uses her battle rap skills to channel the power of her borough, protecting her family when extradimensional alien creatures attack them. Moreover, when the extradimensional alien attempting to destroy New York City, the Woman in White, seeks to weaken the city ahead of her final attack, she tries to undermine its art scene: posing as a potential donor to the Bronx Art Gallery, she tries to bribe the board to take down art by New York City's avatar and replace it with technically incompetent, overtly racist pieces. By implying that art can make a city strong—but bad, bigoted art makes it weak—*The City We Became* argues that a city needs to nurture good art in order to become great.

ABUSE

The City We Became suggests that abuse can make victims stronger—if they direct the anger at the abuse they've suffered toward the right people: their abusers. One major character, Bronca, suffered abusive sexual harassment from adult men in her neighborhood when she was 11. One man, rumored to be a former **police** officer fired for his conduct toward an "underaged witness," ambushed her while she was wearing steel-toed boots—at which point she kicked his knee, putting him in the hospital. By standing up to her abuser, Bronca gained strength: throughout the novel, she uses her steel-toed boots as a potent symbol of her power and desire for justice. By contrast, some characters in the novel who suffer abuse never direct their anger at their abusers, and so remain mired in problematic behaviors. Another major character, Aislyn, suffers from her sexist, racist father Matthew's abuse: he monitors how much she drives, may have installed a GPS tracker in her car, and constantly instills fear in her of people outside of their family's home borough, Staten Island—he especially teaches Aislyn to fear non-white men. Yet Aislyn never allows herself to get consciously angry at her father. Instead, accepting his abuse and mimicking his racism, she rejects the help of the other city avatars—all of whom are non-white—and becomes an ally of the destructive Woman in White, an extradimensional alien who appears to Aislyn as a white woman to manipulate her prejudices. Thus the novel illustrates how people who suffer abuse can develop a keen sense of justice—or they can come to perpetuate abuse

themselves. It all depends on whether they can accurately identify who is abusing them and recognize the injustice of the abuse they have suffered.

SYMBOLS

Symbols appear in **teal text** throughout the Summary and Analysis sections of this LitChart.

TENDRILS

The white tendrils infecting New York City represent outside forces that can manipulate a community to stoke prejudices within it and to homogenize it. When characters, Manny first sees the tendrils, he recognizes that they exist not only in humanity's baseline reality but in another dimension as well, suggesting that they are an outside, alien force. When Manny next encounters a tendril, it has infected a person, and its symbolic meaning becomes clearer. The tendril, attached to the back of a racist white woman's neck, convinces her to harass Manny (a light-skinned Black man), accusing him of being a drug dealer. When Manny orders the creature manipulating the racist white woman to appear, she transforms into the Woman in White—the novel's antagonist, an entity from a parallel dimension seeking to destroy New York City. In the novel, great cities are living creatures that choose human avatars to represent and defend them, and Manny is the avatar of Manhattan. The Woman in White uses the tendril to draw out the white New Yorker's anti-Black prejudice and turn her against Manny, a fellow community member who is in fact their community's defender.

Throughout the novel, the Woman in White uses the tendrils to manipulate prejudiced New Yorkers to attack the city's human avatars. Attacking the city's human avatars is against New Yorker's best interests, as the Woman in White's goal is to destroy New York, whereas the avatars are trying to save it. At the Woman in White's behests, a tendril-infected right-wing art collective called the Alt Artistes attacks the Bronx's avatar, Bronca Siwanoy, when she refuses to display their bigoted art in the gallery she directs. In another instance, Conall McGuiness, a tendril-infected, misogynistic neo-Nazi, sexually assaults Staten Island's avatar Aislyn Houlihan. Ironically, the attack makes Aislyn *more* willing to trust the Woman in White, who appears to Aislyn as another woman, and, therefore, a source of solidarity. The tendrils also thrive at sites of gentrification, such as local restaurants razed to make room for condos, or Starbucks locations in up-trending neighborhoods. This suggests that prejudice drives gentrification: people gentrify neighborhoods—making them homogenous and conforming—when they refuse to accept those neighborhoods' preexisting diversity.

BETTER NEW YORK FOUNDATION

The Better New York Foundation symbolizes how outside money can gentrify communities without those communities' consent. In the novel, great cities can come alive and choose a human protector, an "avatar," from among its human residents. When New York is born, it chooses six avatars: one representing the whole city and one for each of New York City's five boroughs. The avatars derive power from things that represent the essence of New York City: an antique Checker cab, the subway, and so forth. A creature from a parallel dimension, the Woman in White, seeks to destroy human cities at their birth. The novel first introduces the Better New York Foundation, a nonprofit the Woman in White seems to control, when the Foundation buys two brownstones that belong to Brooklyn's avatar, Brooklyn Thomason, and her family. Brooklyn and her family didn't want to sell the brownstones; in fact, Brooklyn was using these essentially New York buildings as safe houses immune to the Woman in White's influence. The novel implies that the Woman in White uses political connections to repossess their home on a legal technicality, thus evicting the protagonists from a safe space and taking possession of this essentially New York building as a hostile outsider.

Later, the Woman in White poses as Dr. White of the Better New York Foundation when she offers the Bronx's avatar, Bronca Siwanoy, an enormous donation to the Bronx Art Center (which Bronca directs) in exchange for replacing the graffiti art of New York City's avatar (a young, homeless Black man) with the racist art of an almost entirely white artists' collective called the Alt Artistes. When Bronca refuses the donation because she won't exhibit racist art in the publicly funded Center, the Center's board of directors threatens to fire her. This demonstrates the power of money to gentrify and racially homogenize a community's culture as well as its buildings. Finally, the boroughs' avatars learn that the Better New York Foundation is owned by an LLC called "TOTAL MULTIVERSAL WAR" that has been using its money to gentrify various great cities around the world—making them less essentially themselves and thus, in the novel's universe, less powerful. This final revelation shows how money can invade local communities and gentrify them against the will of the original inhabitants.

POLICE

The police symbolize how some abusers pose as defenders of their victims—sometimes even convincing the victims themselves to act against their best interests. In the novel's universe, great cities can become alive and sentient, at which point they choose one or more of their residents as avatars to represent and defend them. In one of the novel's first scenes, New York City's avatar, a homeless

young Black man, sees a police officer and wills himself invisible, indicating that police officers—who are supposed to protect and serve the city—are in fact a threat to the city's residents. Then Paolo—the avatar of São Paolo—warns New York City's avatar that an enemy of cities from a parallel dimension, the Woman in White, will send her underlings "among the city's parasites." Shortly afterward, a tourist falsely accuses New York City's avatar of stealing a purse, leading two police officers to merge into a single eldritch creature and attack him.

This sequence of scenes underscores the novel's claim that police officers are "parasites" on the living organisms of cities—that is, they end up harming the cities they claim to defend. This dynamic of abusive policemen becomes even clearer with the introduction of police officer Matthew Houlihan, the father of Staten Island's avatar, Aislyn Houlihan. Under the guise of protecting Aislyn from the dangers of the big city, Matthew controls her, berates her, monitors how much she drives, and may even have hidden a GPS tracker in her car. The novel does not claim that all police officers abuse their power or harm the city—toward the novel's end, one female police officer mistakes Paolo and Manhattan's avatar Manny as authorized personnel and aids them because "those who would help protect the city see what they need to see"—but in general, the novel uses police officers to show how abusers can hide their controlling, abusive behavior by claiming that they are defending or protecting their victims.

QUOTES

Note: all page numbers for the quotes below refer to the Orbit edition of *The City We Became* published in 2021.

Prologue Quotes

> Back when I was in school, there was an artist who came in on Fridays to give us free lessons in perspective and lighting and other shit that white people go to art school to learn. Except this guy had done that, and he was Black. I'd never seen a Black artist before. For a minute I thought I could maybe be one, too.

Related Characters: New York City's Avatar (speaker), Paolo (São Paolo)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 4

Explanation and Analysis

After briefly discussing New York City's impending birth with Paolo (the avatar of São Paolo), New York City's avatar is painting a mural of a throat on a rooftop to help the city breathe.

This passage reveals the importance of diversity and racial representation to combatting stereotyped thinking. Prior to meeting a Black artist, the avatar—who is also Black—thought of "perspective and lighting" and other artistic techniques dismissively, as "shit that white people go to art school to learn." In other words, he thought of art as a stereotypically "white" pursuit, closed to him because he was Black, all because he'd "never seen a Black artist before." Meeting a Black person who was an artist—seeing Black people represented in the art world—updated the avatar's concept of artists to include Black people and thus opened the possibility of artistic ambition to him.

In context, this passage also hints at the importance of diversity to art. Recall that New York City's avatar is helping the city breathe. If he had never met the Black artist who tutored him, he might never have developed the skills that allow him to paint murals that are bringing the city to life. Since art can help define cities and bring them to life—literally in the science-fiction world of the novel and figuratively in the real world, where a thriving art scene contributes to a city's greatness—it's important that everyone be able to create art, not only those who are privileged and white.

> He's been talking like this since he showed up—places that never were, things that can't be, omens and portents. I figure it's bullshit because he's telling it to *me*, a kid whose own mama kicked him out and prays for him to die every day and probably hates me. *God* hates me. And I fucking hate God back, so why would he choose me for anything? But that's really why I start paying attention: because of God. I don't have to believe in something for it to fuck up my life.

Related Characters: New York City's Avatar (speaker), Paolo (São Paolo), Manny (Manhattan)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 6-7

Explanation and Analysis

Paolo is explaining to New York City's avatar that unless the avatar succeeds in serving as a midwife for New York City's birth and protecting the city, it will die like Pompeii and Atlantis. Initially the avatar disbelieves Paolo not only because Paolo is referring to "places that never were," like

Atlantis, but also because the avatar's abusive mother has undermined his self-worth: he thinks that if his "own mama" would leave him homeless, then surely no one would tell him anything truly important. Ergo, Paolo's important-seeming revelations must be "bullshit."

Yet the avatar reasons that "bullshit" can still be important because of how God has affected his life. The avatar believes that his mother "prays for him to die every day," which suggests that his mother is religious and may have "kicked him out," making him homeless, for religious reasons. Since the avatar later has a sexual liaison with Paolo and acknowledges Manny's attractiveness, the novel may be implying that his mother kicked him out because he's gay and she believes homosexuality is a sin. The avatar may not believe in God or homosexuality's sinfulness—but those concepts can still "fuck up [his] life" because his *mother* believes in them. More generally, then, this passage reveals that *other people's* beliefs, stereotypes, imaginations, and so forth can shape a person's reality as much as their own beliefs do. The novel will later literalize this revelation by having concepts and stereotypes give city avatars power to change physical reality.

Chapter 1 Quotes

"But seriously, thanks for helping me. You hear all kinds of stuff about how rude New Yorkers are, but . . . thanks."

"Eh, we're only assholes to people who are assholes first," she says, but she smiles as she says it.

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan) (speaker), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 28

Explanation and Analysis

Manny, who has just arrived in New York City, collapses in Penn Station and receives help from passersby. While thanking them, he refers to the stereotype of "rude" New Yorkers. This reference reveals two things.

First, Manny—a newcomer to the city—has preconceptions about New York and filters his experience through those preconceptions. This reveals a feedback loop between preexisting beliefs and personal experiences: preexisting beliefs shape personal experiences, but personal experiences can also alter preexisting beliefs. This feedback loop is important to the novel because in the novel's science-fictional universe, beliefs and concepts can literally alter physical reality.

Second, the woman's claim that New Yorkers are "only assholes to people who are assholes first" suggests a controversial ethical principle is quintessential to New York City's attitude: it's okay to respond in kind when someone hurts you. For the most part, this principle structures the relationship between the city's defenders and the Woman in White, the extradimensional invader trying to destroy the city. They believe she attacked first and so feel justified in violently defending themselves.

Late in the novel, however, it is revealed that city births destroy parallel dimensions and all their inhabitants. The Woman in White attacks cities because of the mass death their births cause. The city avatars are forced to grapple with the revelation that actually, they were "assholes first," albeit unintentionally. Yet they still do not believe that the Woman's response is proportionate or ethical. By introducing this New York ethical principle early and then subverting it with a revelation about the Woman's motives, the novel suggests that its own protagonists are acting according to inadequate or incomplete ethical worldviews.

The tendril mass looms, ethereal and pale, more frightening as the cab accelerates. There is a beauty to it, he must admit—like some haunting, bioluminescent deep-sea organism dragged to the surface. It is an alien beauty, however, meant for some other environment, some other aether, and here in New York its presence is a contaminant. The very air around it has turned gray, and now that they're closer, he can hear the air hissing as if the tendrils are somehow hurting the molecules of nitrogen and oxygen they touch. Manny's been in New York for less than an hour and yet he knows, he *knows*, that cities are organic, dynamic systems. They are built to incorporate newness. But some new things become part of a city, helping it grow and strengthen—while some new things can tear it apart.

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan), Madison

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 45-46

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Manny is riding atop a Checker cab (driven by helpful young New Yorker Madison) toward a tendril

mass on FDR Drive in an attempt to destroy the mass.

Coming early in the novel, this description of the tendrils introduces two competing interpretations of them: as unethical manipulators of human bigotry and as an ethically neutral, natural phenomenon. The description of the mass as "pale" subtly associates the tendrils with racial whiteness, foreshadowing how being infected with tendrils makes New Yorkers more likely to embrace white privilege, express racial bigotries, and divide New York City's community against itself.

Yet the comparison of the tendrils to a "bioluminescent deep-sea organism" suggest that the tendrils are not, in themselves, evil—instead, they are an ethically neutral, natural organism simply "meant for some other environment." Calling them a "contaminant"—a word with scientific, even medical connotations—further suggests that it's a mere natural fact, rather than an ethical problem, that the tendrils' presence harms New York.

Manny's reflection that "some new things become part of a city, helping it grow and strengthen—while some new things can tear it apart" also helps to distinguish between two different groups in the novel: new New Yorkers and gentrifiers. New New Yorkers like Manny can "become part of a city, helping it grow and strengthen." By contrast, gentrifiers—with which the tendrils are associated later in the novel—"tear it apart" by destroying preexisting communities and other phenomena unique to the city.

Chapter 2 Quotes

"Heard they were calling in emergency personnel from the whole, what do you call it? Tri-state area? for this mess. God, I can't wait to see which entire ethnic group they're going to scapegoat in the wake of this one."

"Maybe it's a white guy. Again."

"A 'lone wolf' with mental health issues, right!"

Related Characters: Bel Nguyen, Manny (Manhattan) (speaker), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 57

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Manny is walking with his new roommate Bel in Inwood Hill Park when they hear ambulances shrieking by, presumably to address the destruction of the Williamsburg Bridge earlier in the day.

Bel's worry that white people will "scapegoat" an "entire ethnic group" for the attack illustrates the real-world consequences of racial and ethnic stereotyping: if a person from a minority race or ethnicity does something bad, people assume that their individual badness is representative of their whole race or ethnicity and may treat everyone of that race or ethnicity with suspicion. By contrast, when a "white guy" does something bad, people do not perceive him as a representative member of the white community but as a "'lone wolf,'" a member of no community at all. This phenomenon—in which bad people of color are perceived as representing their communities, but bad white people are perceived as individuals—is an example of white privilege.

In fact, the perpetrator of the Williamsburg Bridge attack is neither a person of color nor a white man but an extradimensional alien invader, the Woman in White. Although the specifics of the conversation may not apply to her, Manny and Bel's discussion of white privilege in the context of her attacks foreshadows how the Woman will use a white, female disguise to exploit human preconceptions and biases to her own ends.

I am Manhattan, he thinks again, this time in a slow upwelling of despair. *Every murderer. Every slave broker. Every slumlord who shut off the heat and froze children to death. Every stockbroker who got rich off war and suffering.*

It's only the truth. He doesn't have to like it, though.

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan), Bel Nguyen

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 81-82

Explanation and Analysis

The first time Manny thinks "I am Manhattan," he is celebrating his defeat of the tendril growth on FDR Drive and realizing he belongs in the city. In this passage, by contrast, he has just terrorized a racist white woman who harassed him and Bel and called the police on them. After terrorizing her, he realizes that embodying a community means embodying its evil aspects as well as the good things about it.

This passage serves two important functions in the novel. First, it introduces Manny's ethically ambiguous relationship to New York City. Although Manny came to the

city fleeing a violent past and seeking a fresh start, the city chooses him to embody a community that has historically included "murderer[s]," "slave broker[s]" "slumlord[s]," and "stockbroker[s] who got rich off war and suffering." That the city wants Manny to represent these people hints that it chose Manny in part due to his capacity for violence—and thus that Manny's individual desire for ethical improvement may conflict with the needs of the city community he wants to join, represent, and defend.

Second, it introduces the idea that even great cities are not, themselves, straightforwardly ethically praiseworthy. Their historical (and contemporary) essences may include murder, human trafficking, and various forms of economic exploitation. This idea foreshadows the revelation, later in the novel, that city births annihilate parallel dimensions and all their inhabitants—a revelation that makes the city avatars' defense of New York City far more ethically complicated than it initially appeared.

Chapter 3 Quotes

"Just getting sick of these *immigrants*," he says. He's always careful to use acceptable words when he's on the job, rather than the words he says at home. That's how cops mess up, he has explained to her. They don't know how to keep home words at home and work words at work.

Related Characters: Matthew Houlihan (speaker), Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 92

Explanation and Analysis

Aislyn Houlihan, Staten Island's avatar, has just had a panic attack while trying to board the ferry because a Black person accidentally touched her breast. Outside the ferry terminal, she receives a call from her father Matthew, who asks where she is. After giving a misleading response, she changes the subject by asking about his job. Matthew immediately begins to complain about "*immigrants*."

This passage is important to understanding Aislyn. When Aislyn deceives her father about where she's going, it suggests she's afraid of telling him the truth—which suggests, in turn, that he's an angry, controlling, possibly abusive person. As soon as Aislyn asks Matthew about work, he complains about "immigrants"—which hints that Aislyn learned her own racism, apparent in her terrified reaction to a Black person accidentally touching her, from her father. The distinction between "home words" and "work words" suggests that Matthew freely uses racial slurs at home and employs euphemisms at work to keep his job. That he "has explained" this to her suggests Aislyn hasn't tried to contest his bigotry—she accepts it passively, absorbs it, and repeats it herself.

Disturbingly, bigoted Matthew is a police officer, someone supposed to defend the entire New York community. He exemplifies the novel's frequent characterization of police officers as abusers who pretend to be defending the community they victimize. By contrast, the real defenders of New York City are the city's avatars. Since Aislyn is a city avatar but also Matthew's daughter, the novel is setting up a question in this early passage: will Aislyn continue to absorb and imitate her father's bigotry, or will she learn to represent the entire, diverse Staten Island community and become a true protector of the city?

Chapter 4 Quotes

So when she'd seen this man step out of the crumbling entryway of an old building shell, with a smirk on his lips and his hand prominently resting on the handle of his gun, she'd felt like she does now, fiftyish years later in an art center bathroom. She'd felt *bigger*. Beyond fear or anger. She'd gone to the doorway, of course. Then she grabbed its sides to brace herself, and kicked in his knee. He'd spent three months in traction, claiming he'd slipped on a brick, and never messed with her again. Six years later, having bought her own pair of steel-toed boots, Bronca had done the same thing to a police informant at Stonewall—another time she'd been part of something bigger.

Bigger. As big as the whole goddamn borough.

Related Characters: Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 124-125

Explanation and Analysis

Bronca recalls kicking in the knee of a man who was sexually harassing her at age 11 and protesting at Stonewall during a confrontation with the Woman in White in the Bronx Art Center bathroom. The Woman has threatened Bronca and her family, in response to which Bronca becomes the avatar

of the Bronx.

Bronca associates becoming an avatar with earlier experiences of standing up to abuse. In each case, the abuser she confronts is associated with the police: the man who sexually harassed her at age 11 was rumored to be a former police officer fired for bad behavior toward a minor. Meanwhile, the man she kicks at Stonewall—1969 pro-LGBTQ protests sparked by a police raid on a Manhattan gay bar—is a police informant. This fact implies that when Bronca stands up to these men, she is not just an individual person fighting against another person, but a representative of other girls or other lesbians standing up against a representative of institutional powers that abuse the identity communities to which she belongs. Her righteous struggle on behalf of others like her makes her "bigger," not in a literal sense but ethically and in terms of her identity.

Bronca links her confrontations with police-associated men to her confrontation with the Woman in White. In so doing, Bronca suggests that her history experiencing abuse has made her strong and willing to fight and that the Woman in White as an abuser, attacking the vulnerable to secure her own pleasure or power. This latter view, Bronca will learn, is not entirely accurate when she gains the knowledge that the Woman is trying to stop human cities from destroying neighboring realities.

Chapter 5 Quotes

❝ It is the other place. The other *him*. The city he has become. New York City, as its whole and distinct self rather than the agglomeration of images and ideas that are its camouflage in this reality. He understands, suddenly, why he has seen that other place as empty; it isn't. The people are there, but in spirit—just as New York City itself has a phantom presence in the lives of every citizen and visitor. Here in this strange, abstract mural, Manny sees the truth that he now lives.

And he knows as well: the person who is the Bronx made this.

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan), Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Padmini Prakash (Queens), New York City's Avatar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 137

Explanation and Analysis

Manny and Brooklyn are searching for the avatars of the Bronx and Queens when Brooklyn shows Manny a photograph of one of Bronca's murals on her phone. In Bronca's mural, Manny sees the alternate New York—beautiful yet depopulated—of which he's been having visions; both he and Brooklyn immediately realize that the muralist must be the Bronx.

This passage illustrates a couple reasons why good art is important to a city's identity. First, such art can represent the city "as its whole and distinct self" in a way that its residents can perceive. As such, art can give community members a concept of "the truth that [they] now live[]." This is in contrast to how people usually encounter cities: not as unified physical landscapes but as "images and ideas," i.e. as individual rather than communal subjective experiences.

Second, art can create identity communities based around self-recognition and aesthetic appreciation. Manny sees himself in Bronca's art—it represents him. Moreover, Bronca's art allows him to recognize *her* (as a fellow borough's avatar). In simple terms, art can help people understand themselves and bring them into community with similar people. This passage thus helps explain why so many of the avatars who embody New York City communities are artists of one kind or another (Bronca a muralist, Brooklyn a musician, New York City's avatar a graffiti artist).

Chapter 6 Quotes

❝ That was what had made the paint-figures so creepy, really. To know that the things she was seeing weren't just mindless, swirl-faced monsters, but things with minds and feelings? Minds as incomprehensibly alien as Lovecraft once imagined his fellow human beings to be.

Related Characters: Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Veneza (Jersey City), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 168

Explanation and Analysis

Earlier in the day, a right-wing art collective attacked Bronca with an H.P. Lovecraft-inspired painting. In this passage, Bronca is explaining to her coworker Veneza that the painting was a portal to another dimension—and the "paint-figures" inside the painting were real aliens.

This passage explores the ethical dilemma at the novel's center: how are Bronca and the other city avatars supposed to react after they learn that city births destroy neighboring realities and all their inhabitants, including uncountable

intelligent aliens? The novel, which represents very different people coming together to protect their shared community, clearly values diversity. It repeatedly refers to H.P. Lovecraft (1890 – 1937), the influential science-fiction and horror writer, to critique his bigotry—the novel's villain's true name, R'lyeh, is even taken from Lovecraft's 1928 story "The Call of Cthulhu." Yet, at the same time, the novel's protagonists resign themselves to killing unnumbered aliens so humanity can continue to live and build cities.

The passage thus asks: are the novel's protagonists, in privileging human lives over intelligent alien life, acting like Lovecraft—deciding that humans like them are more valuable than any entities that seem "incomprehensibly alien" to humanity, even if those entities have "minds and feelings"? Or is it wrong to judge the novel's protagonists as bigoted against alien life in the way that Lovecraft was bigoted against people of other races and ethnicities? Is alien life really "incomprehensibly alien" to humanity, whereas people of different races and ethnicities need not be "incomprehensibly alien" to each other? The novel poses these questions without answering them.

Chapter 7 Quotes

"I keep thinking about how, at the park, she kept switching between 'we' and 'I' like the pronouns were interchangeable. Like she couldn't keep the words straight, and they didn't really matter anyway."

"Maybe this isn't her first language."

That's partly it. But Manny suspects the problem is less linguistic than contextual. 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.

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan), Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn) (speaker), New York City's Avatar, Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Veneza (Jersey City), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Padmini Prakash (Queens)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 181

Explanation and Analysis

Manny and Brooklyn are discussing the Woman in White's relationship to the tendrils, trying to figure out whether the tendrils obey the Woman or are actually *part* of her.

Up to this point, the novel has represented the Woman as a strange, threatening alien invader: first she appears as a tentacled monster, then as a force possessing racist humans' bodies, and now—potentially—as a consciousness distributed throughout human bodies and nonhuman tendrils. When speculating that the Woman misuses English because she can't tell the difference "between the individual self and the collective plural," Manny is assuming that he and other humans (or at least other English speakers) *can* tell the difference—that confusion between individual and collective is the result of alien beliefs and concepts. His assumptions make the Woman in White seem even stranger and more threatening.

Yet the novel later reveals that the Woman in White is, like Manny and Brooklyn, a city's avatar: she is the alien city R'lyeh. This revelation reminds the reader that human city avatars also confuse "individual self" and "collective plural"—they are simultaneously single people and embodiments of entire communities. This confusion is particularly acute with New York City's avatars, as at the end of the novel, Manny, Brooklyn, Padmini, Bronca, Veneza, and New York City's avatar are psychically conjoined. That Manny fails to recognize the similarities between the Woman in White's individual-plural identity confusion and his own hints that, because she is his enemy, he is subconsciously dehumanizing her—seeing her as more alien and less like him than she in fact is.

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, he needs that, and so for him and him alone I will be again the monster that I am—*

Related Characters: Manny (Manhattan), New York City's Avatar, The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 196

Explanation and Analysis

Manny is having a vision of New York City's avatar, unconscious and in hiding after battling the Woman in White. This vision is the first time Manny has seen the

avatar, and he has an unexpectedly intense emotional reaction, thinking that he would "live," "die," "kill," and become a "monster" for the avatar. The passage strongly implies that Manny has fallen in love at first sight.

Manny's reaction to the avatar marks an important turning point in Manny's character development. After terrorizing a racist white woman who harassed and threatened him, Manny realized that he was likely a violent person in his forgotten past. He wanted to move beyond that violence and felt despair over the evil, monstrous aspects of Manhattan's history, which his becoming an avatar requires him to embody. As soon as Manny sees the avatar, however, he gives up on the ethical growth he has been trying to achieve and assents to "again" becoming a "monster" if the avatar needs that. This change in Manny suggests that belonging to a community—in this case, New York City—may not always be good for individual people, as the community's needs may conflict with a person's personal growth.

While characters from other boroughs express resentment at the primacy of Manhattan in people's stereotypes about New York City, Manny's immediate passion for the avatar also suggests that Manhattan (the borough) has a special relationship to New York City's essence.

"Not sure I love New York enough to die for it. Definitely don't love it enough to sacrifice my family for it."

[…]

"Anything I can do to help your family, I will."

Her expression softens. Maybe she likes him a little more. "And I hope you get to become the person you actually *want* to be," she says, which makes him blink. "This city will eat you alive, you know, if you let it. Don't."

Related Characters: Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Manny (Manhattan) (speaker), Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), Matthew Houlihan, New York City's Avatar

Related Themes:

Page Number: 201

Explanation and Analysis

Brooklyn and Manny are discussing Brooklyn's state of mind, given the events she's experienced after becoming a borough's avatar. Her admission that she isn't "sure" she would "die" for New York City contrasts with Manny's earlier realization that he would die or kill for New York City's avatar. Her refusal "to sacrifice [her] family," meanwhile, shows that she recognizes a potential conflict between her responsibilities to her family and her responsibility to the city community. This recognition reminds the reader that what is good for individual community members or smaller parts of a community (like families) isn't always what's good for the whole community.

Brooklyn's warning to Manny that the "city will eat [him] alive" if he "let[s] it" illustrates her recognition that the city might make demands of Manny that would return him to a life of violence and undo the ethical development he's been seeking. Her warning also echoes Matthew Houlihan's warning to his daughter Aislyn that New York City outside Staten Island would eat *her*. Whereas Matthew's warning seemed like an attempt to control Aislyn's movements, Brooklyn's warning seems well-intentioned. The shared language in the two warnings foreshadows the later revelation that New York City's avatar may have to literally eat the boroughs' avatars. Although it eventually turns out that New York City's avatar doesn't eat the boroughs' avatars, repeated warnings from very different characters about just that possibility primes the readers to believe it is a probable outcome and fear it.

Chapter 8 Quotes

[T]he modified brownstone has been shorn of the stoop that once connected it to the neighborhood. This amputation is a still-healing wound that makes the building even more susceptible to attack by foreign organisms.

Related Characters: Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Clyde Thomason, Jojo, The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 220-221

Explanation and Analysis

Brooklyn's family owns two brownstones, one traditional and one whose stoop has been removed to make it accessible to Brooklyn's father Clyde, a wheelchair user. Clyde and Brooklyn's daughter Jojo live in the wheelchair-accessible brownstone. Brooklyn has been assuming that Clyde and Jojo would be safe from the Woman in White inside the brownstone, because brownstones are quintessential to Brooklyn (the borough) and so possess city energy that is hostile to the Woman and her underlings. In this passage, however, Brooklyn sees spiderlike minions of the Woman entering the wheelchair-accessible brownstone and realizes the renovations that made the

brownstone accessible have also made it "susceptible to attack."

The language of injury and disease in this passage—"amputation," "wound," "foreign organisms"—implies that the conflict between New York City and the Woman in White is as natural as bacteria infecting a cut. This implication suggests that the city and the Woman are merely acting in accordance with their natures, unable to help what they do and so not responsible for it. The lack of ethical responsibility that the language of disease proposes, however, is belied by other passages in the novel in which New York City's avatars reason through ethical decisions and explain their choices. Thus, the novel forwards conflicting accounts of the conflict between the city and the Woman—natural and inevitable vs. chosen and thus changeable—without resolving them.

Up to this point, the novel has associated authentic New York City with diversity, while it has associated gentrification with bigotry. Yet in this passage, the reader learns that making a Brooklyn brownstone wheelchair-accessible—making in more welcoming to diverse bodies—makes it less authentic and thus "more susceptible to attack." Ergo, the passage reminds the reader that while city's essences can include diversity and an ethical response to differing identities, they don't *necessarily* do so.

Chapter 9 Quotes

❝ "Nothing human beings do is set in stone—and even stone changes, anyway. We can change, too, anything about ourselves that we want to. We just have to want to." She shrugs. "People who say change is impossible are usually pretty happy with things just as they are."

Related Characters: Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx) (speaker), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), New York City's Avatar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 233

Explanation and Analysis

Bronca is talking to the Woman in White (in disguise as Dr. White of the Better New York Foundation) about a self-portrait by New York City's avatar. Bronca interprets the avatar as a young man, abused as a child, who could grow up to stop abuse. Through this interpretation, Bronca identifies herself with New York City's avatar—not only because Bronca appreciates his art, but also because Bronca's experiences of sexist and homophobic abuse have fueled her own defense of her community.

Meanwhile, Bronca is mentally associating the Woman in White with "people who say change is impossible" because they're "happy with things just as they are." She makes this assumption due to the Woman's disguise as a privileged white woman, the way the Woman wields money and power through the Better New York Foundation, and the Woman's belief (stated just prior to this passage) that abuse will always continue because cruelty is essential to humanity. Bronca's assumption is partially true: the Woman *is* using the human status quo of white privilege and gentrification to her own advantage in her quest to destroy New York City.

Yet the Woman is also an abuse victim. The reader later learns that the Woman embodies a city—the alien city R'lyeh—created by extradimensional entities seeking to understand human beings so they can destroy humanity. In a future passage, Bronca overhears the Woman's creators torturing her, a scene disturbingly reminiscent of parents hurting their child. That the Woman/R'lyeh continues to do her creators' bidding despite their abuse suggests that people—like the Woman—who say change is impossible aren't always "happy with things just as they are." They may be fearful, self-deceived, brainwashed, or unable to imagine change.

Moreover, the Woman in White believes human beings are essentially cruel because human cities, at birth, destroy neighboring dimensions. Cities are not merely victims of the Woman's abusive tactics but also accidental perpetrators of mass violence. Bronca's claim that "nothing human beings do is set in stone" hints that humans could learn to make their cities less destructive—and yet neither she nor her allies attempt to change or mitigate cities' destructive effects. They simply accept the mass death cities cause as natural. That New York City and the Woman in White are both victims and perpetrators of violence suggests that while the Woman may be wrong to believe "change is impossible," Bronca and the other human avatars are not yet recognizing that they too are responsible for keeping "things just as they are."

"The Better New York Foundation—"

"Jesus, *really*?"

"Yes. Very well resourced, very private, and very dedicated to raising the city from its gritty image to the heights of prosperity and progress."

Bronca actually pulls the receiver from her ear to glare at it for a moment. "I have never smelled a pile of bigger horseshit. That's—" She shakes her head. "It's gentrifier logic. *Settler* logic. They want the city without the 'gritty' people who make it what it is!"

Related Characters: Raul, Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx) (speaker), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), New York City's Avatar

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 240

Explanation and Analysis

The Woman in White, disguised as Dr. White of the Better New York Foundation, has visited Bronca at the Bronx Art Center and offered her an enormous donation—if the Center takes down its exhibit of graffiti by New York City's avatar and puts up work by a right-wing art collective. After the Woman leaves, Bronca receives a call from Raul, the development chair of the Center's board, warning Bronca that the board wants her to accept the Woman's deal.

The Woman in White uses multiple tactics to weaken New York City. She infects individual New Yorkers with tendrils that augment their biases and bigotries, dividing the community against itself. In addition, she uses the Better New York Foundation to gentrify the city—making it less itself and more vulnerable to her attacks—with or without New Yorkers' consent. This passage shows the Woman using money to gain the consent of powerful New Yorkers, in this case the Center's board members, and so try to override New Yorkers like Bronca who do not consent to gentrification.

While the novel shows the Woman using gentrification to weaken the city, it does not explicitly give its own definition of gentrification. This passage, however, indicates what the novel thinks gentrification is. When "well resourced" (i.e. rich) and "private" (i.e. not publicly accountable) people or organizations drive "gritty" (i.e. not rich) people out of a community or area, *that* is gentrification. Since Bronca equates "gentrifier logic" with "settler logic"—comparing gentrification to white European colonizers' theft of indigenous people's land—gentrification also clearly has a racial element: when white people use their racial privilege to drive non-white people out of a community or area, that is also gentrification.

Given that Raul and Bronca are discussing displacing art by New York City's avatar (a young Black man) with art by a racist, mostly white collective, it seems clear that the novel thinks gentrification can occur on the level of art and symbolism in addition to literal population movement, too.

"I know it I know it I know . . . made me for this, but am I not a good creation?" Gasp. Sob. Now the voice hitches. "I . . . I know. I see h-h-how hideous I am. But it isn't my fault. The particles of this universe are perverse—" There's a long pause this time. Bronca has almost reached the ground level when the voice chokes out, now thick with bitterness, "I am only what you made me."

Related Characters: The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh) (speaker), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 250

Explanation and Analysis

Bronca is sleeping at the Bronx Art Center after the Alt Artistes have posted her home address online when she wakes to odd noises. Walking down the stairs, she hears a voice—the Woman in White's—begging and crying out in pain. This passage is a turning point in the reader's understanding of the Woman. It reveals the Woman is not a naturally occurring organism but some entities' "creation"—a revelation setting up the later plot twist that the Woman is herself an avatar of the city R'lyeh, which extradimensional entities built specifically to better understand and so eventually destroy humanity.

It also reveals that the Woman is, like Bronca and Aislyn, an abuse victim. Her creators made her as a weapon to combat human cities, because living cities destroy neighboring dimensions at their birth—but these creators hate cities and have taught the Woman to see herself as "hideous." In response to her creators' disgust, the Woman can only protest that her nature isn't her "fault" and that they themselves "made" her. Though true, these facts do not prevent her creators from torturing her.

Despite the abuse the Woman suffers at her creators' hands, she believes in their cause and carries out their plans.

This fact shows the various ways that abuse victims can react to abuse. Some, like Bronca, become righteously angry and fight back; others, like the Woman in White and Aislyn, internalize their abusers' views and commit their own unethical or abusive acts as a result.

Chapter 10 Quotes

❝ Aislyn loves her father; of course she does, but Conall is right on one level: her whole life, Aislyn has had to scrape and struggle to maintain her own emotional real estate. If she doesn't leave this house soon, her father will snatch it all up and double the rent on anything he doesn't want her to feel.

Conall is very, very wrong, however, about something important. He thinks that the meek, shy girl that her father has described, and whom he is currently terrorizing, is all there is to Aislyn. It isn't.

The rest of her? Is as big as a city.

Related Characters: Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), Matthew Houlihan, Conall McGuiness, The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 279

Explanation and Analysis

Aislyn, unable to sleep, has gone to sit by her backyard pool, only to discover her father Matthew's houseguest Conall asleep in a pool chair with his shirt off, baring a swastika tattoo on his chest. When Conall wakes, he sexually harasses Aislyn and eventually grabs her, suggesting that they have sex so she can belong to him instead of to her father.

Aislyn knows her father is emotionally abusive. She compares herself to a homeowner needing to "scrape and struggle" to afford "emotional real estate," while her father is a real estate company planning to "snatch [] up" her emotional life and "double the rent on anything he doesn't want her to feel"—to make her pay for being her own person. This figurative language of Aislyn as a poor homeowner and her father as a predatory real estate company implies a parallel between emotional abuse and gentrification. In Aislyn's abuse, she is denied the opportunity to feel and express her authentic emotions; in gentrification, a community is denied the opportunity to remain authentic to its roots and live where it has historically lived.

Interestingly, Aislyn stands up to Conall's harassment in a way she never stands up to her father's abuse and rarely stands up to the Woman in White's manipulations. Her realization that she is "as big as a city" when she fights back against Conall echoes Bronca's earlier sensation of being "as big as the whole goddamn borough" when she fights back against the Woman in White in the Bronx Art Center bathroom—a parallel that hints Aislyn has the potential to fight for her own self-determination, the way Bronca does, if only she could consistently direct her anger at the right people. The right people, the novel insists, are those who abuse and manipulate her: not only Conall but also her father Matthew and the Woman in White.

❝ Everything that happens everywhere else happens on Staten Island, too, but here people try not to see the indecencies, the domestic violence, the drug use. And then, having denied what's right in front of their eyes, they tell themselves that at least they're living in a good place full of good people. At least it's not the city.

[...]

Evil comes from elsewhere, Matthew Houlihan believes. Evil is other people. She will leave him this illusion, mostly because she envies his ability to keep finding comfort in simple, black-and-white views of the world. Aislyn's ability to do the same is rapidly eroding.

Related Characters: Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), Matthew Houlihan, Conall McGuiness, The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Paolo (São Paolo)

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 281

Explanation and Analysis

Aislyn has just used her avatar powers to throw her father Matthew's houseguest Conall through her backyard fence after he sexually harassed and grabbed her. Rather than tell her father what Conall tried to do, Aislyn walks away from the house through Staten Island and thinks about her situation.

This passage alludes to a mantra Matthew prompted Aislyn to repeat earlier in the novel, when he was explaining to her why she shouldn't leave Staten Island: "Everything that happens everywhere else happens here, too, but at least here people *try* to be decent." In this passage, Aislyn is

reinterpreting Matthew's mantra critically: trying to be decent, on Staten Island, really means *ignoring* "the indecencies, the domestic violence, [and] the drug use" to feel morally superior to the rest of the city.

If denial about ugly realities characterizes Staten Island, it may explain why Aislyn, Staten Island's avatar, has such a difficult time facing up to her father's emotional abuse and the Woman in White's manipulative nature. In this scene, Aislyn feels as if her capacity for living in such delusion is "rapidly eroding." When Paolo approaches her, trying to recruit her to join the other boroughs, she seems ready to leave Staten Island—until the Woman in White appears and successfully manipulates Aislyn into attacking Paolo. Aislyn's apparent epiphany in this passage is short-lived, but it shows that she has the capacity to understand that her own patterns of thought and behavior are wrong if she contemplates them critically.

While Matthew's view that "evil comes from elsewhere" is a commentary on Staten Islanders' prejudice against other New Yorkers, it also describes the novel's premise: an "evil com[ing] from elsewhere"—literally, from another dimension—threatens a community, and that community must repel the threat. Yet this passage suggests the view that "evil comes from elsewhere" is simplistic and naïve. Thus, it reminds the reader that the Woman in White's tendrils seem to amplify prejudices but not create them, while her Better New York Foundation exploits preexisting phenomena like economic privilege and gentrification: the Woman in White is attacking humanity with evils humanity created.

Once the novel reveals that the Woman attacks cities because cities destroy other dimensions, meanwhile, this passage will make the reader question whether her attack is truly "evil" in a "black-and-white" sense or an understandable response to cities' violence.

Chapter 11 Quotes

"Okay, so." Brooklyn visibly braces herself. "So what happens to those universes that our city *punches through*?"

[...]

"They die," Bronca says. She's decided to be compassionate about it, but relentless. None of them can afford sentimentality. "The punching-through? It's a mortal wound, and that universe folds out of existence. Every time a city is born—no, really, before that. The process of our creation, what makes us alive, is the deaths of hundreds or thousands of other closely related universes, and every living thing in them."

Brooklyn shuts her eyes for a moment. "Oh my God," Queens breaths. "Oh my God. We're all mass murderers."

[...]

[Manny] takes [Padmini's] shaking hands in his own, and looks her in the eye, and says, "Would you prefer to offer up all of your family and friends to die instead? Maybe there's a way we can."

Related Characters: Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Padmini Prakash (Queens), Manny (Manhattan) (speaker)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 306-307

Explanation and Analysis

In this passage, Bronca reveals to Brooklyn, Padmini, and Manny that city births destroy "hundreds or thousands of closely related universes, and every living thing in them." This revelation is a turning point in the novel, both for the characters' development and for their ethical vision.

Each character reacts differently to the mass death that New York City's birth has caused. Before Bronca speaks, Brooklyn—who suspects what Bronca will say—"braces herself," which indicates that she finds the mass death upsetting but wants to moderate her reaction. That is, Brooklyn's body language indicates her desire for emotional self-control in the face of horror. Bronca makes a conscious decision to be "relentless," not "sentimental," suggesting that she's refusing to wallow in remorse. Padmini is guilt-stricken, calling herself and the other city avatars "mass murderers." Finally, Manny is calm and intellectual, reminding the reader that his violent past may have hardened him to guilt and hard choices.

This passage hints at two things about the characters' ethical vision. First, the characters take it as given that some die for others to survive. Manny asks Padmini whether she'd prefer "all of [her] family and friends to die instead," which

suggests the characters might be able to choose who dies and who survives—but ultimately, none of them seem to believe they can find a solution to the problem of cities killing neighboring dimensions. Either the cities die horribly, or the neighboring dimensions do.

Second, the characters quickly choose their own "family and friends" over the inhabitants of "hundreds or thousands of other closely related universes." It does seem natural for the avatars to choose their loved ones over entities from other dimensions. Yet they spend very little time asking themselves whether cities have any responsibility to die so that other universes can live, even though cities' births seem to kill many more lives than they contain residents. The relative lack of debate or internal struggle among the avatars suggests that their ethical viewpoints are not well developed.

Chapter 12 Quotes

❝ There is an instant in which Aislyn's mind tries to signal an alarm, doom, existential threat, all the usual fight-or-flight signals that are the job of the lizard brain. And if the gush of substance had been different somehow—something hideous, maybe—she would have started screaming.

Three things stop her. The first and most atavistic is that everything in her life has programmed her to associate evil with specific, easily definable things. Dark skin. Ugly people with scars or eyepatches or wheelchairs. Men. The Woman in White is the visual opposite of everything Aislyn has been taught to fear, and so . . . Even though intellectually Aislyn now has proof that what she's seeing is just a guise, and the Woman in White's true form could be anyone or any*thing* . . .

. . . Aislyn also thinks, *Well, she looks all right.*

Related Characters: Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), Conall McGuiness, The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Matthew Houlihan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 333

Explanation and Analysis

Aislyn finds a strange white pillar in her front yard the morning after the tendril-infected Conall sexually harassed her. Getting in her car to drive to work, she sees a tendril attached to her rearview mirror and asks the Woman in White to come talk to her. Eventually, the Woman teleports into Aislyn's backseat in a "gush of substance" that becomes a white woman.

Aislyn's racist, ableist, and gendered biases are preventing her from seeing the truth about the Woman in White. Aislyn's life—most likely her upbringing by the bigoted Matthew Houlihan—has "programmed" these biases into her. The word "programmed" suggests that Aislyn's biases aren't inevitable. She could have been "programmed" differently had she been raised to value different things. At the same time, however, "programmed" suggests automatic thinking, even brainwashing, which indicates that it will be difficult for Aislyn to change her biases now that she has them, if such change is possible at all.

This passage also suggests that people may ignore the truth if it conflicts with their preexisting perceptions, beliefs, or biases. Aislyn knows "intellectually" that the Woman in White may be neither female nor white. Nevertheless, because she *perceives* the Woman in White to be a white woman, she allows her biases in favor of white people and women to dictate her behavior. In this way, the novel suggests that more information or education isn't necessarily enough to counteract preexisting biases and help people see the world more clearly.

Chapter 13 Quotes

❝ "Millions of lives in exchange for four?" She shrugs. It looks nonchalant but isn't. "That ain't even a debate."

Related Characters: Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn) (speaker), Manny (Manhattan), Padmini Prakash (Queens), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Hong (Hong Kong)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 351

Explanation and Analysis

Brooklyn is discussing with Manny, Padmini, Bronca, Hong, and Paolo that New York City's avatar may need to eat the boroughs' avatars to defeat the Woman in White and save New York City. Brooklyn is arguing that sacrificing herself, Manny, Padmini, and Bronca is the only choice New York City's avatar can make. The choice between their lives and "millions" is, in her view, not "even a debate." Brooklyn's argument—and the other avatars' eventual acceptance of it—looks utilitarian on its face. Utilitarianism is, broadly speaking, an ethical philosophy holding that one should seek the greatest good for the greatest number of people.

What's odd about Brooklyn's argument is that it mirrors the

utilitarian logic of the Woman in White, who believes herself justified in destroying human cities to save hundreds of neighboring dimensions and all their inhabitants. Yet when the Woman makes the calculation that human cities and their millions of inhabitants must be destroyed for millions *upon* millions of other intelligent lives, Brooklyn and the other avatars treat her as a monstrous enemy. The inconsistency in the avatars' ethics suggest that they do not yet have a consistent or adequate ethical worldview to deal with the complexities of their situation.

Chapter 14 Quotes

"I know an apology don't make up for it [...] I know it don't, okay? I damn sure got called a dyke enough myself just for stepping into a ring that dude rappers thought was theirs by default. Motherfuckers tried to rape me, all because I didn't fit into what they thought a woman should be—and I passed that shit on. I know I did. But I *got better*. I had some friends slap some sense into me, and I listened when they did. And I figured out that the dudes were fucked in the head, so maybe it wasn't the best idea to imitate them."

Related Characters: Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn) (speaker), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), Matthew Houlihan

Related Themes:

Related Symbols:

Page Number: 377-378

Explanation and Analysis

Brooklyn and Bronca are driving to find Staten Island's avatar when Bronca confronts Brooklyn about homophobia in the lyrics she wrote during her career as a rapper. Eventually, Brooklyn apologizes and tries to explain her behavior.

This passage develops the novel's theme of abuse. While talking to the Woman in White, Bronca argued that abuse victims who survive their abuse will change the world by standing up to their abusers and ending them. Bronca herself embodies this vision of victims becoming righteously angry heroes: as an 11-year-old girl, she put an adult man sexually harassing her in the hospital, while as an older teenager she took part in the 1969 Stonewall protests for LGBTQ rights in response to a police raid on a Manhattan gay bar.

By contrast, the Woman in White and Aislyn Houlihan represent abuse victims who perpetuate abuse in turn. Late in the novel, readers learn that the Woman is herself a city avatar, created by extradimensional entities who want to understand and so destroy humanity's living cities. These entities torture the Woman and teach her to hate herself—yet she faithfully enacts their plans, using bigotry and gentrification to destroy cities from within. Aislyn's father Matthew uses racist fearmongering to control Aislyn's thoughts, emotions, and movements, yet Aislyn embraces rather than rejects the bigotry her father has taught her.

Finally, Brooklyn represents a middle position between Bronca on the one hand and the Woman and Aislyn on the other. During her music career, Brooklyn experienced homophobic abuse ("dyke" is a homophobic slur against lesbians) and attempted sexual assault from men who believed women shouldn't be rappers. At first, Brooklyn "passed that shit on" with homophobic lyrics—much as the Woman in White and Aislyn pass on the evil their abusers have taught them. Yet due to an intervention from her friends, Brooklyn "got better" and became like Bronca, an abuse victim who will fight to make the world better. Brooklyn's character development suggests that how people react to abuse isn't static—an abuse victim can become an abuser for a while, reform, and go on to fight abuse.

Chapter 15 Quotes

[Aislyn] can see [Hong's] filthy, foreign foot planted square on the dill.

The anger comes on faster than Aislyn's ever gotten angry in her life. It is as if Conall has broken a dam within her, and now every bit of fury she has ever suppressed over thirty years just needs the barest hair trigger to explode forth.

Related Characters: Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Padmini Prakash (Queens), Hong (Hong Kong), Conall McGuiness, Matthew Houlihan

Related Themes:

Page Number: 403

Explanation and Analysis

Aislyn has woken up to strange noises and walked onto her front lawn, only to find the Woman in White confronting

Brooklyn, Bronca, Padmini, and Hong, who have come to recruit Aislyn. She sees Hong stepping on her herb garden and becomes enraged.

This passage illustrates how biased, stereotyped, or bigoted thinking can misdirect justified anger. Aislyn has every right to be angry with Conall, her father Matthew's neo-Nazi friend who sexually harassed Aislyn and physically grabbed her. That Aislyn feels a lifetime of "suppressed" anger also makes sense, since the novel implies that Aislyn's father Matthew has been controlling and abusive toward her all her life and that Aislyn has never felt able to fight back.

Yet Aislyn is not directing her anger toward her actual long-term abuser: her bigoted, sexist, controlling father, Matthew. Instead, Aislyn, emotionally unable to confront her father, is misdirecting her anger toward targets that her xenophobia and racism have taught her to believe are appropriate to hate: a "foreign" man and his non-white companions. Aislyn's inability to come to terms with her own abuse, combined with her bigoted upbringing, nearly doom New York City.

Chapter 16 Quotes

❝ "Living cities aren't defined by politics," he says. It's almost a shout, so urgently does he speak. "Not by city limits or county lines. *They're made of whatever the people who live in and around them believe.*"

Related Characters: Paolo (São Paolo) (speaker), Manny (Manhattan), Brooklyn Thomason (Brooklyn), Bronca Siwanoy (The Bronx), Padmini Prakash (Queens), New York City's Avatar, Aislyn Houlihan (Staten Island), The Woman in White (The Enemy) (R'lyeh), Veneza (Jersey City)

Related Themes:

Page Number: 425

Explanation and Analysis

Manny, Brooklyn, Bronca, and Padmini have just failed to wake New York City's avatar without the help of Staten Island's avatar, Aislyn. They believe that the Woman in White will defeat them—when, all of a sudden, Veneza transforms into the avatar of Jersey City, a New York City suburb in New Jersey. In the quotation above, Paolo has realized what has happened and is trying to explain it to the boroughs' avatars.

The idea of community has been very important to the novel's plot. Up to this point, the boroughs' avatars have assumed that all five of the boroughs—the Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Queens, and Staten Island—need to come together in community to save New York City and its avatar. Because Staten Island's avatar Aislyn xenophobically rejects the other boroughs' attempts to recruit her, the remaining four boroughs assume that New York City's community is irreparably broken and doomed.

Paolo's revelation here suggests that while Staten Island may belong to New York City as "defined by politics," it isn't the city's true fifth borough because Aislyn doesn't "believe" she belongs to the city. Indeed, throughout the novel she has felt mostly resentment and bigotry toward the other boroughs. By contrast, although Jersey City is not part of New York City according to "city limits or county lines," Jersey City's Veneza has consistently acted like a New Yorker, supporting the city and its avatars. Thus the novel indicates that while community *is* very important, people belong to a community only if and when they believe and act like they do.

SUMMARY AND ANALYSIS

The color-coded icons under each analysis entry make it easy to track where the themes occur most prominently throughout the work. Each icon corresponds to one of the themes explained in the Themes section of this LitChart.

PROLOGUE: SEE, WHAT HAD HAPPENED WAS

A first-person narrator (later revealed to be New York City's avatar), wearing unwashed jeans because he doesn't have another pair, stands on a New York City rooftop at dawn and sings a wordless song: "I sing the city." He hears a strange echo and a "growl" that reminds him of **police** sirens, which he dislikes.

The first-person narrator in this section does not receive a name. Instead, the novel identifies him by his relationship with New York City. The narrator's lack of name suggests that an intense relationship with a community, such as a city, might undermine or threaten an individual person's identity, as represented by a unique name. The narrator's claim that he "sing[s] the city" echoes the famous first line of Virgil's Aeneid, *an epic poem in Latin about the founding of Rome written during the first century BCE: "*Arma virumque cano," *or, in English, "Arms and the man I sing." By alluding to an ancient epic poem about the founding of Rome in its first scene, the novel implicitly argues that New York City is as deserving of its own epic literature as Rome. Moreover, by centering song and literary allusion, the novel hints that art is somehow important to cities. Finally, the narrator's dislike of police sirens hints that although police are often city employees, they may be antagonists in this novel about cities.*

Later, the avatar is in a café with Paolo. Because Paolo is "not-white" and the avatar is Black, other patrons stare at them suspiciously. Paolo is trying to explain to the avatar how "things are supposed to work." The avatar muses that he's never seen Paolo eat. Devouring his own food, he also notes Paolo's accent and aura of being "way older" than he looks.

The suspicious stares that the avatar and Paolo receive because they aren't white reveal that the other patrons are likely racist white people in a predominantly white area of the city. These people may be suspicious of the avatar and Paolo due to negative stereotypes they hold about non-white men. In contrast with the other patrons' stereotypical thinking, the avatar carefully observes Paolo as an individual person: Paolo's (lack of) eating habits, his accent, and his age. The avatar's observation that Paolo seems "way older" than he looks hints at Paolo's mysterious background.

Paolo demands to know whether the avatar is listening. He tells the avatar that he "didn't believe it either" until someone named Hong took him to the sewers to show him "the growing roots, the budding teeth." He says he had noticed breathing all his life but didn't realize it was unusual. He tells the avatar to listen, puts 20 dollars on the table, though he's paid for breakfast, and tells the avatar to meet him in the same café on Thursday. The avatar, musing that he would have slept with Paolo for breakfast or for free, takes the money and asks whether Paolo has a place. Paolo again tells the avatar to listen and leaves.

Though Paolo says he "didn't believe it either," the novel doesn't reveal exactly what "it" is—or what breathing the avatar is supposed to hear. This vagueness deepens the mystery around Paolo. Meanwhile, the avatar's assumption that Paolo is trying to buy sex from him suggests that the avatar has been offered money for sex before. As the avatar is young, homeless, and hungry, this detail suggests that poverty and social vulnerability have forced him into exploitative, possibly abusive sexual situations.

The avatar is finishing his sandwich and fantasizing about having a place to sleep with food in it when a **police** officer enters the café. The avatar visualizes "mirrors around [his own] head" that repels the officer's eyes. To the avatar's surprise, his mirror trick keeps the officer from noticing him, though he is the only Black person in the café. The avatar leaves.

Unexpectedly, the avatar's attempt to visualize camouflage for himself works—which suggests that, in the novel, thoughts, beliefs, and imagination control reality. The avatar's fear of the police officer, meanwhile, reminds the reader of the violence and racial profiling that police have inflicted on Black New Yorkers; it implies that police officers abuse their power over Black residents.

On a roof at night, the avatar is painting a mural of an open throat with salvaged materials. He recalls that when he was in school, a Black artist visited once a week to give lessons about "shit that white people go to art school to learn." This Black artist made the avatar believe he himself could be an artist. When the avatar finishes his painting, the throat seems to begin breathing. He thinks that Paolo was telling the truth, shouts in celebration, and paints "breathing-holes" all over New York until he has no more paint.

Here the novel implies that the avatar used to hold a stereotypical belief that only white people could "go to art school"—that only white people could really be artists. By refuting this stereotype, the Black artist who taught the avatar encouraged the avatar's artistic ambitions. That the avatar paints "breathing-holes" for New York that then allow the city to breathe, meanwhile, suggests that art is as vital to a city's healthy functioning as breathing is to ordinary living organisms.

Next Thursday at the café, Paolo notes that the avatar has begun "hearing it" and that the "city is breathing easier." Yet he warns the avatar that unless the avatar learns from Paolo, the city will die like "Pompeii and Atlantis" and kill the avatar with it. The avatar initially doesn't believe Paolo's stories, since Paolo is telling them to the avatar, a kid whose mother threw him out, apparently for religious reasons. But the avatar reasons that if God can affect his life when he doesn't believe in God, what Paolo is saying can affect his life even if he doesn't believe Paolo. He asks Paolo to teach him.

This passage reveals what "it" was that the avatar was supposed to hear: the city's breathing. A volcanic eruption destroyed the ancient Roman city of Pompeii in 79 C.E., while Atlantis is a mythological lost city mentioned in the works of the ancient Greek philosopher Plato (400s-300s B.C.E.) and taken up by subsequent writers. By suggesting that these cities died *rather than were merely destroyed (or were just fictional), Paolo implies that cities are living things. The avatar's initial distrust of Paolo suggests that he is a suspicious person—perhaps due to his abuse history, as his own mother threw him out of her house and made him homeless. Yet his reasoning that others' beliefs affect him even if he doesn't share those beliefs underlines the importance of belief to reality in the novel.*

Paolo teaches the avatar that "great cities" are living organisms. There used to be several in the Americas, but genocide against indigenous peoples killed those cities. New Orleans was almost born but for some reason failed. Now New York City is being born—and "as in any other part of nature," cities have predators. The avatar is the "midwife" supposed to protect New York during its birth.

This passage reveals that, in the novel, great cities literally are alive. Though Paolo suggests that natural phenomena such as predator-prey relations govern cities' lifecycles, he also explains that genocide against indigenous peoples killed living cities in the Americas—a detail that hints at importance of human politics and human choices (ethical or unethical) to cities. That the avatar is the city's "midwife," meanwhile, partially resolves the mystery of his special relationship to the city. He's its protector, the person who's supposed to usher it into its new life, just as a midwife would help a baby into the world.

The avatar and Paolo go to Paolo's apartment. The avatar uses Paolo's shower and eats his food while Paolo smokes. Paolo warns the avatar about the "harbingers of the Enemy [...] among the city's parasites" and tells him that the city has selected him to represent its entire diverse population.

The reader does not yet know who the "Enemy" is, but Paolo's allusion to this person hints at conflict to come. The idea that a city can have "parasites"—a biological term –again underlines that Paolo sees cities as natural organisms rather than as political, legal, or economic entities created by human choices. His claim that the avatar must represent New York City's entire population, meanwhile, may make the reader worry—can a single person really represent such a diverse population? If he can, can he retain his own individual identity while doing so?

The avatar falls asleep on Paolo's couch and dreams that an underwater monster approaches the Hudson to attack him, but that another entity—a "sprawling jewel" that smells like "familiar cigarette smoke"—warns the monster away. The avatar wakes up, whispers "*São* Paolo," climbs into bed with Paolo, and demonstrates that he's "grateful." Then he leaves.

Due to his dream, New York City's avatar realizes that Paolo is himself the avatar of São Paolo, the largest city in Brazil (by population). That the avatar sees Paolo as a "sprawling jewel" that nevertheless smells like "cigarette smoke" demonstrate how concepts related to cities (like sprawl) and intimate physical descriptions (the smell of cigarette smoke) mingle in cities' avatars. That the avatar decides to show Paolo he's "grateful"—implicitly, by performing some sex act pleasurable to Paolo—may suggest that the avatar enjoys sex and is attracted to Paolo despite his implied abuse history. On the other hand, by linking sex to gratitude, the scene also implies that the avatar views sex as transactional.

The avatar goes to a library—he likes libraries because you can stay in them indefinitely unless you do something objectionable—and reads. When he leaves, he sees two **police** officers on the street whose shadows are moving unnaturally. They begin following the avatar. When he flees, tourists block his way. One accuses him of snatching a woman's purse. The avatar runs, feeling the officers—"*harbingers of the* Enemy"—coming after him. He hides in an alley. The officers' bodies, fused into a huge mass, enter the alley. To escape this "Mega Cop," the avatar sprints across FDR Drive. FDR Drive is the city's "artery," the cars its "white blood cells," and the Mega Cop an "infection," so the avatar crosses safely while the Mega Cop is run over repeatedly and destroyed.

Though the avatar did not touch the woman's purse, the tourist nevertheless accuses him of stealing it. The reader is left to assume that the tourist blames the avatar because the avatar is a young Black man, and the tourist believes racist stereotypes about Black men's criminality. Notably, the police officers are already following the avatar when the tourist accuses him—which suggests either that they racially profiled him or (given their peculiar shadows) that something more science-fictional is going on. That police officers are the first "harbingers of the Enemy" the avatar meets, meanwhile, highlights that, in the novel, police officers are antagonistic to the city's well-being. Finally, the figurative biological language used to explain the city's reaction to the "Mega Cop"—"artery," "white blood cells," "infection"—underlines that within the world of the novel, cities are living things comparable to biological organisms.

The avatar feels some force tugging him in the direction of New York City's center. He sees pieces of the Mega Cop and thinks: "I want it gone. *We* want it gone." Without knowing how it happened, he finds himself teleported to Central Park. He realizes that Paolo's stories were accurate, and the Enemy will use the infection that the Mega Cop represents to gain a "foothold" in New York.

When the avatar refers to himself as "we," the reader can't be sure whether he is referring to all New Yorkers—or some other community that's yet to be revealed. As the city is not literally a biological organism, meanwhile, the novel leaves open what form the Enemy's "infection" of it or "foothold" in it will take.

The avatar thinks, "my water breaks"—and then clarifies that he means water mains. He feels physical transformations suggestive of becoming a city. In the distance he senses São Paolo, Paris, Lagos, and other living cities watching him. As New York City is born, the Enemy manifests in human reality to attack. Its tentacle breaks the Williamsburg Bridge, but the avatar attacks it with painful New York concepts such as "the memory of a bus ride to LaGuardia and back" and drives the Enemy away.

A pregnant person's water usually breaks at the beginning of childbirth. When the avatar refers to his "water break[ing]," he's both indicating that New York City is being born and hinting at his willingness to represent or even embody New Yorkers unlike himself (e.g. those with wombs). That the avatar defeats the Enemy by attacking it with painful concepts highlights, once again, the power of concepts and beliefs to shape reality in the novel.

Exultantly, the avatar thinks the Enemy will be hesitant to attack again. Then he thinks: "Me. *Us*. Yes." He sees Paolo coming and has a vision of Paolo as a city. Paolo congratulates the avatar, who celebrates until he realizes "something's wrong."

Again, the avatar refers to himself in the plural without making clear which communal "us" he means—New Yorkers as a group or something else. This ambiguity heightens suspense, as does the avatar's realization that something has gone wrong.

INTERRUPTION (1)

The avatar faints and then disappears. Paolo senses the city hasn't died but "postpartum complications" have occurred. He calls an international number, suggests the situation resembles London's, and wonders "how many." The person on the other end tells him not to speculate, just to find them—and warns him New York is vulnerable. When Paolo asks where he should begin, the person suggests Manhattan.

The use of the phrase "postpartum complications"—a medical term referring to problems after childbirth—once again implicitly compares New York City to a living creature being born. The novel does not clarify who Paolo has called, how New York City's situation resembles London's, or "how many" of what *Paolo is asking about—thus increasing the reader's suspense.*

CHAPTER 1: STARTING WITH MANHATTAN, AND THE BATTLE OF FDR DRIVE

A man (later called Manny) is preparing to exit his train at Penn Station, gathering his luggage. He worries when he only sees one suitcase but then remembers sending his other things ahead to his new apartment. He and his roommate are entering the same graduate program. Strangely, he's forgotten the school he'll attend. He's also forgotten his own name but hasn't noticed yet. Manny hears passengers murmuring about a bridge and a possible terrorist attack. He wonders whether he made a mistake moving to New York. Yet despite disapproval from coworkers and family—whose names he can't remember—he believes New York is his "future."

That Manny has forgotten his own name and the school he's supposed to attend when he arrives at Penn Station, a massive railway station in New York City, hints that the city is somehow incompatible with or hostile to Manny's individual identity. His loved ones' disapproval of New York City and his own romantic belief that it's his "future," meanwhile, illustrate how people develop and believe in myths about cities they may not even have visited before.

Manny makes his way out of the train and up the escalator when, suddenly, he feels intense vertigo, hears millions of voices screaming, and focuses in on a particular voice yelling at someone that they don't belong and need to leave. Utterly disoriented, Manny wonders whether the voice is yelling at him.

Manny's fear that the voice is yelling at him—that he is the one who doesn't belong—reveals his nervousness that the city's community won't accept him.

Manny comes back to reality on his knees in Penn Station, with a woman and a man checking up on him. The man tells Manny that he keeled over; the man and woman pulled him out of the crowd's way. Manny tells them he's fine and murmurs that he feels "new." The woman asks whether he is new to the city. He agrees, looks around for his luggage, and realizes that his helpers have protected it as well: "He feels alone in the city. He is seen and cared for in the city."

Feeling "new" as a person is not the same thing as being new to a place—but the woman's misunderstanding of Manny seems appropriate: for Manny, having just arrived in New York City and now suffering from amnesia, the city really does offer an opportunity to make himself an entirely "new" person. His helpers, who make him feel "cared for," reveal that despite stereotypes about unfriendly New Yorkers, people in the city do help each other.

Manny is reassuring the man and woman that he'll seek medical attention when he has a vision of the station, emptied of people, collapsing. When he comes to, they're staring at him. They both suggest he eat something. He thanks them, noting that New Yorkers have a reputation for being rude. The woman tells him New Yorkers are "only assholes to people who are assholes first." Then she leaves.

Manny's mysterious vision may lead the reader to wonder what caused his amnesia and what kind of danger the city is in. The woman's claim that New Yorkers are "only assholes to people who are assholes first," meanwhile, both refutes a stereotype about rude New Yorkers and suggests a (controversial) ethical principle: that if someone is hurtful to you, it is fine to retaliate in kind.

The man asks Manny whether he wants the man to get him food. Manny declines, finds a Starbucks carry-cup in his luggage, drinks from it—and realizes he cannot remember where he filled it, where he's going to school, or his own name. The man tells Manny to get "real coffee" and "home food" from a "Boricua shop." Then he asks Manny's name. Manny looks around and blurts that his name is "Manny."

Starbucks is a ubiquitous global brand associated with gentrification. Notably, because it's so ubiquitous, it can't help Manny determine where he's from or who he really is. In implicit contrast, the man helping Manny advises him to get his coffee and food from a "Boricua shop"—that is, a local Puerto Rican place. The man's phrasing both suggests that he thinks Manny is Puerto Rican like him and that local shops can tie people to a particular communal identity in a way that global brands like Starbucks can't. In stark contrast with his helper's Boricua/Puerto Rican identity, however, Manny has to make up his own name.

The man introduces himself as Douglas Acevedo and offers to help Manny any way he can. When Manny expresses surprise at Douglas's generosity, Douglas tells Manny he looks like Douglas's son. Manny, having a strong intuition that Douglas's son is dead, thanks him again. In Spanish, Douglas tells Manny not to worry about it. Manny realizes Douglas assumes he's Puerto Rican. He looks up and notices where he found his new name: a sign reading Manhattan. Manny identifies intensely with this name.

Though the passage doesn't explicitly state that Manny is not Puerto Rican, his surprise that Douglas thought he was suggests that he isn't. His intense identification with his new name, "Manhattan," meanwhile, suggests that despite his amnesia, he has found a new individual and communal identity: Manhattanite.

In the Penn Station men's room, Manny examines his own face. He recognizes that he might resemble Douglas's son but intuits that he's not actually Puerto Rican. He dresses "preppy" and appears to be in his late 20s, with a handsome yet "nondescript" face. Manny thinks his nondescriptness is handy—a thought he doesn't understand and finds disturbing.

Despite maybe resembling Douglas's son, Manny believes he's not Puerto Rican—which suggests that he knows or remembers some things about his identity, amnesia notwithstanding. That Manny's face is "nondescript" thematically reinforces his forgotten past: he's someone apparently without a definite physical or psychological identity. The reader is left to wonder both why Manny might find being "nondescript" useful and why he finds the recognition of that usefulness disturbing.

Exiting Penn Station, Manny feels a phantom pain in his thigh. Suddenly he sees two different versions of New York: the ordinary city full of people and an empty, stormy New York, dilapidated yet beautiful. Manny has an intuition that he needs to do something or both versions of the city will be destroyed.

Manny's vision of multiple New York Cities hints that, in the novel, multiple realities may really exist. It also reinforces the novel's figurative or metaphorical point that cities are built out of multiple, conflicting myths and beliefs that people have about them.


Manny intuitively knows that he needs to go east and asks a man renting bicycles—whom he thinks of as Bike Guy—what's in that direction. Bike Guy replies obscenely. Another woman, also renting bicycles, intervenes. Manny asks her how he can walk to FDR Drive. When the woman asks what kind of tourist walks to FDR Drive, Bike Guy denies Manny is a tourist. The woman tells Manny to take a taxi.

Manny's intuitions about the city suggest that he belongs to it even though he just arrived. The bike rental workers' disagreement about whether he's a tourist, meanwhile, again suggests that people have difficulty deciding who Manny is.

Manny looks around and finds that the sight of chain stores are "irritants" but that small stores, billboards, traffic, and foul odors ease his pain. Without knowing how he's received the information, he tells the bicycle woman that he has a ride. Suddenly an old-timey Checker cab stops in the street right in front of him. Manny tries the door. When he finds it locked, he thinks that he needs it to open, and it opens for him.

An "irritant" can mean something that annoys—but since the novel has repeatedly compared the city to a living organism, in this context "irritant" more likely means a foreign substance that causes physical discomfort or inflammation. The word choice suggests that chain stores—stores not unique to New York City—are bad for the city as an organism in a way that "small stores"—presumably local—and other physical phenomena characteristic of New York are not. That Manny can open doors with his thoughts, meanwhile, illustrates how thoughts and beliefs control reality in this science-fictional universe.


When Manny climbs into the Checker, the driver (Madison), a young white woman, tells him the Checker isn't a working taxi but an "antique" rented for special occasions. Manny asks her to take him to FDR Drive. Sensing the "ritual of getting-in-a-cab" gives him power, he offers her a 100-dollar bill. She assumes it's fake. He offers to pay her in 20s, but he senses 20s have more power because they circulate more—he doesn't want to use them because he doesn't want to "force" her. She says she'll drive him for 200. He pays her. As she drives, Manny ponders that in New York, money has "talismanic power."

In this passage, Manny is realizing that rituals and objects associated with New York City—occupying a taxi, large bills—give him power. In imbuing New York concepts with power, the novel is literalizing the idea that human beings' thoughts, perceptions, beliefs, and myths shape the world they experience. As a "talisman" is a magical object, Manny is suggesting that having money essentially gives you magical powers in New York City.

As the driver (Madison) takes Manny toward FDR Drive, he sees a car pass with "feathery white **tendrils**" coming out of its wheels. Manny intuits that the tendrils exist in multiple dimensions, like his vision of ordinary New York and the strange, empty New York. He also sees the tendril seem to react to his presence. The driver asks Manny whether he sees the tendrils too. When he admits he does, she asks why no one else can. He says he doesn't know but promises he'll destroy the thing that caused it if she takes him to FDR. He tries not to think too hard about what he's saying, because he needs to believe in himself to maintain his mysterious power.

Although Manny doesn't even know what the tendrils are, he instinctively promises to destroy them. Given that Manny already loves New York City and believes it's in danger, his promise to destroy the tendrils implies he believes they pose a threat to the city—and that he's willing to destroy things he believes are threats. Interestingly, Manny has to suppress his own thoughts in order to access the conceptual power the city offers him—which again hints at a tension between Manny's individual identity and his connection to the city.

When the Checker reaches FDR Drive, Manny sees more cars infected by white **tendrils** and then a 20- to 30-foot tendril growth coming out of the fast lane. Although most drivers can't see the growth, they are instinctively avoiding it, causing a traffic jam. Manny exits the cab and asks the driver (Madison) whether she has an emergency car kit. She says yes and tells him to act fast—the **police** will arrive soon and "they're not gonna help much." Intuitively, Manny asks her whether she's a city native. She tells him she grew up in Chelsea with two moms. Manny senses the New Yorkers around him are his "allies." He introduces himself as Manny and asks her name; she tells him she's named Madison because the IVF clinic her mothers used was near Madison Avenue.

It's Madison's distrust of the police that prompts Manny to guess, correctly, that she's a native New Yorker. Once again, the novel is suggesting that although the police claim to protect and serve the city, they are not truly part of the city's community but are in fact a threat to it. That Madison's mothers named her after New York City's geography underlines that she belongs in the city. Her fear of the tendrils and her willingness to help Manny thus further suggests that the threatening tendrils don't "belong" in New York—but Manny does.

Manny proposes a plan to Madison. She helps him use her emergency kit materials to divert cars around the **tendril** growth. As the growth gets bigger, Manny notes it smells like ocean—specifically, like "*trimethylamine oxide*." After telling Madison that he has to hit the growth, Manny asks an Indian woman in a nearby stopped car for her umbrella. The woman threatens to pepper-spray him, but when he tells her he can use the umbrella to end the traffic jam, she gives it to him.

Trimethylamine oxide is a compound found in deep-water animals; it helps them survive at high water pressures. As the Enemy attacked New York City with a huge tentacle—as if it were a giant squid or octopus—the tendril growth's smell suggests that it's related to the Enemy. Manny's ability to smooth-talk a woman who initially wants to pepper-spray him, meanwhile, demonstrates both his charm and New Yorkers' subconscious understanding that he is fighting for them.

Manny climbs on top of the cab, holding the umbrella. He senses he needs the umbrella, but he's not sure what for. With Manny clinging to the roof, Madison drives at the **tendril** growth. Manny opens the umbrella, but that use of it is somehow "still wrong." Manny observes that the growth is beautiful but hostile to the city. He muses that "some new things become part of a city, helping it grow and strengthen—while some new things can tear it apart."

That Manny isn't sure how to use the umbrella shows that while he knows concepts have power, he doesn't always intuitively know how to use them. By noting the tendrils' beauty, Manny hints that the tendrils may not be inherently disgusting or harmful—just bad for the environment. His thoughts about which "new things" are good for the city and which are not foreshadow the importance that questions of belonging, gentrification, and invasion will have later on in the novel.

As the cab gets closer to the **tendril** growth, Manny holds the umbrella over his head. Somehow this gesture causes an energy "sheath" to appear around the umbrella, Manny, and the cab. Manny realizes that unlike the growth, he is not an "interloper" because he has chosen to live in New York, whereas the growth is an "invasive *tourist*." The energy sheath allows the cab to burn through the growth.

In using the concepts of true resident versus "tourist" to power his attack on the tendril growth, Manny partially answers the question of which new things (or people) are good for the city: new residents are good, implicitly because they are invested in the city's long-term wellbeing, whereas tourists are bad, implicitly because they only want to use the city for entertainment.

On the growth's other side, Madison slams on the brakes to keep the cab from hitting stopped cars ahead. Looking backward, Manny sees the fiery hole their passage made in the growth, which burns through the remaining **tendrils**. His energy sheath dissipates, burning up tendrils attached to cars as it does so. Manny realizes that this energy is New York City somehow, and that it "driv[es] out anything unnecessary to make room for itself"—including his memories. Manny whispers, "I am Manhattan."

That Manny can destroy the tendril growth completely by invoking the concept of "tourist" makes clear that the tendrils are an outside force, alien to New York City. His realization that the city destroyed his memories to "make room for itself"—to make Manny into Manhattan—again hints that Manny's previous identity does not gel with his new identity as a protector of New York.

CHAPTER 2: SHOWDOWN IN THE LAST FOREST

Madison drives Manny to his new apartment in Innwood. As she's dropping him off, she tells him the Checker cab "likes" him—it drives better with him in it. Manny says in that case, he'll call her if he has to fight another monster. Madison suggests he call her, period. Though Manny thinks Madison is pretty, he turns her down—he's not sure of his own motives for doing so. Madison, unoffended, leaves with a smile.

Manny's very presence improves how the Checker cab drives; since a Checker cab is a quintessential New York taxi, Manny's improvement of it suggests that not only does he derive power from New York objects, they derive power from him. *His lack of surety about why he turned down Madison, meanwhile, reiterates how little he knows himself now that the city has taken his memory.*

Manny's apartment building is old, with a front garden, a corniced foyer, and an "ancient" gated elevator. Manny recognizes none of it, though he found the address on his phone. He rides the elevator to the top floor. When he disembarks, the hallway undergoes a metamorphosis, from a creepy ambience like "a survival horror video game" to something "safer." Manny finds the change odd but accepts it.

Just as the Checker cab drives better with Manny in it, so his apartment building changes from a "survival horror video game" environment—something truly disturbing, in other words—to a "safer" environment. Thus this passage emphasizes that even as New York City gives Manny power, Manny's presence somehow improves the city's wellbeing.

Manny knocks on his new apartment's door. His roommate, a "lanky Asian guy" with an English accent, opens it. Apologetically, Manny tells the roommate he can no longer remember the roommate's name. The roommate reminds Manny that it's Bel Nguyen and that they're both Ph.D. students at Columbia in "political theory." Manny tells Bel he had a "fainting spell" on the train, which has scrambled his memory. He apologizes if he forgets things and repeats himself—and tells Bel that he may have already shared his nickname, Manny.

That Manny is a Ph.D. student at Columbia—a very well-regarded Ivy League university—implies he's an academically successful intellectual. It does not provide many clues, however, as to what was so incompatible with New York City in Manny's previous identity that entering the city gave him amnesia.

Bel suggests that they go for a walk, which might help with Manny's discombobulation. Manny agrees. They go to Inwood Hill Park. Realizing he knows "general facts," though not personal memories, Manny recalls the park contains Manhattan's last old-growth forest. Bel says that he wanted to live in Inwood because of the forest. He has fond memories of visiting "Hackfall Wood in North Yorkshire" near his grandmother's house—till she rejected him when he came out as trans. Manny says he's sorry and registers he had forgotten Bel was trans. Bel, seeing Manny register it, asks him whether he wants to back out of being roommates. Manny says that if he did, he'd make up a better lie than amnesia—which makes Bel laugh.

Manny's amnesia only affected his "personal memories," not his knowledge of impersonal facts—a revelation that further underscores the incompatibility of his previous personal *identity with his new communal identity as a New Yorker. Hackfall Wood is a large, protected woodland in northern England; along with Bel's British accent, his childhood memories of Hackfall Wood firmly establish that he is not a native New Yorker. Finally, Manny's casual reaction to Bel being trans suggests that Manny is not bigoted against trans people—that he is comfortable with gender diversity.*

Bel mentions Manny seems "different" than when they met over videocall. He was nervous about Manny, because some "queer cis blokes are just as ready to kick my arse" as heterosexual people are, and the old Manny seemed like an "arse-kicker." Manny assures Bel he has no problem with Bel's gender identity.

While Madison assumed that Manny was attracted to women, Bel assumes that Manny is "queer." These assumptions may be compatible—Manny could be bisexual, for example—but they also serve as another example of people assuming they know something about Manny's identity that Manny hasn't actually told them. Bel's sense that pre-amnesia Manny was an "arse-kicker," meanwhile, hints that perhaps New York City decided to take Manny's identity because he wasn't a very nice person.

Manny and Bel hear ambulances driving past the park toward the day's disasters. Bel wonders "which entire ethnic group" will be blamed. Manny suggests the culprit may be yet another white man. Bel says: "A 'lone wolf' with mental health issues, right!" Disgustedly, he says they have to wish for that so the tragedy isn't used to target non-white people.

This passage alludes to a real-world example of stereotypes shaping peoples' perceptions of the world around them: due to racism, when a non-white person commits an act of mass violence, that person's "entire ethnic group" comes under suspicion—whereas when a white person commits an act of mass violence, no one assumes that white people are inherently violent.

Manny and Bel come upon a plaque claiming Peter Minuit bought Manhattan on this site for items "worth about 60 guilders" from the indigenous population. Bel notes that this is where Manny's "ancestors began the whole business of stealing the country." He asks Manny whether he wants to check out the commemorative rock. Manny, who has an intuition that the rock matters, agrees. When they reach it, the rock—named Shorakkopoch—strikes Manny as symbolically powerful, like the umbrella and the cab. Bel mentions that as monuments go, the rock seems "cheap." This word strikes Manny as evocative.

Previously, the novel has hinted that New York City may have taken Manny's memory because there was something unsuitable—perhaps violent—about his identity before he came to the city. By reminding the reader of the city's violent history (European colonists like Peter Minuit, a Dutch-affiliated trader, took the land from its original inhabitants by guile or force), the novel prompts the reader to wonder whether the city would find Manny's past identity unsuitable merely because he had been violent. The city's violent history may also prompt the reader to wonder whether the existence of living cities is a good thing.

A white woman in business clothes walks up to Manny and Bel, recording them on her phone. She threatens to call the police and calls them "druggie perverts." Manny sees a **tendril** attached to the back of the woman's neck and has an intense mental reaction: "*Cordyceps*, *puppet strings*, *drinking straw*, and more coherently, *That thing on FDR Drive*!"

The white woman's harassment of Manny and Bel recalls real-world incidents in which white people have called the police on non-white people doing ordinary things in public: because Manny and Bel are non-white, and possibly because they present as LGBTQ, she stereotypes them as "druggie perverts." The tendril attached to the woman's neck as she harasses Manny and Bel implies a connection between the tendrils—which up to this point in the novel have seemed like totally alien entities—and human bigotry. Manny's reaction suggests various interpretations of the tendrils. Comparing the tendril to Cordyceps—a genus of fungus, many of which are parasitic—suggests the tendril is a parasite on the woman. Comparing it to puppet strings suggests that the tendril is controlling the woman's behavior. Finally, comparing it to a drinking straw suggests that some other entity is using the tendril as a utensil to consume the woman.

Manny demands the creature reveal its true self. The woman freezes, and her clothes and hair turn white. When she (the Woman in White) speaks, her voice has deepened. She admits she was getting tired of faking ignorance and calls Bel "São Paolo." Manny intuits that the **tendril** is helping some other creature control the woman's body. The Woman examines Bel and asks whether he's "something else, underneath that covering." When Bel responds with offense, she tells him she "mistook [him] for fifteen million other people." To Manny, she says she thought she'd hurt him and then observes he smells wrong—too clean.

Manny believes that the tendril allows the Woman in White—whatever she is—to possess the bigoted white woman's body. This suggests that the tendrils represent outside control and manipulation. The Woman in White's odd behavior underlines her status as an outsider, an intruder, among humans. She mistakes Bel for São Paolo and Manny for New York City's avatar, which suggests she has trouble telling human beings apart. When she asks Bel whether he's "something else, underneath that covering," Bel's offended response suggests that he thinks she's making a transphobic remark about his biological sex. Her response—that she confused him with "fifteen million other people"—suggests that she has wholly different, inhuman concerns and prejudices than the bigoted woman she is possessing.

Manny speculates the woman's possession by the **tendril** is what happened to people who touched the growth on FDR. He asks the Woman in White what she is. Noting his brevity, she asks where his "shit-talking" went. Manny tells her they haven't met. The Woman insists they have, notes Manny isn't injured, and asks whether his body has changed. Bel says Manny's name and asserts the Woman is crazy. Hearing the name, she says: "*Manhattan*."

The Woman in White's strange assumptions continue to characterize her as an intruder in New York City and, indeed, the human world. When she eventually realizes that New York City's avatar and Manny have different bodies, she at first assumes that the avatar somehow switched bodies rather than that he and Manny are not the same person. Yet at the same time, she does seem to have some familiarity with human culture—after all, she understands the concept of "shit-talking."

Sensing the Woman in White is dangerous, Manny decides to keep her distracted with talk. He asks whether he killed her on FDR. She tells him that the **tendril** growth on FDR was a "toehold" that remained after her fight with a "vicious" opponent. Manny's attack came too late—she had already infected many cars, which spread the infection throughout the area.

Because the reader does not know exactly what sort of entity the Woman in White is, it's hard to know whether to interpret the word "toehold" literally or figuratively here. That is, are the tendril growths part of the Woman in White's extended body, or are they a kind of technology that she uses? Whatever the answer, her boast that cars have already spread her infection throughout the city reminds the reader how quickly people, diseases, and (figuratively) ideas can circulate in a densely packed urban environment.

The Woman in White tells Manny he's "*part* of that other one" and must have four counterparts. While the man she fought (the avatar) is the "heart," Manny and the others are "heads and limbs." Manny realizes the woman is arguing he embodies Manhattan and that other embodied boroughs exist. He asks the woman what she wants. She admits it would be "sporting" to tell him but says this isn't sport—it's a "job" for her.

Previously, the novel has used the metaphor of a "living organism" to describe the community a city creates. Now, talking about Manny, New York City's avatar, and the other embodied boroughs, the novel (via the Woman in White) uses the metaphor of different parts of the same *body. Notably, the Woman in White's metaphor implies a hierarchy within the community in a way that the "living organism" metaphor does not: a body can survive without limbs, but not without a heart or a head. The Woman in White's claim that she is doing a "job," meanwhile, suggests both that she takes her mysterious task in New York City seriously and that someone else may have (figuratively or literally) "hired" her to do it.*

The woman jerks and her clothes regain color. She begins recording Manny and Bel on her phone again. Manny, noticing **tendrils** are growing from the pavement but not around the memorial rock, tugs Bel toward it. The woman calls the **police** and tells them Manny and Bel are drug dealers having public sex. She identifies them as "*African American*. Or maybe Hispanic?." Bel protests he's "British Asian, you stupid bint!"

That the tendrils are growing everywhere but around the memorial rock hints that there is something special or powerful about the rock. Meanwhile, the woman's ludicrous accusation—that Manny and Bel are both dealing drugs and *having public sex—underlines the absurdity of racist stereotyping. Her recourse to the police, meanwhile, implies that the police serve not real victims (in this situation, Manny and Bel) but people with more social privilege (in this case, a white woman of the business class). Bel's protest that the woman has correctly identified neither his nationality nor his ethnicity underlines how out of touch with reality the woman's stereotypes are.*

Manny sees that the **tendrils** are growing long enough to reach him and Bel. Noting that the rock is the "site of the first real estate swindle" in New York City, he tries to figure out how to use its symbolic power. First, he demands Bel's wallet. Searching his own wallet, he avoids looking at his ID because "he needs to be Manhattan." When he finds his credit cards, he realizes the concept "land ownership" built New York City in its current state. He throws a five-dollar bill at the tendrils—and the bill forces the tendrils to retreat.

The novel has set up New York City's avatar and Manny as protagonists and so encouraged the reader to root for them. Yet they both embody New York City, in whole or in part—and this passage suggests that New York City derives power from an unethical history (a "real estate swindle," i.e., the dispossession of Manhattan's indigenous people) and a concept of dubious moral value ("land ownership," which Europeans used to justify dispossessing indigenous peoples), both of which the memorial rock represents. That these concepts damage the tendril may lead the reader to wonder—which form of life is actually ethically preferable, the city or whatever the tendrils are?

Bel throws some of his own money at the **tendrils**, but it doesn't have the same effect. Manny takes them from Bel, which increases Manny's power, because Manhattan was "built" on "stolen value." Manny keeps throwing money at the tendrils. The greater the money's value, the more it hurts the tendrils. Unfortunately, Manny realizes that he is symbolically buying land around the rock and that Manhattan land costs too much for him to clear much room.

This passage reveals that stealing increases Manny's power, a revelation that tightens the connection between Manny's powers and the "stolen value" European colonizers took from Manhattan's indigenous people. This connection increases the reader's doubt that Manny's power or the concept he embodies are straightforwardly good, in ethical terms.

The woman informs Manny and Bel that the **police** are on their way. She tells them that she didn't relocate to New York for people to engage in drugs or public sex acts and asserts: "We're going to get you, one by one." Given how this "nosy, racist white woman" has reacted to the **tendril**'s infection, Manny is terrified of what an infection will do to New York police officers.

Here, the woman implies that she recently moved to New York City. Her desire to "get" other New Yorkers of whom she disapproves suggests that this woman is a gentrifier, a newcomer who seeks to remake the city's community according to her own (racist, white, business-class) tastes. That the police have responded to her absurd call suggests that, in the novel, police are not defenders of the real New York but enforcers of gentrification. Manny's terror at the idea of the NYPD becoming infected with tendrils in turn suggests that the tendrils amplify bad tendencies people already have—and that the NYPD's bad tendencies are particularly frightening for two young, non-white men.

Manny hears music, turns, and sees an elegantly dressed Black woman (Brooklyn) approaching, holding up a phone. Her music drives the **tendrils** away. Manny realizes she must be another borough. Soon the tendrils have vanished. The elegant Black woman puts her phone in her purse and asks Manny whether he's figured out "how this shit works yet." Manny admits he hasn't and asks whether she has. She says she's started hearing things and seeing tendrils—"pigeon-feather things"—everywhere.

Whereas Manny has been fighting the tendrils using money and "stolen value," Brooklyn defeats them with music. Music's power, in this scene, indicates both that art is important to New York City and that not all New York City's power derives from ethically dubious concepts like "stolen value"—some of its power derives from positive concepts like creativity. Brooklyn's comparison of the tendrils to pigeon feathers, here, suggests that different characters perceive the tendrils differently: whereas Manny sees them as plantlike, Brooklyn sees them as birdlike. Both comparisons suggest the tendrils are organic yet decidedly inhuman.

The white woman accuses Manny and the others of talking in code about drugs. Manny, hearing sirens, approaches the woman, snatches her phone, and covers her mouth. While deleting her recording, Manny points out that if she really believed he and Bel were drug dealers, she wouldn't have confronted them—instead, he suggests she called the **police** on them because they were "comfortable and unafraid" in public. On her phone, he finds—and reads aloud—her name and workplace. He admits to her that he thinks he's hurt other people before, and he feels sad that he's "just confirmed her stereotypes," even though she holds them unjustly. As a threatening end to the conversation, he says he hopes they won't meet again.

This scene suggests that white people, perhaps especially gentrifiers, call the police on non-white people to enforce racial hierarchies within communities—to keep non-white people from feeling "comfortable and unafraid" in what should be communal spaces. Manny's suspicion that he used to hurt people, meanwhile, confirms Bel's intuition that he was, at one point, an "arse-kicker." Finally, his sadness at reinforcing the racist white woman's stereotypes about non-white men shows how people from marginalized groups have to think about how their individual behavior reflects on others' perceptions of the group.

Manny walks away. After a hesitation, Bel and the elegant Black woman (Brooklyn) follow. The woman guesses Manny is Manhattan. When he asks how she knew, she tells him that "smart, charming, well dressed" men who are "cold enough to strangle you" are completely representative of Wall Street and City Hall. She expresses surprise that he only threatened the white woman and didn't hurt her. Manny is upset at his intuition he's hurt other people before.

Bel and Brooklyn's hesitation before following Manny suggests that his threatening behavior toward the racist white woman alarmed them. Brooklyn's characterization of Manhattan as "charming" yet "cold enough to strangle" someone hints that Manny's violent history is actually a conceptual match for Manhattan—but perhaps not for the city as a whole, since Brooklyn, who represents another part of the city, seems to judge him negatively for it. Interestingly, though up to this point Manny has identified strongly with Manhattan, he is upset at the possibility that his past unethical behavior makes him a better fit for his borough.

Bel asks Manny whether Manny remembers who he is, since he's regained his "edge." Manny says no and changes the subject, asking the elegant Black woman (Brooklyn) whether she's Queens. She gives him a disapproving look. When he guesses she's Brooklyn, she agrees and says "Brooklyn Thomason" is her real name, too. She's a lawyer who now works in politics. Noticing she remembers her past, Manny realizes his amnesia is unusual. He asks Brooklyn how she found him and knew to play music to fight the **tendrils**. She asks whether he's a local. He says no. Manny suspects she doesn't like him and wonders whether it's his personality or that he "jack[ed] up a woman." Brooklyn tells him she's been acting on intuition all day—but she's always heard the city in a special way.

That Manny misidentifies Brooklyn as Queens and that Brooklyn immediately guesses he's not a New Yorker suggests that being new to the city is important to the concept of Manhattan, whereas being a Brooklyn native is important to the concept of Brooklyn. The revelation that Brooklyn doesn't have amnesia, meanwhile, suggests there's something particular about Manny that makes the city want to suppress his previous identity—amnesia does not strike all avatars. Brooklyn's intuitive knowledge that music could defeat the tendrils, meanwhile, implies a special relationship between art—music in particular—and Brooklyn that doesn't exist between art and Manhattan.

Suddenly Manny recognizes Brooklyn as MC Free. Brooklyn insists she hasn't been MC Free for 30 years—now she's a city council member and a mother to a 14-year-old. Bel tells her that she was the "greatest of the early female MCs" and that he and Lewisham "grew up on" her music. Brooklyn points out he's making her feel old, and he quiets.

Art is so important to Brooklyn (the borough) that it chose a former rapper whose music was famous enough to reach Lewisham (south London) as well as wherever Manny grew up. Yet Brooklyn (the person) insists she's no longer an artist—which suggests she and the city have different ideas about who she ought to be.

In the silence, Manny thinks about how many crimes have taken place on Manhattan: genocide against indigenous people, slavery, war profiteering, and more. These horrible things are part of his identity.

In this passage, Manny is trying to come to terms with the realization that "great" cities often have ethically horrifying histories, and that embodying such a city may mean embracing some of that horror.

Once they've exited the park, Manny asks Brooklyn what they should do. Brooklyn suggests that these strange phenomena are occurring now for some reason and that the Williamsburg Bridge's destruction is related. Bel asks Brooklyn whether she really thinks the **tendrils** and the Woman in White destroyed the Bridge. When Brooklyn asked what woman Bel is talking about, Bel explains about the transformation of the racist white woman. Manny explains his theory that the Woman in White controls the tendrils.

This passage suggests that the Enemy—the tentacle monster that destroyed the Williamsburg Bridge—and the Woman in White are in fact the same entity. Moreover, the Woman likely controls the tendrils that amplify preexisting bigotry. Thus, the novel is teaching the reader that the Woman can perhaps take a human form but is decidedly inhuman and that she is weaponizing human prejudice against New York City.

When Brooklyn explains that she sensed Manny was in trouble, Manny tells her there are five of them. Brooklyn, realizing that he's suggesting they help the other three boroughs, refuses: she has enough responsibility raising her daughter (Jojo) and taking care of her father (Clyde). Suddenly, they catch sight of a dog, across the street, infected with **tendrils**. Brooklyn compares the tendrils to a disease. Bel points out that the infection will soon spread all over the city. Brooklyn muses that she was able to exercise her power to remove the infection from the park.

This passage demonstrates how community belonging and individual identity can conflict: although Brooklyn represents a whole borough, she believes that her individual responsibilities to her family should come first. The quick movement of the tendrils, meanwhile, reinforces earlier suggestions the novel has made that their "infection"—which may represent both gentrification and bigotry—can spread quickly through a dense urban environment.

Manny asks Brooklyn, even if she doesn't want to get involved fighting the **tendrils**, to help him learn how to embody New York. Suddenly, he has a vision of her as Brooklyn the borough—neighborhoods, buildings, and residents. She agrees to help, though she claims there isn't a single correct way to be a New Yorker. She tells them she's going to call her family first, and then they can talk.

Brooklyn claims there isn't a single correct way to be a New Yorker—yet earlier in the novel, Paolo told New York City's avatar, a single person, that he would have to represent the entire city. Brooklyn's claim hints that the avatar may have experienced problems because he was given an impossible task: to be all of New York City by himself.

Manny and Brooklyn feel another borough manifest and recite in unison: "Oh, come on. *The shape of the Earth* is non-Euclidean. All that means is you use different math!" Bel says they're freaking him out. Brooklyn says they were reacting to Queens. Manny suggests Bel go home, given the strangeness. Bel agrees and wishes him luck. After Bel leaves, Brooklyn tells Manny they should take public transport to Queens, since they don't know where in Queens the person they're looking for is.

Non-Euclidean geometry is a mathematical system based on different axioms than the ones that people normally use (the axioms of Euclidean geometry). That the embodiment of Queens is yelling about geometry suggests that mathematics will be important to the concept of Queens.

CHAPTER 3: OUR LADY OF (STATEN) AISLYN

Aislyn Houlihan is waiting for the ferry from Staten Island. She's shaking, terrified—even though she senses the people around her are "her people," a sense she rejects when she sees Asian people or hears someone speaking a foreign language her new powers inform her is Quechua. When the ferry arrives, Aislyn is overcome with a sense of wrongness: normally, Staten Islanders take the ferry away in the morning and return after work, but this is the afternoon. Aislyn, reaching the ramp, wonders whether leaving the Island will make her "different" or "*wrong*."

Aislyn's reactions to the other people waiting for the Staten Island ferry suggest a mismatch between the facts of her community and her beliefs about it. Her community is in fact racially and linguistically diverse, yet she refuses to believe that a group to which she belongs could include people different from her. This refusal illustrates Aislyn's narrowmindedness and fear of difference—a fear underlined when she equates becoming "different" with becoming "wrong."

Boarding the ferry, a Black person accidentally touches Aislyn's breast. Aislyn starts screaming. A white person grabs her; she scratches that person and flees the ferry. As Aislyn runs, a **police** officer yells at her. Though her father (Matthew Houlihan) has told her "only criminals run," she keeps going, terrified that, having scratched someone, she'll be hauled off to Rikers and never allowed to return to Staten Island.

Aislyn's hysterical terror when a Black person accidentally touches her breast implies that she believes racist anti-Black stereotypes about all Black men being sexual predators. Her father's claim that "only criminals run"—so different from the instinctive fear that New York City's avatar and Manny feel toward the police—hints that Aislyn comes from a very different sociopolitical background than the other avatars the novel has introduced so far.

A voice tells Aislyn that no one can make a city do something it doesn't want to. Aislyn stops—outside the terminal now—and sees a woman in a white outfit (the Woman in White) beside her. The Woman soothes Aislyn, telling her she made the right decision to stay because no "illegal immigrants" will touch her on Staten Island and also "Manhattan is very pretty, but he's full of bees." Aislyn laughs at the Woman's peculiarity and notices the Woman is "petting" her shoulder.

Whereas the Woman in White approached Manny with hostility, she approaches Aislyn by pretending to comfort her and by endorsing her prejudice against "immigrants" and other people different from herself. Despite the Woman's overtly peculiar speech—"Manhattan is very pretty, but he's full of bees"—Aislyn does seem to find the Woman comforting. The Woman's approach and Aislyn's response foreshadow that Aislyn, due to her prejudices, may be more susceptible to the Woman's manipulations than the other embodied boroughs.

Aislyn gets a call from her father Matthew. When he asks where she is, she tells him she's shopping and changes the subject to his work. He says he's tired of "*immigrants*," which Aislyn knows is a euphemism—he's said in the past that **police** officers get in trouble when they "don't know how to keep home words at home and work words at work." He tells her about arresting and calling ICE on a Puerto Rican man he assumed was dealing drugs. When the man protested about profiling, Matthew arrested him for assault.

Aislyn hides from her father that she was trying to go to Manhattan, which suggests that he would disapprove and that Aislyn is too conflict-averse or too afraid of her father to tell him the truth. Due to Matthew's obvious bigotry—the phrase "home words," in this passage, is clearly a euphemism for racial and other slurs—the reader may suspect that Aislyn learned her own prejudice from her family. Matthew's story about racially profiling a Puerto Rican man again illustrates that police in the novel do not protect and serve other New Yorkers but rather abuse them.

Aislyn—who often asks Matthew questions and then ignores him "to make space for her own thoughts"—asks whether he's okay. He reassures her that the man didn't assault him—Matthew just wanted a pretext to arrest him. The man claimed he was listening to music in his car, and Matthew didn't believe him.

That Aislyn has to trick Matthew "to make space for her own thoughts" shows that he is a suffocating presence in her life but that she is unwilling to confront him directly. His casual admission that he lied about the man he arrested assaulting him reveals that he is corrupt as well as bigoted.

As Matthew monologues, Aislyn notices the Woman in White petting her shoulder. Aislyn realizes she's barely reacting to the Woman's touch, in contrast to her accidental contact with the Black man on the ferry. Aislyn also notices that the Woman is touching some people as they walk by. Aislyn sees one person grow a white **tendril** where the Woman touched him. She realizes the Woman is behaving strangely by standing nearby while she talks on the phone but rationalizes that the Woman is worried about her.

Aislyn's non-reaction to the Woman petting her and rationalization of the Woman's strange behavior, in contrast to her hysteria when a Black person accidentally touched her breast, underlines that racism and perhaps gender stereotypes are conditioning Aislyn's behavior: she sees the Woman as non-threatening due to her whiteness (and femaleness), whereas she saw the person who touched her in the ferry terminal as threatening due to his or her Blackness. (Notably, Aislyn doesn't note the person's gender earlier in the chapter but later assumes the person is male.) That the Woman can infect people with tendrils by touching them, meanwhile, hints that she may be petting Aislyn not to comfort her but in an attempt to infect her.

Matthew, still talking, mentions he heard something over **police** radio about a woman matching Aislyn's description but says he finds it hard to believe she'd stab someone or board the ferry. Aislyn says she could get on the ferry if she wanted to. Matthew replies: "That city would eat you up, Apple." He tells her she's too good a person for the city and prompts her to recite a credo of his: "'Everything that happens everywhere else happens here, too, but at least here people *try* to be decent.'" He urges her to stay home as long as she's happy on Staten Island. Aislyn isn't happy, but she lies to herself that she is, because she doesn't want to face that her life is stunted. She thanks her father, and they end the call.

This passage implies that Matthew uses police resources to keep tabs on his adult daughter—another detail that associates the police with abusive control. By referring to New York City as "that city," Matthew reveals that he doesn't really consider Staten Island to be a part of New York City, though technically it is. His claim that New York City would "eat [Aislyn] up," meanwhile, may simply be an example of him using fear to control his daughter's behavior—or it may foreshadow some threat that New York City poses to Aislyn. Finally, his credo that "at least [on Staten Island] people try *to be decent" suggests that he views Staten Island as ethically superior to the rest of the city—though notably, his credo in no way defines what "decency" is.*

Aislyn notices the Woman in White is still holding onto Aislyn's shoulder and looking distressed. When Aislyn asks what's wrong, the Woman says she's "going to have to do this the hard way" but still believes she's "right" about Aislyn. Aislyn asks what she's talking about. The Woman says Aislyn should be susceptible to her, but Aislyn's already too citylike to be infected—she even smells like a city. Aislyn, confused, sniffs herself. The Woman asks Aislyn whether she knows what she is. Aislyn, freaked out, starts thinking about how to escape the Woman.

This passage heavily implies that the Woman in White was indeed trying to infect Aislyn with a tendril—she thought Aislyn would be susceptible to her power, but as an embodied borough and part of New York City, Aislyn seems to have naturally repelled the infection. The Woman's claim that she'll "have to do this the hard way" is vague yet ominous—what, exactly, is she trying to do?—while her claim that she's "right" about Aislyn suggests she's identified Aislyn as the weak link among the embodied boroughs. Aislyn's reaction to the Woman's disturbing behavior is to flee rather than fight, which strengthens the reader's earlier impression of her as timid and conflict averse.

Aislyn senses the Woman in White become more present and more frightening. Though scared, Aislyn feels a resurgence of something she sensed that morning while thinking dreamily about a romance novel in which the hero "isn't Black but whose penis nearly is." In her mind, she heard shouting and felt intense anger. Though Aislyn isn't a fighter, she destroyed a pillow and decided to visit Manhattan—a trip she always fails to complete and hasn't tried to take for a long time. Aislyn feels intense indignation that this Woman is trying to intimate Aislyn on "*her* island" and gets ready to threaten to call the **police**.

*Aislyn's enthusiasm for a romance hero who "isn't Black but whose penis nearly is" contrasts with her abject fear when a Black person accidentally touched her breast. The contrast may mean that some part of her values, in addition to fearing, racial difference—or it may mean that her fetishization of Black men and her fear of Black men are two sides of the same bigoted coin. Interestingly, Aislyn heard voices shouting in her mind much in the same way Manny did at Penn Station—which suggests she is remembering the moment she came to embody Staten Island. This memory and Aislyn's realization that she and the Woman are on "*her *island" make Aislyn want to stand up for herself—something the reader hasn't yet seen her do—which suggests that Aislyn derives psychological strength from belonging to her borough's community. Yet her first thought is to call the police, a consistently negative force so far in the novel, which suggests that Aislyn doesn't know how to stand up for herself in a constructive way.*

The Woman in White tells Aislyn that Aislyn is Staten Island—the "forgotten" and "despised" borough. She asks whether Aislyn heard the city's summons that morning. Aislyn tries to deny it, but she knows the Woman is right. The Woman tells Aislyn she would pity Aislyn's loneliness if Aislyn weren't a menace to myriad universes. Then she sympathizes with Aislyn's fear of the ferry, ventriloquizing Staten Island's jealousy and hatred of Manhattan residents in highly bigoted terms—including a reference to "prissy chink bitches who barely speak English but gamble with your 401(k)." Aislyn, scared, blurts out that she doesn't have a 401(k). Suddenly, the Woman and Aislyn burst into amicable laughter. The Woman admits she'll "miss this universe" and its "small joys."

A previous passage has suggested that the Woman in White identified Aislyn as the borough most susceptible to her influence because Aislyn is prejudiced. This passage hints, in addition, that Aislyn may be susceptible to the Woman's influence because, as Staten Island, she is "forgotten" and "despised" by the other boroughs and resents them for it. The Woman's comment that Aislyn is a menace, meanwhile, suggests that the Woman is attacking New York City because she feels threatened or wronged by it in some as-yet-unexplained way. The Woman succeeds in bonding with Aislyn by terrifying her with a xenophobic, racist, and economically resentful rant—which includes the anti-Asian racial slur "chink"—and then, unexpectedly, laughing with Aislyn over Aislyn's accidental joke about 401(k)s. That Aislyn accepts this as a bonding moment shows her willingness both to accept other white people's overt racism and to appease people who scare her. The Woman's throwaway comment that she'll "miss this universe" implies that she comes from another universe, that she intends to destroy this universe, and that she nevertheless feels some fondness for humanity.

The Woman asks Aislyn to accept her help—she claims to like Aislyn and want to "save" her from New York City's avatar. Aislyn concludes the Woman is insane and foreign, perhaps a legal immigrant from Canada, but Aislyn likes her. They shake hands, and the Woman asks for Aislyn's help in saving Staten Island from extermination. At Aislyn's confusion, the Woman explains she destroyed the Williamsburg Bridge fighting the avatar, whom she didn't expect to know how to fight with "*concepts*." Aislyn worries the Woman is a terrorist, but because Aislyn associates terrorism with "bearded Arab men," she reverts to her theory that the Woman is crazy. Aislyn decides to placate her and escape.

Like Aislyn's father Matthew, the Woman in White tries to convince Aislyn that New York City is a danger—from which the Woman can "save" her. It's clear that both Matthew and the Woman are trying to scare Aislyn to control her behavior while convincing her they're just protecting her; it's still unclear whether their warnings also foreshadow a real threat that New York City poses to Aislyn. The Woman's comment that she didn't expect New York City's avatar to use "concepts" against her reveals that, in the novel's science-fictional universe, concepts are a higher form of technology or power than most humans know how to use. Immediately after, the scene illustrates the power of concepts to limit and control human thought: because Aislyn's concept or stereotype of a terrorist involves "bearded Arab men," she fails to believe that the Woman destroyed the Williamsburg Bridge—even though the Woman herself frankly admits it.

The Woman in White asks Aislyn to help her find New York City's avatar so Aislyn will be "free" of him. She asks Aislyn to ponder why the others haven't come to protect her—Manhattan and Brooklyn have teamed up, and they're looking for the Bronx and Queens, but none of them have come to her. Realizing the Woman is talking about other embodied boroughs, Aislyn longs to meet them, realizes she missed finding them by missing the ferry, and wonders why they didn't come to her. She recalls Matthew yelling at someone: "*Who's gonna help you? Nobody gives a shit. You don't fucking matter.*" Aislyn believes his words apply to her.

In this passage, the Woman in White is trying to convince Aislyn that Staten Island isn't truly part of New York City—both because Staten Island should want to be "free" of New York and because the rest of New York doesn't care about Staten Island. The passage also reveals that Aislyn, witnessing her father Matthew verbally abuse and terrorize others, has come to believe that no one cares about her or will help her—which will make it easier for the Woman in White to convince her that the other boroughs aren't her allies. Interestingly, the passage doesn't reveal at whom Matthew is yelling in Aislyn's memory. It might be a police suspect—except it's not clear when Aislyn would have seen her father interacting with a suspect. It might also be another family member, in which case Matthew is sometimes overtly as well as covertly abusive toward his family members.

The Woman in White reassures Aislyn that though the other boroughs won't take care of her, the Woman will. She points to a **tendril** growing from the ferry station—Aislyn, comparing it to a "petal from an exotic flower," finds it beautiful—and says it's like a microphone Aislyn can use to summon her. Aislyn, thinking the Woman is crazy but liking her, asks her name. The Woman says Aislyn won't enjoy her "foreign" name. Aislyn insists, so the Woman whispers a name—which makes Aislyn collapse.

In telling Aislyn that no one will care for Aislyn except her, the Woman is using the same abusive, controlling tactics as Matthew, who earlier tried to convince Aislyn she wouldn't be happy or safe anywhere except on Staten Island with her family. Previously, the novel has noted that the tendrils are white; that Aislyn thinks they're beautiful and compares them to flowers may suggest that Aislyn associates the concept of whiteness (racial or otherwise) with beauty, goodness, and innocence and so is less able to realize that the tendrils pose a threat to her. The Woman's "foreign" name and its dramatic effect on Aislyn, meanwhile, remind the reader that despite appearing as a white woman to Aislyn and other humans, the Woman is in fact a radically alien outsider in New York City.

When Aislyn comes to, the Woman in White is gone, and a bus driver is asking Aislyn whether he should call 911. Aislyn's arms are covered in hives, but she tells the driver she's fine—it's allergies. Riding home on the bus, Aislyn sees another **tendril** and realizes she can't remember the Woman's name, only that it began with R. She decides to call the Woman Rosie and imagines her on an "I WANT YOU" poster before remembering that that isn't, in fact, Rosie the Riveter's slogan, which she can't remember either.

The Woman in White's very name gives Aislyn hives, a detail dramatically underlining that the Woman does not belong—she's like an infection or allergen to the living organism of New York City. The appearance of the tendril hints that the Woman in using the tendrils to keep tabs on Aislyn, somewhat like Matthew keeps tabs on her using police resources—a parallel that reinforces the associations the novel has made between Matthew's controlling behavior toward Aislyn and the Woman's manipulation of her. Aislyn has mismatched Uncle Sam's U.S. military recruitment slogan, "I WANT YOU," with Rosie the Riveter's, which is actually "WE CAN DO IT." That Aislyn imagines the Woman on a military recruitment poster hints that the Woman is recruiting Aislyn for some kind of war. That Aislyn can't remember "WE CAN DO IT," meanwhile, implies that Aislyn doesn't remember or understand the concept of successful community action—a bad sign for her relationship with the other embodied boroughs.

INTERRUPTION (2)

Paolo senses something wrong in Inwood Hill Park and investigates. Approaching the rock monument, he recognizes that the "brinier" odor in the air and the money on the ground hint at a fight between the Enemy and Manhattan. Then he notices approximately 20 people, mostly "white and well dressed," all wearing white and speaking to no one, a phone, or a pet. Paolo takes a photo of the crowd. When his phone emits a "shutter-sound," they stop talking and stare at him. Paolo lights a cigarette, which seems to confuse them. Slowly, he backs away. When he's out of sight, he hears them resume talking.

A "brinier" odor in the air alerts Paolo to the Enemy's presence, which once again suggests that the Enemy, in its true form, is similar to a saltwater organism. The Enemy's presence has caused rich white people to descend on the neighborhood and to create a crowd without actually talking to each other—which suggests both that the Enemy is using gentrification as a weapon and that gentrification is the opposite of true community or human connection. That Paolo uses a cigarette to confuse the jabbering crowd suggests something about the concept "cigarette" gives Paolo power.

Once Paolo exits the park, he examines his photo. In it the crowd's faces are distorted, as are areas "just behind each person's head, or near their shoulders." He texts the photo to an international number with the attached message: "*It's boroughs. There will be five of them. And I'm going to need your help.*"

The tendril influencing the racist white woman who harassed Manny and Bel was growing out of her neck. The distortion in the photo "behind each person's head, or near their shoulders" suggests that they, too, have neck tendrils—and that the tendrils don't show up on camera. The distortion around the tendril-infected people's faces, meanwhile, implies that the infection destroys people's individuality, symbolized by their particular, recognizable faces.

CHAPTER 4: BOOGIE-DOWN BRONCA AND THE BATHROOM STALL OF DOOM

Bronca bursts into a bathroom and calls out "Becky." At the mirror, Yijing demands Bronca call her by her actual name. Bronca accuses Yijing of submitting a grant application Bronca mostly wrote without putting Bronca's name on it. Yijing admits she did but says Bronca isn't doing any new work. When Bronca gestures to a mural on the wall signed "*Da Bronca*," Yijing clarifies that Bronca isn't exhibiting new work at Manhattan galleries. She describes Bronca's work as too Bronx-centric and not "relevant enough." Stung, Bronca accuses Yijing of sleeping with the grant committee chair. Yijing starts swearing at Bronca in Mandarin—at which point Bronca starts swearing at Yijing in Munsee.

"Becky" is a slang term for an obnoxious or racist white woman. Bronca is using the term against Yijing, whose name and ability to curse in Mandarin suggest she's Chinese American. By calling her Asian coworker a negatively connoted slang term for a white woman, Bronca is suggesting there's something stereotypically "white" about Yijing taking credit for Bronca's work on the grant application. In retaliation, Yijing tells Bronca her art isn't "relevant enough"—a claim controversially presupposing that art, to matter, has to speak to a broader audience than its artist's local community. At the end of this passage, Bronca starts swearing in Munsee, one of the languages of the Lenape, the Native American people whose ancestral lands include the territory now occupied by New York City. Bronca's ability to speak Munsee reveals that she is likely Lenape.

Bronca and Yijing's coworker Jess comes into the bathroom to tell them everyone can hear them. Once Yijing leaves, Jess scolds Bronca for sulking even though she's about 60. Keeping to herself that she's closer to 70, Bronca denies sulking. Jess then scolds Bronca for "slut-shaming" Yijing. Though Bronca realizes and regrets that she slut-shamed Yijing, she doubles down and claims, "Bitch has bad taste." Jess scolds her for using the word "bitch" and points out that Bronca dislikes men in general. Bronca replies that she likes her own son "okay"—which is an inside joke she knows Jess teed up for her to calm her down.

"Slut-shaming" is a term referring to sexist criticism of women's sexual behavior. By saying that Bronca was "slut-shaming" Yijing, Jess chastises Bronca for bringing up Yijing's sex life during their fight. Bronca internally agrees with Jess's criticism but externally ignores it and calls Yijing a "bitch," a sexist slur. Bronca's behavior here reveals that while she recognizes and disapproves of sexist stereotypes and behaviors, she still employs sexist stereotypes against other women if she's angry with them.

Jess tells Bronca she needs help. She explains that artists linked to a potential donor want to show their art at the gallery but trails off rather than describe the art. When Bronca points out the gallery sometimes exhibits bad art, Jess claims this art is "worse."

When Bronca says the gallery sometimes exhibits bad art, she seems to mean art that is not technically proficient. When Jess replies that the art she's talking about is "worse" than bad, she seems to be implying that it's bad in a different way—that it's offensive and perhaps ethically *bad. Thus, this passage introduces the idea that art should be judged by at least two criteria: its technical execution and its ethical content.*

After Jess leaves, Bronca hears a voice (the Woman in White) say, "'Turning and turning in the widening gyre'" and laugh. Realizing someone in a stall heard her and Yijing, Bronca apologizes. The Woman says Yijing should respect her elders. Bronca asks whether she and the Woman know each other. Instead of answering, the Woman says: "So often, 'the falcon cannot hear the falconer.'" Annoyed, Bronca points out that she's capable of quoting Yeats too and recites from the next two lines of the poem. The Woman takes up the recitation, but when she gets to the line, "The ceremony of innocence is drowned," she breaks off to tell Bronca that it's her favorite part, because it shows how vapid innocence is. The Woman thinks it's bizarre that humans think ignorance is a virtue and expresses surprise that the species has managed to progress.

The Woman in White and Bronca are quoting the 1920 poem "The Second Coming" by Irish poet W.B. Yeats (1865 – 1939). The poem uses the religious concept of the Second Coming—the belief that Jesus Christ will return to earth, after which some humans will be eternally damned and others eternally saved—as a governing metaphor to describe the apocalyptic effects of World War I. By choosing to recite this particular poem, the Woman in White is hinting that a war or apocalypse is coming. That she chooses a poem to communicate with Bronca, meanwhile, shows both that the Woman is well-educated in human culture despite her alienness and that art is an important tool for communication. Finally, the Woman's disgust that human beings think innocence is a virtue suggests that she has—or thinks she has—a very different value system than most or all humans.

Bronca now suspects that the Woman in White is threatening her. One stall door opens, and no one is inside. The Woman tells Bronca she has a "foothold" on Staten Island, the city, and maybe Bronca herself, whom she calls "sweet thing." Bronca asks whether the Woman is into "old ladies." Another stall opens, revealing no one. The Woman tells Bronca the city is full of people so sweet she wants to eat them. Looking at the last closed stall, Bronca realizes she can only see "blank whiteness" in the gaps around the door.

When the Woman in White calls Bronca "sweet," Bronca interprets it as a kind of threatening flirtation—until the Woman changes the meaning of "sweet" from figurative to literal by talking about wanting to eat people. This exchange shows that Bronca and the Woman have fundamentally different concepts of humanity: Bronca sees other people as potential equal partners in activities like sex, whereas the Woman sees them as prey. That Bronca can only see "blank whiteness" when she tries to peek at the Woman tightens the association between the Woman and racial whiteness; it also associates the Woman with homogeneity as opposed to diversity—of color or anything else.

Bronca dares the Woman in White to say what she means. The Woman says she likes humans, but they're dangerous and not "likely to volunteer for genocide." She offers to let Bronca, her son, her unborn grandchild, and her exes die last when she destroys everything. When Bronca tells the Woman to come out of the stall, the Woman laughs, says she's resting from using "this shape," and suggests Bronca wouldn't want to see her. Bronca says she doesn't like the Woman threatening her and her family from the toilet. The Woman tells Bronca she's not threatening but advising and warns her to remember, when everyone's dying, that the Woman offered to help.

Earlier, the Woman in White told Aislyn she was a menace. Now, the Woman tells Bronca that humans are dangerous and implies that the only way to respond to the danger effectively is to commit "genocide" against humanity. These comments make clear that the Woman views humanity—and perhaps cities in particular—as a terrible threat, but she doesn't hint at why. *Her throwaway comment that she's resting from her human "shape," meanwhile, reminds the reader that although the Woman can appear as a white woman to exploit human prejudice and white privilege, her original form is something alien and perhaps terrifying.*

The Woman in White launches into a description of Bronca's grandchild's impending death. Suddenly Bronca feels herself transform. She remembers a day when she was 11, wearing her father's steel-toed boots while trying to avoid a group of men who were sexually harassing her. One of the men ambushed her in a brickyard. Feeling suddenly "*bigger*," she kicked his knee. He ended up in the hospital. Bronca also remembers kicking the knee of "a **police** informant at Stonewall." She compares the sensations she felt at these times to the sensations she feels now: "Bigger. As big as the whole goddamn borough."

*When the Woman tried to scare Aislyn, Aislyn wanted to escape. By contrast, Bronca remembers fighting back against people who abused her due to her gender or sexuality—an adult man who harassed her when she was 11 and a police informant at Stonewall, famous pro-LGBT protests in 1969 precipitated by a police raid at a gay bar called the Stonewall Inn in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. Getting righteously angry against gender- and sexuality-based abuse makes Bronca feel "*bigger*"—not literally bigger, but conceptually bigger, because she's fighting as a representative of a whole identity group. This moment parallels the previous moments Bronca has fought back against abusers because now she is fighting on behalf of a "whole goddamn borough."*

The Woman in White groans, "Oh, not you *too*." Bronca charges the stall. It begins to open. Through it Bronca spies a white room, larger than it should be given the size of the Bronx Art Center bathroom. Before the door can open wide, Bronca kicks it in. The Woman screams and the space behind the door becomes an ordinary stall again. Suddenly, Bronca, as the eldest borough, gains "a hundred thousand years or so of knowledge." Though she knows she's supposed to team up with the other boroughs, she thinks of her long life of fighting and her unborn grandchild and decides not to participate: "The Bronx has always been on its own; let them learn what that felt like." Bronca leaves the bathroom. When she's gone, a **tendril** hidden behind the toilet writhes.

The Woman's exclamation "Oh, not you too" seems to betray that the Woman knew Aislyn and Bronca would become or had become embodied boroughs before either woman was fully aware of her powers—but that both Aislyn and Bronca acclimated too fast to being boroughs for the Woman in White to infect them or immediately bully them into helping her. The Woman's apparent ability to manipulate space—to make the bathroom stall bigger on the inside—again emphasizes her alienness and hints that she possesses advanced technology or superhuman powers. Bronca's decision not to help the other boroughs precisely because "the Bronx has always been on its own," meanwhile, illustrates that conforming to stereotypes about their boroughs doesn't always simply make the boroughs' avatars more powerful—sometimes, as with Aislyn and Bronca, it may make them feel ambivalent or even resentful about the rest of the city community to which they belong. Since the tendrils represent an outside force manipulating a community to divide and conquer it, the continued presence of a tendril in Bronca's workplace suggests that her decision to go it alone, without the other boroughs, makes her vulnerable to ongoing attacks by the Woman.

CHAPTER 5: QUEST FOR QUEENS

While Manny and Brooklyn wait for the bus to Queens, Brooklyn calls someone to help them figure out who has embodied the Bronx. Then she explains how, when she was searching for whoever was embodying Manhattan, she saw a TV playing phone footage of Manny atop the Checker cab. Immediately she knew who and what he was and had a better sense of where he was. Ergo, to find the other embodied boroughs, Brooklyn and Manny need some hint or concept of who they would be.

That Manny and Brooklyn can use concepts or stereotypes of the other boroughs to find their fellow avatars emphasizes once again the power of concepts and stereotypes in the novel's science-fictional world.

Manny and Brooklyn discuss how they both feared they were going crazy when they first began to embody boroughs. Brooklyn says that after her intuition that she could use music to fight the **tendrils**, she decided it was "too goddamn weird" to be a delusion. Then she mentions Bel is the first non-borough she's met who can see the tendrils. After wondering why Bel and Madison saw the tendrils, Manny concludes the city made it happen so Manny could "use them as tools," just as it took Manny's memories to make him a better Manhattan. He realizes neither he nor the city may be "good guys."

Brooklyn believes that the ability of concepts or stereotypes associated with New York City to destroy the tendrils is "too goddamn weird" to be a delusion—in other words, concepts and stereotypes built up by ordinary communities like cities are stranger than what a mentally unstable person would invent. In turn, Manny realizes that the city "use[s] its citizens as tools" and that he may make a good avatar for Manhattan precisely because he isn't one of the "good guys." Both these insights casts doubt on the rationality and ethical status of communities in general and of the city Manny and Brooklyn want to defend in particular.

Brooklyn asks Manny whether he still wants her to teach him how to be a New Yorker. When he asks whether he has a choice, she says yes—he could leave the city. Manny realizes that if he leaves, he may regain his memory and another city resident will become Manhattan. He wonders, uncertain, whether he wants to stay and fight for the city.

When Manny destroyed the tendril growth on FDR Drive, he seemed elated to defend the city and represent Manhattan. Now that he's had to wrestle with his borough's evil history and the city's dubious ethics, however, he's less sure of his commitment to join the New York City community.

The bus arrives. After Manny and Brooklyn board, he asks her to explain New York to him as if he has no memories of it—since he doesn't. Then he explains his amnesia. Brooklyn replies that she's started to perceive music in the city's noise, resurrecting her musician identity—which she gave up to spend her energy on a different life with her daughter (Jojo). She resents what the city is doing to her: "I'm not Free anymore." At first Manny misinterprets "Free" as "*free*"; realizing his mistake, he asks whether the city is changing them for its own purposes. Brooklyn says that she believes so: becoming embodied boroughs means they can't be "ordinary people anymore."

That New York City wants Brooklyn to become a musician again demonstrates the importance of art to a city's greatness—but it also shows how the needs of a community, whether a family or a city, may not align with the desires or priorities of an individual person within that community. When Manny misinterprets Brooklyn as saying "I'm not free anymore," his misinterpretation is telling. On the one hand, Brooklyn isn't free to pursue her musical ambitions without considering others because she has a family now. On the other hand, Brooklyn isn't free to be one of New York's "ordinary people" anymore because Brooklyn (the borough) has chosen her as its avatar.

Brooklyn shows Manny a subway map and tells him it's "bullshit"—it shows Manhattan as the city's "center," though in terms of population it isn't, and Staten Island as small, though it's larger in size than the Bronx. Then she shares her concept of Queens (working-class, immigrant, in danger of gentrification by tech workers) and the Bronx (tough but artistic). Manny suggests Queens will be a "hard-working non-techie" and the Bronx "creative but with an attitude." When he asks about Staten Island, Brooklyn says its embodiment will probably be a "small-town thinker" who dislikes the rest of the city and votes Republican.

Brooklyn's tutorial for Manny distinguishes between stereotypes about the city that are "bullshit" (Manhattan is the center of everything; Staten Island is small and insignificant) and concepts about the city that are true (Queens is working-class but gentrifying; the Bronx is artistic and belligerent). This passage seems to imply that while stereotypes and concepts shape people's perception *of reality, there is an objective reality beyond people's perceptions. Further, it implies that concepts are "bullshit" if they make it harder for people to see that objective reality, and good if they help people perceive it more clearly.*

Brooklyn and Manny get off the bus and enter the subway. Brooklyn explains to Manny New York's slang terms for taxis and laments that they're "getting eaten up by Uber and Lyft." Feeling a strange pull, Manny and Brooklyn disembark in Jackson Heights. On the street, Manny searches online for strange events in Queens and finds photographs on social media of an odd pool with two children in it and a woman with black hair beside it. Manny and Brooklyn feel an instant connection to the woman in the photo (Padmini).

Brooklyn's digression about global companies Uber and Lyft "eat[ing]" quintessentially New York taxis and making New York taxi slang obsolete illustrates how global companies homogenize cities—and casts that homogenization as predatory. Manny and Brooklyn's instant recognition of the woman embodying Queens, meanwhile, shows how the boroughs are already part of a New York City community even though they may not know each other individually.

Brooklyn gets a text and shows Manny, on her phone, a mural representing the city "as its whole and distinct self rather than the agglomeration of images and ideas that are its camouflage." He realizes the Bronx must have painted it. Brooklyn tells him that after his description of the Bronx, she asked people to search for this mural, whose name she couldn't remember. Then she shows him the artist's information: Bronca Siwanoy, director of the Bronx Art Center. Brooklyn suggests they split up, one finding Queens and one the Bronx. Manny disagrees: safety in numbers. They decide to find Queens first, since she's nearby.

Bronca's art can represent the city as its "whole and distinct self," beyond the "images and ideas" that people use to understand it but that prevent them from seeing it clearly. Thus, the novel suggests that art is a tool for seeing reality—including the essential nature of cities—more clearly. Manny's refusal to split up with Brooklyn, meanwhile, suggests he believes the city's avatars can only defeat the Woman in White by working together, not on their own.

CHAPTER 6: THE INTERDIMENSIONAL ART CRITIC DR. WHITE

At the Bronx Art Center, Bronca surveys pieces by an (almost entirely white) artists' collective led by a man she dubs Strawberry Manbun. Jess, Yijing, and the Center's assistant Veneza are there. After looking at the art, Bronca asks, "Are you fucking with us?" The art represents lynchings, a Jewish man raping a sexualized woman with dark skin, Native American men in stereotyped clothes raping the same woman, and more. Bronca asks Manbun whether 4chan inspired them.

4chan is an Internet forum known for far-right, racist, and neo-Nazi political content. When Bronca asks the art collective whether they are "fucking with" her and her colleagues, she is pointing out that the art trades in extreme racist and sexist stereotypes; given that Bronca and her colleagues are all female and mostly non-white, the art seems intended to offend or frighten them.

One of the collective tells Bronca his work is ironic. Bronca asks what, exactly, the gang rape is trying to say. A young-looking member of the collective, smirking, claims the work is about female genital mutilation, since the victim is "*African* Black." Bronca tells the collective that the Bronx Art Center not only exists to "celebrate the diversity of the Bronx" but also to exhibit good art. Jess adds, forcefully, that they don't exhibit prejudiced art.

The collective's invocation of irony and claims about political commentary on female genital mutilation illustrate how some artists use bigoted material in their work to shock or titillate viewers while claiming to be commenting on (rather than reproducing) bigotry to avoid taking responsibility for their work's ethical content. Bronca's rejoinder that the Center "celebrate[s] the diversity of the Bronx" and exhibits good art suggests that she thinks the collective's art fails both ethically (rather than celebrating diversity, it attacks women and minorities) and technically (it's not well made).

Manbun tells Bronca she hasn't seen the collective's best piece, "*Dangerous Mental Machines*." When artists remove the tarp covering it, Bronca realizes it's technically adroit, unlike the work she's already seen. It represents a Chinatown street, full of entities "for whom the word *people* is a laughable misnomer." Somehow, Bronca can hear their noises—which aren't human speech. She smells seawater. Suddenly, the entities in the painting charge. Veneza grabs Bronca's arm, and the painting is just a painting again. Due to the knowledge she gained when she became the Bronx, Bronca realizes the painting constituted an attack on her and the city.

This passage indicates that racist art is dangerous. The last painting that the collective shows Bronca represents residents of Chinatown—presumably, Chinese American New Yorkers—as so inhuman it would be "laughable" to consider them people. In this science-fiction novel, where concepts like stereotypes have power over the material world, the anti-Asian stereotypes in the painting constitute a literal attack on Bronca as an artist of color. The smell of seawater links the attack to the Enemy/the Woman in White, who has previously been associated with deep-sea creatures; the association suggests that the painting is another instance of the Woman using human bigotry to divide and conquer humanity.

Demanding the artists cover the painting, Bronca tells them she understands the reference—"dangerous mental machines" is a term H.P. Lovecraft coined to describe Asian New Yorkers in Chinatown, whom he believed were clever but soulless. Yijing chimes in that, in the same letter, Lovecraft also expressed virulent prejudice against Black, Jewish, and Portuguese people. When Veneza says, "Shit, even the Portuguese?", Bronca recalls Veneza is biracial, Black and Portuguese, and has fallen out with her Portuguese family.

H.P. Lovecraft (1890 – 1937) was an influential and extremely, overtly racist writer of science fiction and horror. By associating its villains with Lovecraft, the novel suggests that it is seeking to combat Lovecraft's influence in the science-fiction/horror tradition—because his art's unethical, racist content is genuinely damaging and therefore matters. Veneza's surprise that Lovecraft was bigoted against Portuguese people, too, underlines the randomness and absurdity of Lovecraft's racial, ethnic, and national hatreds.

Bronca tells the artists that this painting, rather than offering an ironic take on Lovecraft's racism, embodies his racist perspective. The Center won't exhibit it. Though one of the artists looks "stunned that Bronca's still talking," Manbun claims to accept Bronca's decision. The collective start packing up their art.

When one of the collective is "stunned that Bronca's still talking," it suggests the artists knew their last painting was dangerous and expected it to hurt her.

Since the artists didn't react to the painting, Bronca decides they must be "ordinary"—which means they couldn't have created the painting themselves. Examining them, she sees a white **tendril** sticking out of Manbun's ankle. Though Bronca doesn't know what it is, she guesses. As Manbun is leaving, she asks him who he's working for. He replies that Bronca will see his boss soon, "without a bathroom door to protect" her. Bronca slams the door on him.

This passage reveals that the dangerous painting has no effect on "ordinary" people—only Bronca, who is an embodied borough, and, inexplicably, Veneza, who noticed the painting moving. The tendril in Manbun's leg and his allusion to Bronca's earlier confrontation with the Woman in White in the bathroom reveal that the artists' collective is working for the Woman. On a thematic level, Manbun's tendril-infection also suggests that seeking to place bad, racist art in a community's public art center is another way of invading and gentrifying the community.

Yijing, furious that racist white men would try to force bigoted art into a gallery "run by women of color," suggests the Center hire lawyers. Jess says they need to tell the artists using the upstairs workshops to vacate the Center for the night—the collective had a "brownshirt vibe," and two of her grandparents died in a concentration camp. Bronca says she'll warn the "keyholders"—artists who live in the Center—but won't force the ones who are homeless, many of whom have abuse histories, to leave. Jess agrees but says Bronca must warn the Center's board about what's happened.

"Brownshirt" was a slang term for a Nazi paramilitary group (officially called the Storm Detachment) that aided Adolf Hitler's takeover of Germany. When Jess says the artists' collective has a "brownshirt vibe," she's communicating that Nazi history and her grandparents' deaths during the Holocaust have given her important concepts for predicting when a group of bigoted men might get physically violent. Bronca's response—that she won't evict from the Center artists who have only abusive homes to go back to—shows that she takes Jess's worries about the artist's collective seriously, but that she also wants to protect the Center's artists from other abusers.

Veneza goes to the reception computer and calls over her coworkers, showing them a YouTube video starring Manbun. Veneza explains that she image-searched the logo in his email and found it belonged to a group called Alt Artistes. She plays a video of Manbun ranting about "disrespect for a superior culture," Picasso, and Gauguin. Veneza tells her coworkers they need to protect their identities against doxing and other internet-based harassment. The women work on protecting themselves online until late; then Jess and Yijing head home.

The name "Alt Artistes" associates the artists' collective to the real-world "alt-right," a right-wing white supremacist movement. Pablo Picasso (1881 – 1973) and Paul Gauguin (1848 – 1903) are famous white European avant-garde artists. Mentioning Picasso and Gauguin while complaining about "disrespect for a superior culture," Manbun seems to be using Picasso and Gauguin's art as an ideological weapon against anyone who believes that white European culture isn't "superior" to other world cultures. This use of art as an ideological weapon shows that art has political as well as aesthetic relevance. Veneza's recognition that her coworkers need to protect themselves against online harassment from the Alt Artistes both reminds the reader that the internet is a powerful tool of racist harassment and characterizes Veneza as younger and tech-savvier than her colleagues.

Veneza tells Bronca there's something creepy about one of the Center's bathroom stalls and "everything's weird all of a sudden." Bronca realizes Veneza can sense the city has come alive; she's surprised, since Veneza's from New Jersey. Bronca decides that since Veneza can sense the weirdness, Bronca should tell her the truth. She explains the painting was a "doorway." Veneza, horrified that they were really traveling to the place the painting represented, replies: "I got your back anywhere, B, but *dayum*." Bronca tells Veneza she can't protect Bronca in this case, because she doesn't have the "boots." Then she offers to show Veneza something and then drive her home to Jersey City.

Earlier, the novel hinted that Veneza had some special sense of the Woman in White's activities when she saved Bronca from the Alt Artistes' last painting. Yet Bronca's surprise that Veneza has noticed "everything's weird" suggests Bronca doesn't think of Veneza, a New Jerseyan, as a true member of New York City's community, even though Veneza works in the Bronx. Her claim that Veneza doesn't have the "boots" to watch her back, meanwhile, is a reference to Bronca's steel-toed boots, which she uses to kick abusers. For Bronca, having "boots" means having the power to defend yourself.

Driving, Bronca explains to Veneza what she knows. Though hesitant, Bronca hears the city encouraging her to be honest: *"We like having allies, don't we? Real ones, anyway."* Before exiting the Bronx, Bronca pulls off the expressway, drives to Bridge Park, and walks Veneza down to the Harlem River. Bronca begins to dance. As she dances, she lifts a finger—and a pipe lifts from the river to mimic the gesture. Veneza is astonished. Bronca insists that what Veneza senses is real and "dangerous."

Bronca has decided to defend herself alone rather than find the other embodied boroughs. Yet the city, by encouraging her to find "allies," reminds her of the powers and joys of community. That Bronca uses dance to demonstrate how symbols and concepts give her power over the city, meanwhile, shows the importance of various art forms to her character and to New York City.

Veneza asks whether Bronca can make "any part of the city" move. Bronca raises her arm and flexes, and the river mimics her like an "immense, spectral Rosie the Riveter parody." Veneza's joy at this magic makes Bronca feels good about embodying a borough for the first time. Veneza notices that while the Harlem River is in the air, mimicking Bronca's arm, it's also still flowing along the riverbed. Seeing her confusion, Bronca explains that "reality isn't binary." Every possible reality that could have happened really has happened.

The novel has mentioned Rosie the Riveter once before—when Aislyn decided to nickname the Woman in White Rosie. Whereas Aislyn failed to remember Rosie's real slogan ("WE CAN DO IT"), Bronca correctly mimics Rosie's iconic bicep-flex. Since Rosie the Riveter is a symbol of community action, Aislyn's failure and Bronca's success in alluding to Rosie may foreshadow their eventual relationships to New York City's community as a whole (that is, Bronca will perhaps work with the other embodied boroughs, while Aislyn will continue to reject them). Meanwhile, Bronca's claim that "reality isn't binary" makes explicit that, in the novel, multiple realities or parallel dimensions exist.

When Veneza asks whether Bronca is talking about the "many-worlds interpretation" in "quantum physics," Bronca tells her a story. Once upon a time, only one reality existed that was "full of life." Every time a living creature made a choice, however, reality split into multiple realities, one for each of the possible choices the living creature could have made. To illustrate this multiplicity of realities, Bronca stacks her hands, one atop the other.

"Quantum physics" scientifically describes the nature and behavior of atoms and subatomic particles. The "many-worlds interpretation" of quantum physics is a theory that explains some strange properties of subatomic particles by arguing that infinite possible universes exist. In other words, Bronca is telling Veneza that they live in a single reality—but an infinite number of other realities (a "multiverse") exist alongside theirs.

Bronca explains that it's not only choices that create new realities: so do myths, lies, stories, and other concepts. When a city gains a certain mass of realities from all the choices, ideas, and so forth occurring in it, it travels across multiple realities and becomes "alive." Veneza, awestruck, says that when she saw the city from her roof, she thought she saw it breathing. Bronca says that it really was, but that now New York has been truly born.

Here the novel is using the scientific theory of many worlds to make literal the figurative claim that individual people's and communities' beliefs, concepts, stories, and so forth create the reality in which they live. The novel also seems to be suggesting that cities are special instances of this phenomenon because they bring so many people—and thus so many individual "realities"—together.

Veneza asks about the painting. Bronca says that one of the other realities, for reasons unknown to her, hates our reality and tries to kill cities when they're born. It tried to kill New York, destroying the Williamsburg Bridge in the process, but someone like Bronca thwarted it. When Veneza asks whether there are other people who can control the river, Bronca explains that there are six: five embodied boroughs and New York City's avatar, who repelled the attack that morning. She also notes that the creature from the other reality has switched up its tactics. Internally, she worries about the other avatars, but then she reminds herself that she only wants to protect Veneza and stay out of things.

This passage reveals that the Enemy/the Woman in White is an alien entity not from another planet but from a parallel reality. Bronca's claim that she doesn't know why the Woman in White hates humanity or cities foreshadows the revelation of the Woman's true reasons later in the novel. Bronca's worry about the city's other avatars reveals that she does care about the wider New York City community, even though she is trying not to care about them and to stay out of the fight.

Veneza remembers the creatures in the painting moving. Bronca says that life in other realities doesn't necessarily look humanoid. Veneza is disturbed the painting-creatures could really exist. Bronca muses: "That was what had made the paint-figures so creepy, really. To know that the things she was seeing weren't just mindless, swirl-faced monsters, but things with minds and feelings? Minds as incomprehensibly alien as Lovecraft once imagined his fellow human beings to be."

This passage compares Veneza and Bronca's reactions to the "paint-figures" with H.P. Lovecraft's bigoted reactions to other people unlike himself. The comparison is ambiguous. It could suggest that there's something prejudiced and unethical about Veneza and Bronca seeing these "things with minds as feelings" as "creepy"—or it could suggest that Lovecraft's fear of "incomprehensibly alien" entities is justifiable in theory but not when applied in practice to other human beings, who are in fact neither incomprehensible nor alien.

Bronca and Veneza get in the car and keep driving to Jersey City. Bronca warns Veneza that while she, Bronca, has the power to fight extradimensional intruders, Veneza doesn't. Veneza says if she sees any, she'll fetch Bronca. Bronca says if she isn't around, Veneza needs to run away—not intervene, like she did in the gallery. Veneza points out that if she hadn't intervened, the painting creatures would have killed Bronca. Bronca begs Veneza to take care of herself. Veneza grudgingly agrees.

Veneza saved Bronca when the paint-figures attacked, which shows that Bronca needs allies and a community to survive. Yet at this point in the novel, Bronca's independence and her protectiveness of Veneza make her unwilling to accept even her good friend as an ally.

Veneza asks why she could see the paint creatures when Yijing, Jess, and the Alt Artistes seemed unable to. Bronca tells her some people are "closer to the city" and can either become its avatars or merely "serve its will." When Veneza asks whether she could have become an avatar like Bronca, Bronca says yes—except she's from New Jersey.

Bronca doesn't explain why some people are "closer to the city" than others, but given that the city derives its power from beliefs, concepts, stereotypes, etc., it seems likely that those New Yorkers are "closer" to the city who best adhere to New York City stereotypes. That the city bends residents to "serve its will" once again casts doubt on the city's ethical status. Veneza and Bronca's exchange about whether, as a New Jerseyan, Veneza could have become an avatar foreshadows the importance of Veneza's relationship to New York City for the rest of the novel.

Veneza points out that if people are already trying to kill Bronca with paint creatures, things could get much worse for her if someone puts her address on the internet. She offers to let Bronca stay with her. Bronca explains that she derives her power from New York City—she won't be able to fight the extradimensional intruders if she's crashing in Jersey. When they reach Veneza's place, Veneza exits the car. Bronca tells Veneza she'll be fine. Veneza says she knows Bronca fought a police officer at Stonewall, but that's not the same as extradimensional monsters. They say good night. Driving home, Bronca prays for Veneza's safety.

Again, "Stonewall" refers to the 1969 Stonewall protests, pro-LGBT demonstrations sparked by a police raid on a gay bar in Greenwich Village, Manhattan. When Veneza compares Bronca's participation in the Stonewall protests to Bronca's conflict with the Woman in White, the novel compares the Woman's invasion to bigoted police action and gentrification while suggesting the Woman will be more dangerous to Bronca personally than she might be to the other embodied boroughs.

CHAPTER 7: THE THING IN MRS. YU'S POOL

In Queens, while doing homework for her master's degree in engineering, Padmini Prakash is daydreaming about a comical argument she read on Tumblr—an argument that non-Euclidean geometry frightened H.P. Lovecraft. Due to the competitive "H-1B lottery" and the "ICE gestapo," Padmini studies finance—which promises a job after graduation—rather than math, which she likes better. Glancing out her window at Manhattan, she sees an enormous tentacle destroy the Williamsburg Bridge. She assumes it's a special effect—she's seen movie crews exploiting "multicultural working-class" Queens "as a backdrop for their all-white upper-class dramadies"—but then hears the breaking bridge and people screaming.

Tumblr is a social media and blogging platform known for its fan communities. In Lovecraft's 1928 short story "The Call of Cthulhu," sailors come upon a lost city called R'lyeh constructed according to non-Euclidean geometry, which scares and disorients them. The reference to non-Euclidean geometry here suggests that when Manny and Brooklyn echoed Padmini's exclamation about non-Euclidean geometry earlier, Padmini was talking to herself about how ridiculous it was that Lovecraft believed an entire legitimate mathematical system was creepy. This exclamation characterizes Padmini as both a math nerd and a science-fiction nerd. The "H-1B lottery" is a process by which non-citizens can get visas to work legally in the U.S., while "ICE gestapo" refers to U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement and compares them to the historical Gestapo, Nazi Germany's secret police. These references indicate that Padmini works in the U.S. but is not a citizen. Padmini's mention that movies have started to use "multicultural" Queens "as a backdrop" for moves with white casts, meanwhile, indicates that the gentrification of Queens has already begun.

Padmini hears the subway, feels at one with the train, and then senses something wrong in her neighbor Mrs. Yu's backyard. Mrs. Yu's grandsons are playing in her small backyard pool when its bottom changes into something "organic." The boys aren't touching the bottom, but they will. Padmini runs for her door. Gifted with comprehending "the mechanics of the whole business," she knows water helps the Enemy travel between realities. If the boys touch the bottom, the Enemy will kidnap them to another reality.

Bronca, when she became an avatar, gained an understanding of the history of living cities and their war with the Enemy. Similarly, Padmini gains an understanding of "the mechanics of the whole business." Since Bronca is the oldest avatar and Padmini is a mathematician, it seems the city is giving its avatars gifts that match their preexisting individual characteristics.

Padmini runs down her apartment stairs, startling Aishwarya Aunty, and pictures equations rendering the fastest trip to the pool. She's suddenly transported to Mrs. Yu's backyard. She hauls one boy from the pool. As Mrs. Yu enters the backyard, the other boy touches the bottom. **Tendrils** envelop him. Padmini and Mrs. Yu grab the boy's hand and try to pull him out, but the tendrils are too strong.

Padmini lives with her relative Aishwarya, but it's not clear from the respectful address "Aunty" whether Aishwarya is Padmini's literal aunt or just an older female relative. Padmini's use of math to help the boys faster shows that math concepts—as well as historical and artistic concepts—can channel the city's power.

Padmini, thinking of equations in fluid mechanics, imagines a lubricant between the boy and the **tendrils**. This trick allows Padmini and Mrs. Yu to pull the boy free. Padmini is overjoyed to have succeeded but also to have done something she's "*chosen*" rather than something she's "expected to do." An energy wave passes out of her body through the neighborhood. When she checks the pool bottom, it's normal.

That Padmini feels so happy to do something of her own free choice, rather than because she's expected to, implies that she doesn't like her current life working in New York finance; rather, she feels pressure to do it. Her happiness to exercise free choice is somewhat ironic under the circumstances, since Queens has chosen her without asking her input to be its avatar and defender. The energy wave that Padmini emits suggests that there's something about Padmini and the other avatars that's so quintessentially New York that it's deadly to the outside interference the tendrils represent.

Manny and Brooklyn arrive at Mrs. Yu's backyard. Manny sees damage to our reality surrounding the pool and smells ocean. He speculates the pool bottom-monster may be the same composite entity as the **tendrils**, remembering the Woman in White calls herself both "we" and "I": the "distinction between the individual self and the collective plural" may not exist in her culture. Brooklyn points out the Woman can control the tendrils and may have a subterranean presence across the city, "like a fungus." Overhearing, Padmini expresses disgust at the comparison.

This passage emphasizes the Woman in White's alienness. Whereas the novel's human characters recognize both individual people and communities—both "I" and "we"—the Woman in White and entities like her may not understand the "distinction" between them, which suggests they conceive of selfhood in a radically different way than the human characters. In the same vein, by comparing the Woman and her tendrils to a "fungus," Brooklyn is arguing that the Woman may resemble earth's nonhuman lifeforms more than its human ones. Yet the avatars, as representatives of entire boroughs, also inhabit a weird middle ground "between the individual self and the collective plural"—which hints that they may have more in common with the Woman than they yet realize.

Brooklyn asks why the **tendrils** attacked Padmini's neighbors instead of Padmini. Manny explains that attacking vulnerable people close to your real target can trick your target "out of a safe position." Brooklyn gives Manny a suspicious look and asks why Padmini was safe in her apartment. Aishwarya, standing protectively near Padmini, seconds the question. Manny directs the others to examine Padmini's building: it's somehow "*more* Queens […] than the rest of Queens"—and thus protected.

Manny easily follows the cold-blooded logic behind the tendrils' attack tactics. From Brooklyn's suspicious look at Manny, the reader may infer that Brooklyn is wondering whether Manny has used such cold-blooded tactics in his forgotten past. This inference may in turn lead the reader to ask whether Manny and the city that chose him are in any way morally superior to the antagonists they are combating. The avatars' realization that Padmini's apartment building is invulnerable to the tendrils because it's so "Queens," meanwhile, hints that the tendrils represent gentrification and homogenization. Because the building is not homogenous but representative of a particular place (Queens), the tendrils can't touch it.

Brooklyn suggests they rest for the night. Manny asks whether they should look for the Bronx and the fifth borough, whose name he's forgotten. Brooklyn reminds him the fifth borough is Staten Island and that they have no idea how to find "her." When Padmini asks how they know Staten Island is female, Brooklyn says it "feels right." Then she argues that since neither the Bronx nor Staten Island has been destroyed, they've probably already fought off the Woman in White and can wait a little longer.

Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini are tired and need to rest in safety. Yet, given that the boroughs' avatars need one another for protection from the Woman in White, Brooklyn's cavalier argument that the Bronx and Staten Island can wait gives credence to Bronca's and Aislyn's resentful suspicions that the other boroughs don't consider them important parts of the New York community. That Brooklyn correctly guesses Staten Island is female again illustrates how the boroughs' avatars can use their preexisting beliefs and concepts about each borough to figure out what the other avatars are probably like.

Manny blurts out that there's a sixth avatar who's already defeated the Woman in White. Brooklyn points out that New York City only has five boroughs. Padmini replies, "Five shapes that fit together make one whole." Brooklyn realizes they must be talking about New York City's avatar and suggests this man must be insane. Manny adds, "But strong," and realizes he likes Brooklyn's assumption that the avatar is male. He says they should find the avatar.

Padmini's statement, "Five shapes that fit together make one whole," offers a positive vision of community: each individual piece can remain exactly how it is—retain its original shape, its identity—and still create something new by entering into a relationship with the others. Given the ways that becoming an avatar has changed Manny and Brooklyn, however, it's not clear that Padmini's view of the relationship between individuals and their community is correct. Manny's preexisting concepts of what New York City's avatar will be like, as well as his interest in the avatar's gender, foreshadow the importance of their relationship to the rest of the story.

Padmini agrees with Brooklyn that they should rest and suggests separating for the night. Aishwarya cuts in that it's stupid for them to split up when under attack. Then Padmini asks whether this weirdness is happening in other cities as well. Manny remembers the Woman in White mentioning São Paolo was in New York. He speculates that the process New York is undergoing has already happened in São Paolo and that, once the process is complete, the city will be safe, but the embodied boroughs will be embodied boroughs forever. Padmini, horrified, points out she's not a U.S. citizen: if she can't get a visa, she could end up "puttering around Chennai, being Queens."

Aishwarya, by advising Padmini, Brooklyn, and Manny not to split up, reminds the reader how important community is to survival. Yet Padmini reacts with horror when she realizes that she could be Queens forever, even if she goes back to Chennai (the capital of Tamil Nadu, a predominantly Tamil-speaking state in southern India)—which also reminds the reader that the city didn't ask any of these people's permission before choosing them as its avatars and defenders. The city's dubiously ethical foisting of responsibility onto its human avatars again suggests that what is good for the community's survival won't always be good or pleasant for individual community members.

Mrs. Yu opens the door and asks Manny, partly in English and partly in Chinese, whether he's biracial. Confused, he says no. Then she tells them: "In China, many cities have gods of the wall […] It's normal. Relax." Mrs. Yu continues that, contrary to what "most of you Christians" believe, gods are "*people*" with "jobs." Brooklyn, realizing they've been in Mrs. Yu's yard awhile, offers to leave. Mrs. Yu accepts.

In contrast with the avatars' own disturbed confusion at their transformations, Mrs. Yu's casual acceptance of the avatars suggests that the avatars' reactions are culturally specific, based on concepts and beliefs they have derived from their nationalities, religions, etc., and not representative of how all people would react.

Aishwarya invites Brooklyn and Manny to stay, since her and Padmini's apartment is protected. Manny suggests his apartment might work too, though his roommate might not like it. Decisively, Brooklyn tells them that her place should work and is large enough.

That Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini all turn out to live in buildings quintessential to their boroughs and thus protected from the Woman in White suggests that buildings are as important as people to the essence or concept of a city.

While Brooklyn makes a call, Padmini tells Manny she thought he was Punjabi. He insists he's "plain old ordinary Black," expresses disinterest in "other stuff" in his ancestry, and summarizes, "America." Padmini recalls Harlem, Central Park's history as a former "Black and Irish neighborhood," and enslaved African people buried under Wall Street, where she works. She suggests that though white people control much of Manhattan, it was built by Black, indigenous, and immigrant populations and concludes: "That must be why you look so . . . everything."

Earlier, Douglas Acevedo assumed Manny was Puerto Rican like him. Mrs. Yu has just asked Manny, partly in Chinese, whether he's biracial. Now Padmini, an immigrant from India, admits she guessed Manny was Punjabi, an ethnic group from the Indian subcontinent. This pattern suggests that people tend to assume Manny belongs, at least in part, to their own ethnic group or culture. Yet despite his amnesia, Manny is very sure he's Black—which reveals that becoming Manhattan hasn't erased his entire personal identity. Padmini's suggestion that Manhattan chose a racially ambiguous Black man to represent it, even though white people control the borough, hints that boroughs and cities derive their essences not from their most powerful residents but from the residents that helped build *them. This fact may explain why, in the novel, gentrification is so bad: it privileges rich and powerful white people over the working-class people and people of color who are more likely to have literally and figuratively built a given city. Thus, gentrification degrades or destroys the city's essence.*

Manny asks Padmini about working on Wall Street. She has she has no choice—because she's not a citizen, she needs a job with a corporation rich enough to pay visa fees. When Manny replies, "I don't judge," Padmini tells him that the company she works for is evil, she hates New York, and she only stays because her family needs her to be successful. Manny concludes this is why Padmini became Queens.

Padmini works a job she finds ethically disgusting to help her family. This backstory again shows how the needs of a community (Padmini's family) can conflict with the needs of an individual community member (Padmini). It also suggests that ethically compromising self-sacrifice is essential to the concept of Queens.

Brooklyn tells the others she's let her father Clyde know they're coming and asks whether they're ready to leave. Padmini wants to pack a bag, so the others accompany her up to her apartment. As they climb through the building, diverse neighbors open their doors to say hello. Manny realizes the building is a "microcosm of Queens." He loves the experience and thinks he wants to fight for the city that produced it.

A "microcosm" is a small representation of a larger phenomenon. When Manny thinks that the apartment is a "microcosm of Queens," he means it represents Queens in miniature—much as each avatar represents his or her borough. That diversity is essential to the apartment and to Queens explains why the homogenizing power of gentrification is so threatening to the borough. Meanwhile, Manny's love of the apartment shows his growing affection for New York City despite his worry about the city's (and his own) moral code.

All at once, Manny sees himself, Brooklyn, and Padmini as cityscapes. He's contemplating how powerful they could be if they joined together when suddenly, he's back in his human body. He falls, smacking his face on the stairs. As Aishwarya helps him up, he hears a voice in his head pointing out that he's only Manhattan—it's the job of New York City's avatar to unite the city. Then Manny has a vision of a subway station with "white tile walls" where a young man in dirty clothes is sleeping on newspapers. Manny experiences the sudden, intense thought that he belongs to this man—that he would die or kill for him and will act like a "*monster*" for him.

Manny's vision of himself, Brooklyn, and Padmini as cityscapes suggests that he can "see" parallel realities in the multiverse. His vision of New York City's avatar is the first hint, in the novel, of what happened to the avatar after he disappeared following his fight with the Woman in White. Manny's extreme emotional reaction to seeing the avatar—especially his willingness to act like a "monster" for him—suggests both that Manhattan has a special relationship to the concept or essence of New York City, and that Manny's love for the city and its avatar may cause him to act unethically.

Coming out of his vision, Manny realizes that he, Brooklyn, and Padmini are all sitting on the stairs. Brooklyn looks at Manny, confirms he had the vision too, and states that there really is a sixth avatar, New York City's. Padmini asks whether the others recognized where the avatar was. Brooklyn says no, but it wasn't Brooklyn. Manny realizes she knows the avatar isn't in her borough because Manny experienced the vision most forcefully.

That Manny experienced the vision most forcefully is evidence that New York City's avatar vanished to somewhere in Manhattan. This fact underscores the special relationship between Manhattan and New York City's essence.

Aishwarya asks about the vision. Padmini explains they saw a dark subway station where a boy was sleeping on newspaper. Internally, Manny recalls that New York City's avatar is in his early 20s, Black, thin, and fast-looking. Brooklyn laments the number of out-of-use subway tunnels their vision could have depicted. Manny speculates that the vision occurred because three boroughs came together; if they find the others, they may be able to find the avatar.

In this passage, Manny realizes that the five boroughs' avatars need to come together to find New York City's avatar and protect him from the Woman in White. This realization reveals that community and teamwork among the boroughs are essential to saving the city.

Brooklyn tells Padmini to get her stuff. After Padmini and Aishwarya enter their apartment, Brooklyn asks Manny whether he's remembered more. Manny thinks he's trying not to remember some things because his old self conflicts with being Manhattan. He tells Brooklyn he used to hurt people for his job, he'd decided not to anymore, and he came to New York for a "new start." Brooklyn tells him what he's saying suits Manhattan and mentions his "weird feelings" about New York City's avatar. He sighs, and she apologizes for the accidental "Vulcan mind-meld."

Although Manny decided he didn't want to hurt people anymore and came to New York City for a "new start," he's recently realized he would be willing to kill and act like a monster for New York City's avatar. This fact suggests that the city may not give Manny the new start he craves. It also suggests that while Manny's old self may conflict with being Manhattan, the conflict doesn't *derive from Manny's old self being violent—in fact, the city may need Manny's capacity for violence. When Brooklyn says "Vulcan mind-meld," she's alluding to the science-fiction franchise* Star Trek, *which includes aliens called Vulcans who can engage in telepathic contact via a technique called a "mind-meld." This allusion reveals Brooklyn could sense Manny's feelings during their shared vision. That she calls his feelings "weird" indicates that she did not have the same intense emotional reaction to New York City's avatar that Manny did.*

Brooklyn tells Manny she doesn't like the idea of all six avatars meeting—she doesn't want to mind-meld with them all. Manny suggests that maybe New York City's avatar will ease the connection. Then he asks how Brooklyn's doing. She tells him she's fighting for New York and her family's safety—but if push came to shove, she'd choose her family over the city. Manny says he'll help Brooklyn's family if he can. Brooklyn, touched, says she hopes he can become "the person you actually *want* to be." She adds: "This city will eat you alive, you know, if you let it. Don't."

Brooklyn's discomfort with "mind-melding" and her insistence that she'd choose her family over the city again demonstrate that the city is asking Brooklyn to give up or change her identity in ways she doesn't want to. Her warning to Manny that the city might "eat [him] alive" oddly echoes Matthew Houlihan's earlier warning to Aislyn that the city would "eat" her—and foreshadows a possible conflict between the avatars' well-being and the city's. Finally, Brooklyn's wish that Manny becomes who he "actually want[s] *to be" shows that Brooklyn has realized the city may ask Manny to use his old, violent tendencies to defend it.*

Padmini and Aishwarya come out of the apartment. Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn get a Lyft. Manny, stunned by the city, sticks his head out of the window. The wind almost ruins Brooklyn's hair. Though he gives her an apologetic smile, he thinks: "He can't help it, though. He is falling in love with a city, and men in love are not always considerate or wise."

Though in an earlier conversation Brooklyn decried Uber and Lyft outcompeting New York City taxis, in this scene the avatars still take a Lyft—which suggests how difficult it is even for socially aware people to avoid participating in the homogenization of cities by global corporations. Manny's realization that he's "falling in love with a city" implies a romantic, sexual component to his reaction to New York City's avatar, while his thought that "men in love are not always considerate or wise" again implies that Manny's love for the city may cause him to act in unethical or otherwise questionable ways.

The Lyft deposits Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn outside two brownstones in Bedford Stuyvesant. The first is "traditional," with a stoop; the second opens directly onto a courtyard. Padmini notes Brooklyn must be rich. Brooklyn explains her father Clyde uses a wheelchair and her family lives in the second, accessible brownstone; the embodied boroughs will be staying in the first. Entering the brownstone, they sense its rightness. Brooklyn comments: "Ain't nothing more Brooklyn than a brownstone."

Bedford Stuyvesant is a neighborhood in northern Brooklyn known for its historic brownstones, townhouses mostly built in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. That one of the brownstones is "traditional" suggests that it may be particularly representative of Brooklyn (the borough) and thus resistant to the Woman in White's tendrils. Brooklyn's declaration that there "ain't nothing more Brooklyn than a brownstone" emphasizes the importance of distinctive architecture—arguably an art form—to a city's essence.

Brooklyn explains that her father Clyde bought both brownstones cheaply during the 1970s, when white flight and a bad economy made them less expensive. Now the brownstones are hugely valuable. She expresses relief that they were able to renovate the second brownstone for wheelchair accessibility before the block became a historical landmark. Padmini expresses surprise that the city would object to making a building wheelchair accessible. Brooklyn replies, "Welcome to New York."

Wheelchair accessibility makes a brownstone less traditional and thus less characteristically Brooklyn. At the same time, however, wheelchair accessibility is an ethical response to the fact that some people need extra help getting around. This conflict between what is characteristic of a city and what is ethical—which Brooklyn's snarky "Welcome to New York" underlines—makes clear that not every form of homogenization is bad: for example, it would be good if all buildings were wheelchair accessible and thus, in one sense, more homogenous.

They order takeout. While they eat, Manny feels guilty and worried because the Bronx, Staten Island, and New York City's avatar are alone. He privately vows to New York City's avatar that he'll find him. Manny wonders whether it's so bad that the city has found a use for his "unsavory" traits. He wonders whether it's wrong to use those traits for the city's benefit—he likes the idea that it's okay. When he sleeps, he "dreams eight million beautifully ruthless dreams."

Manny's passion for New York City and its avatar is leading him to embrace "unsavory" traits he wanted to leave behind—which again hints that the city may be bad for Manny's ethical development. When the novel was published, New York City's population was estimated at more than eight million; Manny's "eight million beautifully ruthless dreams" may suggest both that he's dreaming on behalf of the city's entire population and that there's something essentially "ruthless" about New York.

INTERRUPTION (3)

Paolo exits a cab, sees an apartment building that is "*more* Queens" than those around it, and feels the Enemy. He hops a fence to examine the backyard pool and concludes that someone did a good job "excising the infection." Paolo buzzes the top apartment and says he's looking for someone who understands what happened to the neighbor's pool. Over the intercom, Paolo hears someone say something about ICE. Paolo denies working for ICE, and someone buzzes him in.

That Paolo conceives of Padmini's destruction of the tendrils as someone "excising the infection" shows he thinks of the Enemy's presence in terms of disease. This conception of the conflict between cities and the Enemy casts it as a merely natural, almost mindless struggle, not a battle between intelligent entities with ethical considerations and responsibilities. ICE—as mentioned earlier—is U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. The apartment-dweller's worries about ICE emphasizes that Queens is an immigrant community.

When Paolo reaches the top apartment, a 40ish woman (Aishwarya) opens the door. When he says he's São Paolo—not anticipating an American will recognize the name—Aishwarya expresses surprise that he's real. She tells him about Manny and Brooklyn's visit and says they claimed her relative Padmini had become Queens. Paolo, glad the boroughs have begun to locate one another, asks where they've gone. Aishwarya, now suspicious, tells him they said a woman was "hunting" them.

Paolo's gladness that the boroughs' avatars have started to find each other suggest that Manny was right—the boroughs do need to band together in order to find New York City's avatar and defeat the Woman in White.

Paolo is shocked that the "Enemy ha[s] reactualized harbingers already." He asks about the woman. Aishwarya asks why she should tell him anything. When he says he wants to help, she points out that he hasn't so far. He acknowledges the criticism but claims that "any knowledge" he can give Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn will help. Aishwarya says, mournfully, that she can't help Padmini. Paolo tells him that the other boroughs will help—as will he. At last, Aishwarya tells him they went to Brooklyn.

The last time Paolo warned someone of the Enemy's "harbingers," it was New York City's avatar—and the avatar was subsequently attacked by monstrous policemen. The boroughs' avatars have not been experiencing similar attacks. Rather, they've been encountering the Enemy itself, in the form of the Woman in White. Paolo's shock thus suggests he has an inaccurate or out-of-date concept of the Enemy's capabilities—and he may not have as much "knowledge" to share with the boroughs as he thinks he does.

Paolo is glad three boroughs are protecting each other but notes that that leaves two unprotected. Aishwarya tells him that Padmini, Manny, and Brooklyn were planning to find the Bronx in the morning. Paolo asks about Staten Island. Aishwarya, "skeptical," says they didn't know how to find Staten Island. Paolo decides, in that case, to start with Staten Island.

Aishwarya's "skeptical" attitude toward Staten Island again demonstrates that New Yorkers from other boroughs don't see Staten Island as a real part of the New York City community. Yet Paolo's decision to find the one unprotected borough, rather than joining up with the largest group of boroughs, suggests he thinks every part of the city will be important in fighting the Enemy.

Paolo gives Aishwarya a business card, asks her to give his number to Padmini the next time they're in contact, and tells her the country code is 55. Aishwarya tells him to get a U.S. phone and save Padmini the cost of an international call. Paolo replies that when he makes other people "acknowledge" where he's from, it gives him power. In addition, has asks Aishwarya to please tell Padmini to text him the location of the Bronx once he's found Staten Island. Aishwarya asks when this madness will be over for Padmini. Paolo says it'll be over when the boroughs find New York City's avatar. Yet, given how strangely the city's birth is going, he worries that may not be true. With that, he leaves to find Staten Island.

Paolo's desire to make people symbolically "acknowledge" his origins by dialing his country code underscores the power symbols and concepts possess in the world of the novel. His confusion at how the city's birth went and his worry that finding the avatar won't solve the problem, meanwhile, reveal that Paolo is in over his head.

CHAPTER 8: NO SLEEP IN (OR NEAR) BROOKLYN

Brooklyn pretends to stay in the first brownstone with Padmini and Manny for their benefit, but she's really doing it because she lived there as a child. Opening a window and reminiscing in her childhood room, she thinks that turning into an avatar of Brooklyn makes sense for her—she ran for city council to give voice to "people who actually love New York, versus those merely occupying and exploiting it."

Brooklyn's thoughts about why she ran for city council give another implicit definition of what it means to be a good member of a city community: you have to "actually love" the place where you live, unlike the transient residents and gentrifiers who "merely occupy[] and exploit[] it."

Brooklyn gets a call from her daughter Jojo. When Brooklyn asks Jojo whether she's finished her homework, Jojo says she misses her old English teacher. This teacher left Jojo's school, Brooklyn Latin, for a better-paying job in Westchester; Brooklyn reminds Jojo that she's championing an affordable-housing program for teachers.

Founded in 2006, Brooklyn Latin is a well-regarded public magnet school. Westchester is a wealthy suburb of New York City. That Jojo's teacher left Brooklyn Latin for a more lucrative suburban job despite the school's good reputation suggests that the school wasn't giving her enough money to justify her paying rent in Brooklyn anymore—and thus that the ongoing gentrification of Brooklyn may have indirectly caused the teacher to leave. Brooklyn's attempt to pass affordable-housing legislation shows that she is trying to use her political career to counter gentrification and aid her community.

Jojo says she can't see much from her window. When Brooklyn tells Jojo to open the screen, Jojo complains about mosquitoes but opens it. She and Jojo wave at each other from their windows. Suddenly Brooklyn sees a "white and ghostly" object in the backyard of the brownstone her daughter's occupying—something like a giant four-legged spider. Then another one climbs into the yard. Brooklyn orders Jojo to close her window and go to Clyde's room. Jojo, "a true child of New York," realizes there's a threat and obeys.

Agents of the Enemy/the Woman in White are associated with both the color white and racial whiteness throughout the novel, which emphasizes both the Enemy's homogeneity and its use of racial prejudices to divide and conquer New York City's diverse community. That the spider-creatures are "ghostly" as well as "white" reminds the reader that they may exist partly in a parallel universe. Jojo's sensitivity to threat because she's "a true child of New York" shows that identifying danger is essential to the concept of being a New Yorker.

Soon six of the spider-things have entered the brownstone's backyard. Brooklyn recognizes the "*antithesis of presence*" they emit from her encounters with the **tendrils**. She runs out of the first brownstone, hops the gate into the second brownstone's courtyard, and realizes the problem: she hasn't entered it since becoming the embodiment of Brooklyn, and the renovation that removed its stoop made it "susceptible to attack by foreign organisms."

Something's "antithesis" is its complete opposite. To say that the spider-things and the tendrils are the "antithesis of presence" means that they negate what's present—that is, they negate New York City. In describing the wheelchair-accessible brownstone as "susceptible to attack by foreign organisms," the novel is again using language associated with infection and disease to describe the Woman in White's invasion. This then implies that the conflict between the Woman and the living cities is a merely natural phenomenon, rather than a conflict between intelligent entities with an ethical dimension. That making the brownstone wheelchair-accessible rendered it less characteristic of Brooklyn and therefore vulnerable, meanwhile, shows that what is ethical and diversity-supporting does not always accord with a given city's essence.

A spider-thing slips under the brownstone's front door. Brooklyn hears a musical beat in her breath and realizes that, as a former battle rapper, she can use those skills to combat the home invasion. Improvising lyrics in her mind, Brooklyn gains physical strength to break open the brownstone's locked front door. Inside, she destroys a web the spider-thing has woven, runs into Clyde's bedroom, and—concluding a rhyme—hits the spider-thing, incinerating it. Improvising more lyrics, she strikes the floor and emits "a wave of city-energy" that incinerates all the "contamination" in Brooklyn. Then she collapses.

Brooklyn uses her preferred art form, rap music, to combat the spider-things. That Brooklyn derives power from rap music shows the importance of rap and art more generally to the novel's concepts of Brooklyn (the borough) and New York City. Here the novel describes the spider-things as a "contamination," once again using language associated with infection to characterize the Enemy's attacks. Again, this implies that the battle between the Enemy and the city is merely natural, without the ethical dimension the reader might expect from conflict between intelligent entities.

Manny enters the room. When Jojo tries to get Brooklyn up, Manny says to let Brooklyn rest and, touching her, shares energy with her. Brooklyn realizes that the energy-sharing Manny has done for her is what she and the other boroughs will need to do for New York City's avatar, so that he can save the city. Falling asleep, she completes the song she's been improvising in her head.

That Manny shares energy with Brooklyn—and that all the boroughs will need to share energy with New York City's avatar—shows the importance of cooperation and community to the avatars' powers. That Brooklyn completes her rap even after she's defeated the spider-things, meanwhile, shows that she cares about her art as a craft as well as a means to channel the city's power.

The next afternoon, Brooklyn wakes to find Jojo, Clyde, Padmini, and Manny staring at a letter on the table. Clyde tells her it's an eviction notice. When Brooklyn protests that their family owns the building, Jojo says the city claims they didn't "pay arrears on taxes." Brooklyn, who always pays her bills, says it must be a mistake. Clyde says he's called the city and they've really seized and sold the house—the family has a week to move out. Brooklyn examines the letter and finds that her family home has been stolen by an organization called the **Better New York Foundation**.

Earlier, Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini took a Lyft even though Brooklyn disapproves of Uber and Lyft's muscling-out of traditional New York City taxis, which showed how even people theoretically opposed to cultural homogenization and gentrification sometimes cooperate with it. The Better New York Foundation's theft of Brooklyn's family's historic brownstones, however, shows how organizations with power and money can wrest power and property from a city's locals even without *their cooperation.*

CHAPTER 9: A BETTER NEW YORK IS IN SIGHT

Bronca, arriving at the Bronx Art Center in the morning, checks her voicemail and hears a message from the development chair of the Center's board, Raul, pointing out that though the Center doesn't want to promote prejudice, the Alt Artistes have ties to "a prospective donor." Bronca stops listening.

Raul's voicemail implies that Center's board cares about funding more than principles, which demonstrates how local organizations might cooperate with the gentrification or other external takeovers of their own neighborhoods. The board's concern with money also highlights the vulnerability of publicly funded art galleries to individual rich donor's agendas.

Bronca, walking through the Center, enters an exhibit of "photographs of graffiti" in the Bronx, which she now believes another avatar of New York City painted. The works include pictures of giant body parts and a "*handhold*" for an enormous entity. In the exhibit, Bronca comes upon a woman dressed in white business attire (the Woman in White). The Woman is viewing a painting of a young, thin, raggedly dressed Black man sleeping on newspapers, depicted with veneration—internally, Bronca compares it to historical paintings of the Virgin Mary. She thinks, cryptically, that this painting is different than the others: it's "a self-portrait, but the boy didn't paint it."

This passage implies that New York City's avatar painted the graffiti in the photographs on display in Bronca's gallery. After all, the "self-portrait" the Woman is viewing matches the vision Manny and the others had of the avatar. That love of art has already indirectly connected New York City's avatar to Bronca shows the importance of art to community in the novel. In Christianity, the Virgin Mary is the mother of Jesus Christ; the comparison of New York City's avatar to the Virgin Mary implies that he is the "mother" of the living city, since he helped it through its birth, and that the city itself is a kind of god. If the painting is a self-portrait, but New York City's avatar didn't paint it, then New York City itself *must have painted the graffiti—which hints that the city may have mystical or divine powers.*

The Woman in White says to Bronca that the painting seems to be sending a message. Bronca, thinking the message isn't for a "random stranger," asks what it is. The Woman replies, "'Find me,'" and smiles—baring large, crooked canine teeth out of keeping with her fancy clothes. Bronca, sensing the woman is a predator, says she gets "warning vibes" off the painting—the artist seems to be homeless, as in the painting he's wearing ragged, anonymous clothes. When the Woman asks whether he's hiding, Bronca realizes he likely is and worries about the other embodiments of the city. She considers—but rejects—the impulse to find them. The Woman asks what the man is hiding from, and Bronca says he doesn't know.

Bronca's intuition that the painting's message isn't directed at a "random stranger" suggests that some art isn't meant for just anyone—instead, it's meant for the artist's particular community. The Woman's large canine teeth, coupled with Bronca's sense that the Woman is a predator, once again imply something merely natural and animalistic about the battle between the Woman and the living cities. Finally, when Bronca squashes her impulse to help the city's other avatars, it shows both her desire for community and her distrust of it.

Indicating the artist's scarred knuckles in the painting, Bronca tells the Woman in White that he (the avatar) may be hiding but he'll defend himself if attacked. She thinks people who believe New York is "more bluster than bite" haven't seen its "large canines."

Bronca thinks of New York City as a predator with "large canines"—much like the Woman in White strikes Bronca as a predator with large canine teeth. The comparison suggests an odd equivalence between the city and the Woman, even though the novel's protagonists are defending the city and the Woman in White seeks to destroy it. Readers may wonder whether they should root for the city and against the Woman if both are fundamentally just big-toothed predators.

Standing beside the portrait and facing off with the Woman in White as a "symbolic" point, Bronca says that small, disadvantaged, dark-skinned, poor people learn to fight because others target them: "Sometimes the abuse breaks them," but other times it teaches them how to survive. When the Woman says it could also make them "monsters," Bronca replies that it's abusers who think fighting back makes victims monsters—because these kids could "fix" reality and bring "the end of all abusers." The Woman rejects this possibility as idealism: "Cruelty is human nature."

Bronca's "symbolic" body language highlights the power of symbols in the novel. Her claim that people can derive survival skills from suffering abuse, meanwhile, makes sense given how Bronca has discovered her own strength by fighting back against abusers—but it may make the reader wonder whether Aislyn, whose father Matthew seems emotionally abusive, will learn strength or be broken. The Woman and Bronca's disagreement about whether abuse victims could become "monsters" when they fight back points to an ethical question: if someone is abusing you, are you justified in doing absolutely anything *to end the abuse? The Woman seems to think the answer is no; Bronca, that it's yes. That may be because the Woman thinks you can never bring "the end of all abusers" because abuse and cruelty are "human nature," whereas Bronca thinks fighting back against abusers can end the cycle of abuse once and for all.*

Bronca denies the existence of fixed realities like human nature and concludes: "People who say change is impossible are usually pretty happy with things just as they are." She means this to insult the Woman in White, whom she intuits is one of the "Beckies"—racist white feminists, tax-evading philanthropists, and doctors who sterilize Native American women on reservations. She resolves not to call Yijing Becky again—she'll only use it on people deserving of it.

Bronca and the other avatar derive power from essentializing concepts like "Bronx-ness" and "New York-ness." It's interesting, then, that Bronca thinks the essentializing concept of human nature is ethically suspect, an alibi for people who are "pretty happy" with an unjust status quo. In that case, are the Bronx stereotypes and New York City stereotypes that empower Bronca ethically suspect as well? Although the Woman in White is an extradimensional alien, Bronca identifies her as a "Becky," a quintessential racist white woman—which reminds the reader that the Woman is clearly using human prejudices and racist power structures as weapons in her battle against New York City.

The Woman in White, catching Bronca's meaning, smiles toothily and introduces herself as "White." Bronca is confused. The woman clarifies—she's "*Dr.* White" from "the **BNY Foundation**"—and says that Bronca spoke yesterday with artists she knows. Bronca says the Alt Artistes' paintings broke the Center's anti-prejudice rules, and "art should be more layered" than tired old bigotries.

By noticing Bronca's coded insult and introducing herself as "White," the Woman in White shows that—although an alien—she has learned to understand and manipulate human racial hierarchies for her own purposes. The reader can guess that "BNY Foundation" stands for "Better New York Foundation," the same organization that stole Brooklyn's family's brownstone. Rather than battling the avatars directly, the Woman seems to be using money and institutional power to attack the local phenomena that give them strength—brownstones, a neighborhood art gallery, and so forth. Meanwhile, Bronca's claim that "art should be more layered" than bigotry is suggests that bigoted art is bad not just ethically but aesthetically, because bigotry is simplistic and anti-innovative.

The word "layers" seems to strike the Woman in White. Appearing tired, she says: "So many layers to existence." Then, suggesting they simplify matters, she shows Bronca a check for 23 million dollars and says the donation has conditions. When Bronca asks whether the Woman is joking, the Woman says Bronca should have received a call from a board member about the prospective donation. Bronca remembers Raul's message. When Bronca asks about the conditions, the Woman says the Center must display a few works from the Alt Artistes—non-prejudiced ones—and take down the photos of the unknown artist's (the avatar's) art. Bronca, shocked, asks why. The Woman claims to dislike the avatar's artwork.

The word "layers" may remind the reader of Bronca layering her hands, one over the other, to illustrate parallel dimensions for Veneza. The Woman's exhaustion with existence's "layers" hints that the diversity of realities is a problem for her—but does not reveal why. The Woman's prospective $23 million donation through the Better New York Foundation again shows how powerful outsiders can use money as a weapon to strongarm a community into changing to suit their preferences. That the Woman is targeting the avatar's art, meanwhile, implies that the avatar's art gives the city strength while the Alt Artistes' art would weaken it.

The Woman in White requests that Bronca tell the board that day whether she's accepted the donation and offers her hand. Thoughtlessly, Bronca shakes it—and feels a strange pricking sensation. After showing the Woman out, Bronca examines her hand and sees weird marks. As her post-embodiment knowledge tells her the Enemy has never appeared as a "passive-aggressive white woman," she concludes her suspicions about the Woman are paranoid.

The strange sensation Bronca feels and the marks on her hand imply that the Woman in White tried and failed to infect her with a tendril, much as the Woman earlier tried and failed to infect Aislyn. The revelation that the Enemy has never appeared as the Woman in White before means that the Woman is using unprecedented tactics in the battle against New York—and, thus, that the beliefs and concepts about the Enemy that Paolo could share with the city's avatars are outdated. Paolo may not be able to give the embodied boroughs the information they need, even if he's able to find them.

Raul calls Bronca and tells her the board is abuzz about the donation. Bronca protests that taking the Woman in White's deal would violate the Center's ethics. Raul says the **Better New York Foundation** wants to improve the city's reputation. When Bronca calls that "gentrifier logic. *Settler* logic," Raul implies that if she doesn't cooperate, the board will fire her.

By calling the Better New York Foundation's mission "gentrifier logic" and "settler logic," Bronca is linking the Woman in White's invasion of New York City to the city's real-world gentrification, as well as to the European settlers' theft of the land from indigenous peoples. Raul's response shows how money can coerce locals into cooperating with gentrifiers.

Bronca asks what the Center would signal if it took down the avatar's art for art by "*neo-Nazis*." Raul suggests she watch the Alt Artistes' new videos, check her email, and call back. When Bronca accuses him of choosing racists over her, he tells her he understands—he's Chicano and his parents immigrated illegally—but a lot of board members doesn't care about racism, only their affluent lifestyle.

Bronca's anguished question about what an Alt Artistes' exhibit at the Bronx Art Center would signal implies that the art in a given community represents that community. Thus, if the Center took down the avatar's art for the Alt Artistes', it would be a symbolic gesture aligning the Bronx with racism and against diversity. Raul's response—that some board members only care about their lifestyle, not racism—indicates that for some people, engaging with art has neither ethical nor aesthetic value but is only a way to signal to other people that they have money.

Yijing, Jess, and Veneza are now in the Center. Bronca puts Raul on speakerphone so they can hear the call. Raul tells Bronca that he resisted the board's decision, he doesn't want her to get fired, and he hopes she takes care because the situation has deteriorated quickly. After the call ends, Yijing tells Bronca that since the Alt Artistes posted a new video about the Center, she's been getting online racist messages and rape threats. Jess says harassers have been calling her home phone. Veneza mentions that, since she's not on the Center's website, she's so far been spared.

The online harassment that the Center's employees experience mirrors the real-world online harassment that women and people of color disproportionately experience, especially when they are public figures in creative fields.

Veneza tells the others they've been doxed and shows them a forum on her laptop. Yijing, scanning the dates on the posts, realizes the Alt Artistes planned the hate campaign before they came to the Center. Veneza says this means the steps the women took to protect themselves online came too late. Showing them Bronca's number and address posted on the forum, Veneza offers again to let Bronca stay with her.

Yijing's realization that the Alt Artistes planned online retaliation against the Center before Bronca rejected their work shows that they did not come in good faith. They always intended to turn the rejection of their bad art into a racist and sexist anti-diversity campaign.

Yijing says that the Center needs to start its own online campaign to counter the Alt Artistes. Jess contacts artists associated with the Center who have a substantial online presence, and Veneza asks her "art-school buddies" to contribute. These actions concentrate and amplify support for the Center already occurring online. Meanwhile, Yijing calls reporters and tells them Bronca may lose her job for refusing to remove the avatar's art in favor of bigoted paintings. Eventually, thousands of people are posting on the Center's side of the controversy.

In this passage, the novel demonstrates that online communities are not exclusively bigoted and destructive. Some, like the groups that come together online to support Bronca and the Center, can support diversity and effect positive change.

That evening, Raul calls Bronca again. When the call's over, she tells her coworkers that the Center's board has decided to turn down the **Better New York Foundation**'s donation and keep Bronca as director. While Veneza is overjoyed, Yijing is angry, pointing out that the board was only bowing to internet pressure. Bronca tells her coworkers they should leave and thanks them for keeping her from getting fired. Yijing, awkwardly, offers to let Bronca stay with her. Bronca turns her down but thanks her. When Yijing asks where Bronca is going to stay—given that the Alt Artistes have posted Bronca's address online—Bronca says she'll stay at the Center with the keyholders. Veneza decides to stay too, in solidarity.

While gentrifiers and other invaders like the Better New York Foundation can use money to control and change local communities, communities that come together to resist gentrification, homogenization, and diversity—like the online community that forms to protect Bronca's job—can sometimes succeed. Yijing and Bronca's truce, here, represents people who may dislike each other putting their personal feelings aside for the sake of principle and community—something the boroughs' avatars may need to do in the rest of the novel.

That night, the city wakes Bronca with a mental danger warning from where she was sleeping on the Center's third floor with Veneza and the keyholders. She hears a man laughing and liquid splashing. Running downstairs, Bronca sees the murals along the walls have been somehow "erased." She hears a familiar-sounding woman (the Woman in White) crying, yelling in pain, and pleading with someone. The Woman says she's a "good creation" and concludes, "I am only what you made me." Then she stops speaking.

That the murals on the walls are "erased" on the same night the Woman in White invades the Center suggests the Woman is responsible for the erasure—which suggests, in turn, that the Woman is hostile to art, presumably because it's essential to the city and gives the city power. The Woman's tears and pained noises hint that someone—the entities that "made" her, whose "creation" she is—are torturing her. This torture makes the Woman, like Bronca and Aislyn, a victim of abuse—another unexpected similarity between the Woman and the avatars she's attacking.

Bronca enters the Center's ground level and sees that intruders have taken down the avatar's art and poured lighter fluid on it. Someone has scribbled over the face in his self-portrait. When Bronca says, "you *motherfuckers*," she hears a voice—which she now recognizes as the voice of the woman (the Woman in White) she heard on the stairs and, previously, in the bathroom stall—comment that many fewer people have sex with their mothers than she expected relative to the frequency with which they use that swear word.

That someone would take the trouble to deface the avatar's art ironically highlights the power and value of his art to the city. The Woman in White's throwaway comment that she's surprised more humans don't have sex with their mothers given how often they call each other "motherfuckers," meanwhile, shows that despite her intuitive understanding of some human concepts (like racial privilege), the Woman is still an alien and an outsider who has trouble with other human concepts.

Bronca hears breaking. Part of the wall begins to "peel back [...] like something *computerized*," to reveal a white room that looks very far away. She recognizes it as similar to the white space she saw in the bathroom stall earlier. Something shoots out of the white room to the Center's floor and transforms into the Woman in White. Although she doesn't look like the Dr. White Bronca met—who, according to the Better New York Foundation's website, is named Dr. Akhelios—Bronca intuits this is somehow a truer appearance.

Previously, the novel has compared the Woman in White and her various manifestations to natural phenomena: tentacles, plants, pigeon feathers, predators, infections, and so on. Now, however, the novel compares the Woman's manipulations of our reality to something "computerized"—which reminds readers that in addition to being part of nature, the Woman may come from a highly technologically developed society of intelligent aliens.

Three Alt Artistes, including Manbun, appear and block the exit. Defiantly, remembering the begging she heard, Bronca asks the Woman in White whether she's in trouble. The Woman replies: "We all have a board, of sorts, to answer to." Bronca, unexpectedly empathizing, says she prefers her own board.

The Woman in White's admission that she "answer[s] to" someone or something else reveals that she did not decide to attack New York City or the other living cities on her own. She is the creation and tool of another entity or entities. Bronca's empathy with the Woman suggests a similarity between the two characters: both have been abused, and both are subordinate to those who may not deserve their authority.

The Woman in White says it's good to meet the Bronx face-to-face. When Bronca insists on her own name, the Woman says that names are "meaningless" but that she understands why Bronca cares about hers, given how hard humans, especially humans like Bronca, have to fight not to be "consumed into the mass." Then she laments "what must be done."

The Woman in White's claim that people's names are "meaningless" suggests that Manny was right when he speculated she has a different concept of singular and plural identity (of "I" and "we") than humans do. Yet her appreciation of Bronca's fight not to be "consumed into the mass" surprisingly implies that the Woman—who has used gentrification and homogenization as a tool to weaken New York—respects Bronca's struggle as a racial and sexual minority who doesn't want to assimilate. When the Woman expresses regret over "what must be done," the reader may infer that on some level, the Woman doesn't want to destroy New York City—but for some reason believes she has to.

The Woman in White gestures, and murals appear on the walls. Bronca sees painted entities, including one "more radial than symmetrical," and looks away. The Woman again offers to protect Bronca and her loved ones, guaranteeing that they'll be "the last to be enfolded," if Bronca finds "him"—and the Woman gestures to the avatar's self-portrait.

Whereas human bodies demonstrate bilateral symmetry—we have "symmetrical" left and right halves—other organisms, like jellyfish and flowers, are "radial," or arranged in a circle. When Bronca sees a "radial" painted entity, she may be seeing aliens from the Woman in White's dimension, as the Woman and her tendrils have also been compared to sea creatures and plants. Bronca looks away from the murals because the Woman has previously used art to attack her. It's not clear what it means "to be enfolded," but from the context, it seems likely to be fatal.

Bronca, recalling how she found the self-portrait in a South Bronx brickyard, realizes that "*the city painted it*" for the avatar and that, given that the avatar is hidden, asleep, underground, something has gone wrong with the city's birth. That's why the Woman in White was able to attack. Abruptly, Bronca realizes that because New York City "is too much for one person to embody," the avatar expended too much energy trying to do so while fighting the Woman in White and now needs the boroughs to wake him.

Bronca's realization that the city created the avatar's self-portrait reveals that not only does the city derive power from art, it's a kind of artist itself. Her realization that New York City "is too much for one person to embody," meanwhile, shows that some communities or concepts are too diverse for a single person to represent them adequately.

Bronca's sure that the Woman in White's portal can destroy her and that to survive she'll have to cooperate. Yet she knows she's a fighter—"This isn't the first time Bronca has been surrounded on all sides by those who would invade her, shrink her borders, infect her most quintessential self"—so she refuses.

Bronca's figurative language, claiming that the Woman in White is trying to both "invade" and "infect" her, implicitly compares the Woman both to European colonizers who stole land from indigenous peoples and to a disease. The comparison leaves ambiguous whether the Woman, like European settlers, has free will and could have chosen not to invade—or whether, like a disease, she is acting according to her nature.

The Woman in White says she's sorry and makes a gesture. Bronca hears a bestial "hunting cry" behind her. Infuriated that the Woman, though not really a white woman or indeed human, has used white privilege to manipulate and threaten her, Bronca declares that she may not know who the Woman is, but she does know "how this works." Bronca enters another reality where she is, physically, the Bronx. Kicking the ground with her steel-toed boot, she releases a "wave of energy." The walls clear of strange entities, and the Alt Artistes fall unconscious as the **tendrils** controlling them are destroyed.

The Woman in White's gesture, followed by a "hunting cry," suggests that the Woman has summoned the extradimensional alien equivalent of an attack dog. Bronca's fury at the Woman for manipulating human bias and bigotry underscore how unethical the Woman's tactics are. The "wave of energy" that Bronca releases—similar to the waves Manny released on FDR, Padmini in Jackson Heights, and Brooklyn in Bedford Stuyvesant—obliterates the tendrils. As the tendrils represent gentrification and homogenization, the energy-waves that destroy them must represent concepts essential to authentic New York—like Bronca's steel-toed boots, symbols of her Bronx toughness and her brave fight against abusers.

The energy wave doesn't harm the Woman in White, who tells Bronca she wishes they could have teamed up: they're both survivors who work alone, live " in the shadow of their supposed betters," and want to act morally. When Bronca replies she's not "a settler from another damn dimension," the Woman snaps that Bronca puts uncountable dimensions and their inhabitants in danger. Yet the Woman claims not to blame Bronca, since everyone acts according to necessity. The murals vanish, and the hunting cry behind Bronca subsides. The Woman says Bronca won't have to deal with her "minions" anymore—before the final battle, anyway. Then she disappears.

The Woman in White has already compared the entities that created her and were recently torturing her to Bronca's board. When she talks about herself and Bronca living "in the shadow of their supposed betters," it seems she is extending the comparison—and betraying resentment toward the creatures that created her, harmed her, and sent her to do their dirty work. When Bronca calls the Woman a "settler"—once again implicitly comparing the Woman's invasion to European colonization of the Americas—the Woman contests the description, saying that Bronca is the one threatening others' dimensions. Although the Woman does not explain how Bronca and the other avatars pose a danger, she has repeatedly suggested that they do—which may make the reader wonder whether the embodied boroughs have chosen the right conceptual frame when they think of the Woman as an unprovoked "settler" or "invader." The Woman's claim that everyone acts according to necessity, meanwhile, suggests that the Woman doesn't believe in free will—which may be how she justifies her own unethical tactics to herself.

Bronca sees Veneza behind the collapsed Alt Artistes and realizes she must have seen Bronca fighting the Woman in White. Veneza explains that she spotted the Alt Artistes, came to check on Bronca, and witnessed—at this point she stops speaking and looks fearfully at the wall where the hunting cry came from. She asks whether "that White bitch" is Bronca's real enemy and the Alt Artistes only her stooges. Bronca asks Veneza not to call women "'bitch,'" to which Veneza replies that she's talking about a "nonhuman nonwoman." Overwhelmed, Bronca and Veneza hug.

When Bronca tells Veneza not to call women "bitch"—somewhat hypocritically, since Bronca called Yijing "bitch" earlier in the novel—Veneza retorts that the Woman in White is a "nonhuman nonwoman." Though clearly a joke, this retort also reveals that the embodied avatars and their allies currently lack the conceptual categories to understand what sort of entity the Woman in White actually is.

Keyholders come downstairs to check on Bronca and Veneza. Bronca tells them to call the **police** and says she'll retrieve the Center's security footage. Veneza insists on making a copy, since otherwise the police will conveniently lose the footage. When the police arrive, one Alt Artiste has come to consciousness and keeps asking what happened. Bronca doesn't empathize: she knows the Woman in White only manipulates those with "something sympathetic" in them. Because the Alt Artistes are white, from privileged backgrounds, the police try to convince Bronca not to press charges, but she and Veneza show them the evidence of the Alt Artistes' crimes. Eventually the police take the men away.

Veneza's distrust of the police reminds the reader that throughout the novel, the police have served the Woman in White, engaged in racial profiling, and abused their power—though they pose as defenders of New York City, they aren't. Continuing that trend, the police who respond to Bronca's call try to protect the Alt Artistes due to the Artistes' whiteness. The revelation that the Woman can only infect those in some way "sympathetic" to her cause or methods is surprising, given how many New Yorkers (including a dog) she's managed to infect so far. The Woman's ability to infect so many suggests that bigotry and a desire for homogeneity are widespread, even in diverse communities.

Bronca asks the keyholders to return the avatar's art to the walls. People, hearing about the attack on the Center online, come to help clean up—which makes Bronca hide in her office and cry. She hears a knock on her door. When it opens, she sees—and recognizes as fellow boroughs—Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini. In a hostile manner, she asks them what they want.

The help the Center receives after the Alt Artistes' attack illustrates the power of community spirit. Yet while Bronca appreciates community spirit (it makes her cry), her hostility upon meeting Manny, Brooklyn, and Padmini suggests she's not yet willing to form a community with them.

CHAPTER 10: MAKE STATEN ISLAND GRATE AGAIN(ST SÃO PAOLO)

Watching the city from her house's roof at night, Aislyn is startled when her mother (Kendra Houlihan) joins her. Kendra sits—and asks Aislyn whether she reached the city the day before. Aislyn reflects that she doesn't get Kendra, whom she used to think "dull" but then realized only acted dull to make men "feel sharper"—something that Aislyn has also started doing. She asked Kendra how she guessed Aislyn was traveling to the city. Kendra replies that Aislyn takes the car, not the bus, when she shops—but "NYPD photographs license plates at the ferry station."

Kendra acts "dull" to make men "feel sharper," a detail revealing that she deals with abusive or unfair power dynamics (like the power dynamics sexism creates) by accommodating them, rather than fighting against them. Since Aislyn has begun to act the same way, it seems she has learned her accommodationist tactics from her mother. Kendra's tacit understanding that Aislyn wouldn't take her car to the ferry station because Matthew Houlihan might notice her license plate among NYPD photographs shows that Kendra, as well as Aislyn, knows Matthew uses his status as a policeman to surveil and control his daughter.

Aislyn reflects that Matthew almost caught her despite her precautions. She's wondering how she can admit that she wanted to visit the city, which her parents hate, when Kendra says she wishes Aislyn had gone. She tells Aislyn that as a young woman, she was a concert pianist with a Julliard scholarship, but when Julliard accepted her she was already pregnant and married Matthew soon after.

Julliard is a highly prestigious performing arts school in Manhattan. Kendra's former desire to go to Julliard hints that she doesn't hate the rest of New York City the way Aislyn thought she did. Kendra gave up her musical career for her family, somewhat like Padmini studies finance rather than math to fulfill her family's goals—yet another example of an individual person's needs and desires conflicting with the needs, desires, or value of their community.

Aislyn has heard about Kendra's miscarriage; Matthew believed the baby was a son and called him Conall. Aislyn asks why Kendra couldn't have attended Julliard anyway. Kendra admits she aborted her pregnancy to do so—but Matthew's "heartbroken" reaction to losing the pregnancy convinced her she should sacrifice her dream. When Aislyn asks whether she ever told Matthew about the abortion, Kendra asks why she would—which suggests to Aislyn that Kendra believes her "son-hungry" husband would have responded badly.

Matthew didn't know the baby's sex for certain but nevertheless believed it was a son and called it Conall. This fact, together with the description of Matthew as "son-hungry," suggest that he's a misogynist who values male children more than female children. This passage seems to be implying Kendra is too afraid of Matthew ever to tell him she had an abortion, which strengthens the reader's sense of him as an emotionally abusive and maybe violent man. That Kendra felt she had to give up art for Matthew—when good art, in the novel, is a source of joy and power—further underscores Matthew's negative characterization.

Kendra tells Aislyn that, given her own sacrifices, she wanted her daughter to leave Staten Island. She admits she ordered Aislyn New York City college brochures for that reason. Aislyn recalls that her father Matthew believed she, Aislyn, had ordered them and yelled at her, suggesting that the city was dangerous and "it was her choice of course but he expected her to make good choices." Aislyn imagines Kendra as she would have looked in another reality where she became a pianist—elegant, younger-looking, and not as sad. Kendra tells Aislyn: "if the city calls you, Lyn, listen to it. And go." Then she exits the roof.

Matthew's fury that Aislyn would consider leaving Staten Island and his refusal to accept her choices unless he deems them "good" once again show his controlling nature. Aislyn imagining Kendra as a pianist reminds the reader that, given the infinite parallel dimensions that exist in the novel, Kendra probably did *become a pianist in a neighboring reality—and that, given the value the novel accords to art, that reality is probably better for Kendra than this one. When Kendra urges Aislyn to leave Staten Island for the rest of New York City, it reminds the reader that a person need not remain stuck in their home community if their community isn't good for them.*

When Aislyn reenters the house, she finds Matthew laughing in the dining room with a tattooed man who looks to Aislyn like "antifa" or a "commie" and whom Matthew introduces to Aislyn—he calls her "Apple"—as Conall McGuinness. Aislyn, startled by the name, asks her father whether he knows Conall from work. When her father says no, Aislyn senses he's lying, though Conall doesn't seem like a **police** officer to her. Conall says he and Matthew are working on a "hobby," and both men laugh again.

"Antifa" is an abbreviation of "anti-fascist" and "commie" an abbreviation of "communist." As Matthew is conservative, he presumably wouldn't be friends with a man who is either—so Conall's "antifa" or "commie" appearance likely signifies that some young right-wing men have appropriated countercultural fashions associated with the left. Since throughout the novel, various police officers have abused their power, Aislyn's intuition that Conall is somehow associated with Matthew's work immediately make him a suspect figure. That he shares the name Matthew wanted to give to Kendra's first pregnancy, meanwhile, suggests that Matthew may be using Conall as a substitute son.

Conall asks about the nickname "Apple." Matthew says he calls Aislyn his "little apple, here in the Big Apple," and claims she adores the nickname. Aislyn reflects that she hates it. Matthew yells for Kendra and orders her to ready a room for Conall, who will be staying with the family. Aislyn exchanges glances with Kendra—neither of them is sure what's going on—and spots a **tendril** on Conall's neck. When he notices her staring, she retreats to her room.

Though Matthew has used abusive tactics to keep Aislyn away from the rest of New York, his nickname for her—"Apple" in the Big Apple—ironically highlights her connection to the city. Matthew doesn't know (or care) that his daughter hates the nickname he gave her and yells at his wife, more details revealing his callous, sexist personality. Given that the reader has just learned that only those sympathetic to the Woman in White can receive her infection, Conall's tendril-infection hints that he likely espouses a gentrifier's or bigot's ideology.

Aislyn can't sleep. At 3 a.m. she goes to the backyard to sit by the pool (where she never swims—she's afraid, despite the fence, that someone will see her in a swimsuit). Conall's asleep on a pool chair, wearing only pajama pants. As he wakes, she sees on his torso an "Irish trinity knot," figures she thinks are Norse gods, and a swastika. Seeing her note the swastika, he says she must be a real Irish girl, since she hasn't run. When Aislyn asks what Ireland has to do with swastikas, Conall tells her "there aren't enough girls like you out there making the right choices."

Conall has a swastika tattoo, indicating that he's a white supremacist neo-Nazi. Though the "trinity knot" has a pre-Christian history, in Irish Catholic culture it represents the Holy Trinity: the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit of Christianity. The Norse gods, meanwhile, are pagan figures associated with Scandinavia. The clashing religious and cultural signifiers among Conall's tattoos highlight that white supremacy is not only evil but conceptually confused, trying to make various, conflicting religious and cultural traditions represent an imaginary "whiteness" and "white culture." Aislyn's question about what Ireland has to do with swastikas underlines the conceptual confusion visible in Conall's tattoos. At the same time, her lack of outright horror at the swastika reminds the reader of Aislyn's own racism and her tendency to accept it passively when Matthew or the Woman in White uses bigoted language. When Conall replies by describing Aislyn as a girl "making the right choices," it echoes Matthew's earlier demand that Aislyn make "good choices"—and suggests that Conall endorses abusive, hierarchical gender roles as well as white supremacy.

Aislyn spots bottles around Conall's chair. She's wondering whether the Woman in White can perceive her through Conall's **tendril** when he asks her whether she's ever had sex with a Black man. The question shocks Aislyn. Conall laughs at her and tells her that since Matthew wants to set them up, he wants to know what he's getting: "I mean, you're a pretty girl, but you're from Staten Island." As he talks, he ogles her. Aislyn becomes ashamed of her modest pajamas, thinking that he's speaking to her in this way "because she's dressed like a whore."

The Woman in White told Aislyn the tendrils were like microphones and Aislyn could use them to contact her, so Aislyn understandably wonders whether the Woman is spying on her right then. When Conall points out that Aislyn's from Staten Island as if it's a mark against her, he seems to be deploying some negative sexual stereotype about women from Staten Island. When Aislyn blames her pajamas for Conall's sexual harassment and thinks of herself as a "whore," meanwhile, her reaction reveals how her misogynistic family environment has conditioned her to accept sexist harassment and abuse.

Conall tells Aislyn that he's joking and that she isn't his "type." Aislyn, angry that a man taking advantage of her family's hospitality would behave like this toward her "in her own home," agrees she really isn't his type, shows him her back, and stays there, so he doesn't think she's running away.

Aislyn does get angry with Conall and attempt to stand up to him a little—not merely because he's sexually harassing her, but because he's violated the concept of hospitality and the sanctity of the "home." Aislyn only allows herself to stand up for conservative concepts like hospitality and home, not more progressive ones like gender equity.

Aislyn hears Conall move and turns, frightened. Seeing he has an erection, she begins to flee. He grabs her and tells her that if she can't find a husband, she'll die living with her parents. Seeing from her expression that she believes him, Conall says he knows she's a virgin who wants to leave "this shitty island." Aislyn tells him to let her go. Trembling, she realizes she's doing so out of rage—because he insulted Staten Island. Conall tells Aislyn to perform oral sex on him, then offers to have vaginal sex with her, and then, laughing, says "anal's good, too. Doesn't hurt at all."

Conall's erection and his refusal to let Aislyn leave suggest an intent to sexually assault her. His sneering, ironic claim that anal sex won't "hurt at all" indicates that he doesn't care whether he physically harms Aislyn. Once again, Aislyn fails to get angry at the threat or insult to herself—instead, she's angry at the insult to her community, to Staten Island.

Aislyn is disturbed by the thought that Matthew is friends with Conall because Conall is "also a beer-swilling, controlling boor" who wants to buy up her "emotional real estate" and "double the rent on anything he doesn't want her to feel." She reflects that while Conall has correctly diagnosed this dynamic, he's mistaken about Aislyn, who embodies a whole borough. Aislyn demands again that Conall let go, yanks free of him, and emits an energy wave, throwing Conall through the fence. Looking at the backyard security cameras, she murmurs Matthew's mantra about people in Staten Island at least trying to be decent. She uses her power to affect the cameras, tells Conall she was never there, and walks through the hole his body made in the fence.

Though Aislyn accommodates Matthew, she knows he is "controlling" and abusive. Interestingly, she compares Matthew's emotional abuse of her to aggressive real estate purchases and rent gouging—as if Matthew is "gentrifying" Aislyn the way the Better New York Foundation is gentrifying the city. Whereas previously the other embodied boroughs have emitted energy waves to destroy the Woman in White's tendrils, which represent gentrification, here Aislyn uses an energy wave to defend herself against a sexual predator who reminds her of her father. This incident suggests a parallel between the Woman's invasion of New York City and male sexual violence against women. It may also prompt the reader to wonder why Aislyn won't stand up to Matthew, when she's willing to throw a man who reminds her of Matthew through a fence.

As Aislyn walks away, she feels Staten Island making sure no one notices her. Behind her, Matthew, with a shotgun, goes to investigate his back yard. She reflects that in Staten Island, people ignore "the indecencies, the domestic violence, the drug use" and use their denial to feel superior to the city. She won't tell Matthew that Conall tried to rape her, since Matthew has mocked rape victims before—hence her decision to alter the cameras so the figure struggling with Conall won't be recognizable. She reflects she's jealous of Matthew's ability to fool himself that "evil comes from elsewhere" and resides in "other people."

Aislyn's thoughts suggest that Staten Islanders use the stereotype of decency to ignore actual "indecencies," including abuse such as domestic violence. Clearly, Aislyn finds herself in one such indecent situation—her abusive father is a police officer who mocks rape victims and might not believe his own daughter if she told him about her assault. This passage suggests that denial about the facts of one's situation is characteristic of Staten Island—which may explain why Aislyn, the quintessential Staten Islander, seems to move in and out of denial about her father's emotional abusiveness and the Woman in White's manipulations. Yet at the same time, when Aislyn muses that her father is deceiving himself that "evil comes from elsewhere" and resides only in "other people," it may make the reader wonder: isn't the Woman in White an "evil from elsewhere"? Is this scene then hinting that the Woman in White may have understandable reasons for her behavior? And if evil resides not only in other people, what evils have the novel's protagonists committed? The reader knows that Aislyn is racist and Manny has a violent past, but what about Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini?

Aislyn, "bitter about all the forces that have conspired to make her what she is," is trying not to cry when a car stops near her. A non-white man with a cigarette in his mouth (São Paolo) rolls down the car window and calls her Staten Island. Suddenly, Aislyn perceives Paolo as a city. When he tells her to get in the car, she moves to obey—and **tendrils** jump from the ground to block her path and attack the car.

In preceding scenes, Aislyn has defended herself against attack and reflected actively on the negative aspects of her life and community. Yet she still thinks of herself as a passive object of "forces that have conspired to make her what she is" rather than an agent in her own right. Still, she seems willing to make a change. Although previously Aislyn has reacted with racist fear to non-white men, in this scene she's willing to get in a strange non-white man's car because she knows he's like her—a city. Only the Woman in White's tendrils prevent her.

The Woman in White grabs Aislyn, tells her Paolo almost "got" her, and asks whether she's okay. As an energy wave from the car destroys most of the **tendrils**, Aislyn demands the Woman let go of her and realizes the Woman is in a different body. Remembering Conall's tendril, Aislyn concludes that the Woman witnessed his assault on her and didn't intervene. She angrily points out that the Woman promised to help her. When the Woman says she's trying to protect Aislyn from Paolo, Aislyn says that one of the Woman's people assaulted her in her "own home"—the location makes her especially angry.

Previously, the reader has seen how Matthew controls Aislyn by teaching her racist fears and then using those fears to keep her living at home under his supposed protection. Now the Woman in White is using a similar strategy: she says Paolo almost "got" Aislyn and casts herself as Aislyn's defender. At this point, Aislyn isn't falling for it: she knows the tendril-infected white supremacist Conall is the one who attacked her, not Paolo. Yet Aislyn is still clinging to her old habits of thinking: she's especially angry that Conall attacked her in her "own home," as if the violation of her father's hospitality is the real problem.

Paolo exits the car, still holding a cigarette in his mouth, with a business card in hand. Aislyn, realizing he's not a New Yorker, suddenly perceives him as "bigger and stronger and a man and *foreign*."

Paolo's cigarette and business card—objects associated with his city—remind the reader that stereotypes have power in the novel. When Aislyn realizes that Paolo is "foreign," it triggers her xenophobia, foreshadowing that she may not see Paolo as an ally anymore. Her fearful reaction to Paolo being "bigger and stronger and a man" makes some sense, given that a man (Conall) just sexually assaulted her—but it also seems like Aislyn is once again directing her fear and anger at the wrong target.

Paolo tells the Woman in White that they've had an "understanding" with her for millennia—that the Woman would stop trying to kill a city after the city was successfully born. The Woman denies any understanding, because his "kind *don't understand anything*." Paolo asks her to explain, speculating that if she's "a person" capable of speech then maybe they don't have to kill each other. The Woman, disgusted, asks: "Did you really need to hear me speak to know that I was a person, São Paolo? Do people have to *protest* their own assault before you'll stop?"

Paolo thinks that the living cities have had a long-term "understanding" with the Woman and White, but up until recently he and the other cities didn't even know she could speak. The cities' ignorance suggests their concept of the Woman is inaccurate—though the Woman's claim that Paolo's "kind don't understand anything" also seems like an unfair stereotype. The Woman's disgust that the cities couldn't see her as a person and her reference to people "protest[ing] their own assault" implies that the cities have somehow assaulted, abused, or otherwise harmed the Woman's species—that her attacks on cities are some kind of retaliation. Yet the Woman doesn't explain exactly what she means, which leaves the reader's understanding of the conflict between the cities and the Woman murky.

Aislyn sees "confusion" but also "guilt" on Paolo's face. She concludes "this brown foreign man" has wronged the Woman in White or another woman because he felt "entitled." Aislyn, feeling hatred toward men who act that way, demands to know what Paolo wants. When he looks surprised, Aislyn speculates he didn't expect self-assertion from her and thinks: "Maybe he's a Muslim, or some other kind of woman-hating heathen barbarian."

In this passage, Aislyn seems to be xenophobically redirecting her righteous anger at Conall's assault on her toward Paolo, whom she thinks of as a "brown foreign man" and a possible "woman-hating heathen barbarian." This redirection shows how Aislyn's xenophobia and bigotry prevent her from getting or staying righteously angry at the (white or white-appearing) people who have actually manipulated, controlled, and abused her: her father Matthew, Conall, and the Woman in White.

Paolo says he was looking for her and "the others" so that they would help the city. Aislyn tells him to leave. When Paolo gives the Woman in White a suspicious look, Aislyn concludes he thinks the Woman must be manipulating Aislyn. Infuriated, Aislyn tells him he doesn't "belong" and attacks him like she did Conall. The energy wave turns the Woman into a regular red-haired woman, who leaves in a trance-like state—and both breaks Paolo's arms and causes an earthquake in São Paolo. Paolo, on reflex, strikes back and hurts Staten Island—but she is less damaged than he is. Aislyn demands, one last time, that Paolo leave her alone, and she begins walking home.

Paolo is correct to suspect that the Woman in White is manipulating Aislyn. Due to both her history of sexist abuse and her negative stereotypes about non-white men, however, Aislyn can only interpret Paolo's suspicions as sexist condescension. She once again reveals her xenophobia when she attacks him with energy derived from a concept of "belong[ing]," a concept that requires excluding those who don't "belong"(in this case, Paolo).

At Aislyn's house, Matthew and Conall are talking to the **police** outside. No one notices Aislyn return to her bedroom. Through her window, she hears Conall claiming a Black man attacked him. She wishes her father would realize Conall is a terrible person, but she's sure she won't get that kind of justice: "the only true justice is having the strength to protect oneself against invasion and conquest." Reflecting that Staten Island, not the whole city, saved her that night, Aislyn decides to ignore her mother Kendra's advice and Paolo's entreaties and stay in her own borough.

Conall, telling the police a Black man attacked him, is relying on racist stereotypes about Black male criminality to hide the fact that he himself was trying to commit a crime, sexual assault. Aislyn's lack of faith that her father or the other police officers will see through Conall's racist lie ironically aligns her with the other, less conservative, non-white boroughs, who also distrust the police. Aislyn's claim that the "the only true justice is having the strength to protect oneself against invasion and conquest" is interesting. The reader is inclined to distrust Aislyn at this moment, since she's just made the mistake of trusting the Woman in White again and attacking Paolo—yet the embodied boroughs' whole goal in the novel does seem to be combating the Woman's "invasion and conquest" of New York City. If the embodied boroughs are not in fact pursuing "true justice" in their fight against the Woman in White, why not?

As Aislyn sleeps, **police** and city staff investigate gouges like giant claw marks breaking Staten Island's subway tracks. While the city is repairing the damage—repairs that will take days—poor people on Staten Island will have trouble getting to work and taking care of family elsewhere.

Aislyn, Staten Island's avatar, has just decided to isolate herself from the rest of the city. This short passage illustrates how literal, physical isolation—the breaking of the subway tracks that connect Staten Island to the rest of the city—is bad for Staten Islanders. It thus suggests that isolation is also likely to be bad for Aislyn.

CHAPTER 11: YEAH, SO, ABOUT THAT WHOLE TEAMWORK THING

Bronca dislikes the other embodied boroughs. She remembers Brooklyn as MC Free, whose lyrics included "homophobic bullshit," and notes that Brooklyn won't sit down in Bronca's unkempt office. Initially, she thinks Manny is Lenape, but once she realizes he makes "every ethnic group" believe something similar, she compares him to a deceitful Dutch colonizer stealing Canarsee land. Bronca is suspicious of Padmini's "innocence," meanwhile, because it doesn't fit with her idea of Queens. She acknowledges to herself—and embraces—that disliking the other boroughs is Bronx-like.

This passage illustrates that embodying the concepts of their respective boroughs won't necessarily help the protagonists get along. Bronca's dislike and suspicion of the others is quintessentially the Bronx, after all. The passage also reveals possible negative interpretations of Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini that the reader hasn't heard before. Brooklyn's old music, which Manny and Bel loved, actually included "homophobic bullshit." Manny's racial ambiguity—which tends to make people think he's whatever race they are, and which Padmini interpreted as representative of Manhattan's complex past with race and immigration—may actually be a tool Manny uses to get people to trust him so he can take advantage of them, like Dutch colonizers took advantage of the Canarsee, the Lenape from whom the Dutch "bought" Manhattan. Padmini, meanwhile, seems gormless.

Bronca says that since she defeated the Woman in White herself, she doesn't need them. When Manny asks why she wouldn't help them protect the city, she replies that she fights alone or with loyal allies. She asks whether he would "walk through fire" for her. Brooklyn interjects that the "fire" has already arrived, and Bronca snaps that Brooklyn wouldn't urinate on her to douse that fire. Padmini, bewildered, asks whether the others have already met, since there seems to be "bad blood" between them. Brooklyn says that's the Bronx—always blaming the other boroughs for its inability to use its resources well. Bronca tells Brooklyn to get out of her office. When Manny tries convincing Bronca to change her mind, she yells at them all to leave—and they do.

Bronca's concept of community requires loyalty. Although Bronca hasn't met the other embodied boroughs before, she reacts to them as if they've already been disloyal—which suggests that her feelings and stereotypes about Manhattan, Brooklyn (the borough), and Queens are driving her reactions to Manny, Brooklyn (the woman), and Padmini. Brooklyn stereotypes Bronca in turn when she claims that Bronca is acting exactly how the Bronx always does—blaming the other boroughs for its problems.

Veneza comes into the office and looks at Bronca, who admits she feels too old and frightened to do this. Veneza asks whether she should tell Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini to come back later. Bronca tells Veneza to ask them for an hour. Rather than leave right away, Veneza says Bronca taught her to love New York City. When Bronca claims to hate the city, Veneza points out that New Yorkers always complain about the city but never want to leave. Then, every so often, they have quintessential New York experiences, and it *"glows"* from them. Bronca thinks Veneza would have made a wonderful daughter—and is a wonderful friend. Believing Veneza's love for the city is motive enough to save it, Bronca reiterates that she needs an hour. Then she'll work with the others. Veneza leaves to tell Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini.

Alone with her friend Veneza, Bronca can be vulnerable enough to admit that she's hostile to the other boroughs in part because she's scared of the battle she must fight. Veneza, in turn, offers Bronca a reason to fight: a reminder that she, the others, and all their fellow New Yorkers love the city, whose essence "glows" from them when they experience it. The understanding and support that Veneza offers Bronca illustrates the value of friendship and community at a time when Bronca's community is asking a great deal of her.

Talking to Brooklyn, Manny, and Padmini, Bronca realizes how little they know relative to her—the one "given to know the history"—and becomes less angry about their confusion and tardy arrival. She and Veneza take them to the staff break room. There, Bronca tells them they need to find Staten Island and New York City's avatar. Brooklyn, glancing at Manny, repeats that the sixth avatar is real. When Bronca asks whether they really didn't know, Manny replies that they only knew about him through the Woman in White and a vision they had.

When Bronca sits down and has a conversation with the other embodied boroughs, she realizes she was judging them too harshly—a reminder that applying stereotypes to people is a poor replacement for interacting with them if one actually wants to understand them. Her realization that she has a particular skill they need—she's "given to know the history"—illustrates the different strengths a diverse group of people can bring to a community.

When Manny asks how Bronca has this knowledge, she explains it's supposed to come to the city's avatar at its birth—but, since New York has six avatars, the knowledge only came to Bronca. She explains that each borough will have "unique skills" based on the "different strengths" it brings to the city—the Bronx, the "ancestral land" of the Lenape and thus the most historical borough, got the skill of historical knowledge.

This passage makes explicit that each borough's avatar is bringing "unique skills" to the group, which are derived from the essence or stereotype of their borough—a fact that emphasizes how diverse individual members can strengthen a community.

Manny tells Bronca that the self-portrait downstairs exactly represents the vision he had of New York City's avatar. When Bronca asks whether he knows where the avatar is, Manny says no—if he did, he would be with him: "I am *supposed to* protect him." Brooklyn suggests that protecting the avatar may be Manny's special purpose. Bronca tells the others they may need Staten Island to find the avatar, but regardless, they'll need to enter "cityspace." Padmini asks whether, when she sees herself and the embodied boroughs as cities, they're really traveling to another reality. Bronca tells her that she's seeing both a "representation of this world" and a "world in itself."

That Manny's unique skill or special purpose is to protect New York City's avatar again implies that Manhattan (the borough) is more closely tied to the city's essence or stereotype than the other boroughs are. The description of "cityspace" as a "representation of this world" and a "world in itself" reminds the reader that in this novel, multiple parallel realities exist—and also implies that art is so important because it can represent and thus create new worlds.

Bronca explains to the others that humans' beliefs, imaginations, hopes, and lies all create new realities. Then she tells the others that city births "smash[] through" layers of reality, because cities are places where "reality and legends" intersect.

This passage again suggests that, in the novel's world, art literally creates new realities through the power of the artists' imagination—which explains why art is so important to New York City and to several of the avatars: by adding "legends" to "reality," art and storytelling help create the conditions for the city's birth.

Manny tells Bronca that when he first came to New York, he saw damage, and when he became Manhattan, he lost his memory. All the boroughs experienced something similar at the city's birth, during the battle. Manny speculates the battle caused his memory loss and suggests if he hadn't killed the **tendrils** on FDR Drive, they would have killed him. Given that damage to the city hurts the avatars, Manny wants to know whether the city in turn dies if its avatars die. Bronca replies: "More like explodes."

Throughout the story, the tendrils have been associated with gentrification, homogenization, and racial bigotry. Until the point, the novel has not made clear what happens if the tendrils "win"—if they succeed in gentrifying, homogenizing, and destroying the city's diverse community. Now the reader learns that the tendrils' success means mass destruction.

Bronca explains that anytime and anywhere there's a city, if its occupants "tell enough stories about it" and "develop a unique enough culture," it begins to gestate. Close to the moment of its birth, it picks an avatar who helps it through the birthing process. If the birth succeeds, the city is protected from the Enemy. But if the Enemy sabotages the birth before it's complete, for example by killing the avatar, the city dies. Bronca names Pompeii, Tenochtitlán, and Atlantis as examples of dead cities—Atlantis having died so horribly that humanity "shifted into branches of reality in which Atlantis never existed at all."

Bronca's explanation suggests that what, in the novel's view, makes cities great is mythmaking (inhabitants who "tell enough stories about" the city) and "a unique enough culture"—or, in other words, a culture that adds to the diversity among cities. Thus imagination and diversity are the two great urban values in the novel. Pompeii was an ancient Roman city destroyed by a volcanic eruption in 79 C..E; Tenochtitlán was an Aztec city destroyed by Spanish invaders circa 1521 C.E. Atlantis is a mythological lost city; cleverly, the novel uses the science-fiction conceit of parallel dimensions to explain the origins of the Atlantis myth.

When the others react with horror, Bronca reassures them that New York City's avatar succeeded in protecting New York during its birth—but, while the avatar succeeded, he used too much strength to do so and fell into a quasi-coma. The embodied boroughs must find him so that he can protect the city. Bronca concludes, "We're not supposed to do this alone."

Bronca's concluding statement, "We're not supposed to do this alone," emphasizes the importance of teamwork and community in a novel about urban communities.

Brooklyn restates Bronca's claim that a city's birth smashes through realities and asks what happens to those realities. Bronca explains that a city's gestation and birth annihilate "hundreds or thousands of closely related" realities and all their inhabitants.

The shocking revelation that city's births destroy parallel dimensions explains why the Woman in White keeps calling the city's avatars dangerous. Given the mass death living cities cause, the Woman in White's hatred of cities and desire to destroy them suddenly becomes understandable. Interestingly, Bronca earlier told Veneza that she didn't know why the Woman in White hated their reality, even though Bronca already knew that living cities destroy neighboring realities. Either Bronca was lying to Veneza or she doesn't understand the Woman's motivations.

Padmini is horrified. Manny asks whether she would rather everyone she knew in their own reality died instead. After a long pause, Padmini shakes her head. Bronca reflects that although Padmini seems young, she embodies Queens, which contains refugees and exploited workers. She understands "brutal choices and unavoidable sacrifice." Padmini tells Manny that no, she wouldn't rather everyone she knew died instead, but the situation still makes her angry.

This passage suggests that, once a city begins to be born, "sacrifice" really is "unavoidable": either the city's birth fails and all its inhabitants die, or the city's birth succeeds and neighboring dimensions die. This bit of the novel's mythology suggests a view of nature as an unavoidably "brutal," death-filled place. Bronca believes that Padmini can understand and accept the brutality and ethical ambiguity of the situation because such concepts are essential to Queens.

Bronca tells them it's "nature" for some to die ensuring the lives of others. The living have a responsibility to those who died to fight for survival. Padmini and Veneza's horrified reactions make Bronca reflect that city people tend not to know where their food comes from. She remembers her ex-husband taking her hunting. Though Bronca refused to kill deer herself, her ex-husband and their hunting partners insisted Bronca contribute to butchering the deer. They told her that she needed to understand that she lived because others died and to kill only as much as necessary. Bronca suspects that Manny, Brooklyn, and New York City's avatar all understand this principle in a way Padmini and Veneza don't.

Bronca's claim that the city's avatars should fight for survival to honor those who died for them suggest that New York City's birth already *destroyed neighboring dimensions—and so the Woman in White's plan to destroy New York City will only lead to more death, not to saving some lives. Bronca's comparison of city births to hunting may lead the reader to wonder, however, whether it's always* necessary *that cities' births destroy neighboring dimensions. After all, human beings don't actually need to hunt and eat meat to survive; in the contemporary world, vegetarians do just fine. Could there be a vegetarian equivalent to a city's birth, one that doesn't involve mass death in neighboring dimensions? Bronca doesn't seem to consider the question. Her thoughts do suggest that violent survivalism is more essential to the concept of some parts of New York (Manhattan, Brooklyn, the city as a whole) than others (Queens, the Jersey suburbs).*

Manny asks Bronca what they should do next. Bronca says they need to find Staten Island. Brooklyn says their previous method, searching for strange events on social media, hasn't given them any leads. She suggests they could rent cars and drive around Staten Island waiting for their "city-dar" to find the missing avatar—or they could look for New York City's avatar, who seems more important and more vulnerable. Since Staten Island is surviving, its avatar has probably figured out how to protect herself from the Woman in White. Though leaving Staten Island to fend for herself bothers Padmini, Manny wants to try to find New York City's avatar immediately.

Bronca's insistence that all five embodied boroughs need to come together to protect the city shows the importance of community to the novel's mythos. On the other hand, Brooklyn's lack of urgent interest in finding Staten Island's avatar suggests she doesn't see Staten Island as a true part of the New York City community—that the Woman in White was deploying a stereotype with at least some truth in it when she told Aislyn Staten Island was the "forgotten" and "despised" borough. Padmini's unease at abandoning Staten Island hints that leaving Aislyn alone for so long may have been a tactical mistake, while Manny's desire to find New York City's avatar highlights once again Manny/Manhattan's special, intense relationship to the city and its avatar.

Bronca tells the other embodied boroughs to use whatever technique helps them to enter cityspace. Padmini does math, and Brooklyn freestyles to herself, but Manny isn't sure what to do—he admits he enters cityspace instinctively, whenever he's "feeling New Yorkish." Brooklyn points out that it also happens when he thinks about New York City's avatar. When Manny says he's not sure what that means, Bronca tells him to ask the avatar out once they've saved the avatar from his coma—which makes Manny laugh and become less self-conscious. Bronca reflects on the value of Stonewall.

This passage associates math (hard work, intelligence) with Queens, art (music, creativity) with Brooklyn, and a nebulous "New Yorkishness" with Manhattan—which suggests that unlike the other boroughs, which have their own preoccupations, Manhattan is conceptually defined by its love of the New York City as a whole. *That Manny is sexually attracted to New York City's avatar—an attraction Bronca's suggestion about a post-coma date makes explicit—strengthens this suggestion. By remembering Stonewall, the 1969 pro-LGBT protests in which Bronca participated, Bronca is reflecting with pleasure that her fighting for the marginalized has had some effect: New York City has become a more accepting place for people of diverse sexualities, and Manny feels better, not worse, when his same-sex desire is explicitly acknowledged.*

Bronca encourages them all to enter cityspace. Soon she sees herself as the Bronx, Manny as Manhattan, Padmini as Queens, and Brooklyn as Brooklyn (the borough). When they look for Staten Island, they find her and perceive that though she's "different" and "reluctant" she's also "truly New York." Yet they have difficulty seeing her, when Manny tries to touch her, she flinches away.

Thus far, Aislyn has proven herself "different" from the other avatars in myriad ways—one of them being that she's racist and xenophobic. The novel may implicitly be asking: can a diverse community tolerate intolerant members like Aislyn? That Aislyn flinches from Manny, meanwhile, reminds readers both of her racist fear of non-white men and her arguably legitimate fear of men in general after Conall sexually assaulted her.

Bronca guides the others through a change of perspective until they're looking at all realities. This multiverse looks like a giant tree. As they marvel at it, they see branches falling from the tree—realities dying—as a city that looks like a tiny light is born. "Thousands" of lights decorate the multiverse tree.

This passage serves to illustrate and verify what Bronca has already revealed to the other avatars: multiple realities really do exist, and city births really do destroy whole branches of reality. If "thousands" of living cities are decorating the multiverse, then thousands upon thousands of neighboring realities and their inhabitants have been annihilated by cities.

Bronca zooms in on New York, and they see New York City's avatar sleeping on newspapers. Bronca hears Manny think, "*I would do anything for him*," and the other boroughs echo his thought with the sentiment that they and the avatar belong to each other. When the boroughs realize they're hearing each other's thoughts, they start to panic, but Bronca redirects them by asking: "*Where*?" Her perspective changes, and they see walls covered in white tiles, which Bronca recognizes. Then the avatar's eye opens. He communicates with them via thought that they're getting closer to him, and they feel themselves falling into his mouth.

Given Manny's mysterious, violent past, his resolution to do "anything" for New York City's avatar may seem disturbing and ethically problematic as well as romantic. Yet the boroughs' group recognition that they belong to one another suggest that they—minus Aislyn—are truly beginning to come together as a community. That Bronca recognizes the tiles near the avatar's hiding place, meanwhile, suggests that her knowledge of art (in this case, architecture) may come in handy in saving the city.

Veneza shakes Bronca awake. Bronca finds herself on the Center's staff meeting room couch. Manny, Padmini, and Brooklyn are waking up around the room. Suddenly, a 50-something Asian man (Hong) wearing a suit walks in carrying an unconscious man (Paolo). When Brooklyn tries to call emergency services, the suited man tells her ordinary medical attention can't help a city. The suited man puts the other man down on a sofa. Bronca notes that the unconscious man has turned gray like an ancient TV set. She peeks into "cityspace" and sees a cord "like an umbilicus" attaching him to somewhere in South America.

The novel has emphasized the alienness and inhumanity of the Woman in White, in contrast with the novel's protagonists. Yet this passage reminds the reader that city avatars, being embodied concepts, are no longer entirely human either: regular medicine can't help them and when they're truly injured, they resemble old technology more than a bleeding human body. What the strange parallels between the Woman in White and the living cities signify remains to be seen.

The suited man (Hong), noticing what Bronca is doing, comments that he supposes they aren't completely useless but that none of them realized the unconscious man (Paolo) had been harmed in New York City. Padmini asks what happened, and Brooklyn asks who the suited man is. The suited man tells them to call him Hong, takes cigarettes and a lighter from the unconscious man, and comments that he previously believed the unconscious man was exaggerating how bad things were in New York. Manny mouths "*Hong . . . Kong*?" at the others.

The novel has focused primarily on New York City and the communities in New York City. Yet the appearance of Hong—Hong Kong's avatar, presumably the international number Paolo was calling and texting in earlier scenes—gestures toward another, larger community: the global community of living cities. Given Hong's anger that none of New York City's avatars realized Paolo was hurt, the reader may suspect that this community of living cities comes with its own rules and expectations.

Hong lights a cigarette, mentions that he hates smoking, and exhales smoke onto the unconscious man (Paolo). Abruptly, the unconscious man changes from gray to "sepia." When Manny suggests Hong try again, Hong says that it barely worked the first time—the man requires "the polluted air of his own city," but it's dangerous to go "through macrospace" and a flight would take a long time.

This passage again emphasizes the non-humanity of the city avatars: whereas cigarettes and "polluted air" harm ordinary human beings, cigarettes and pollution have conceptual power due to their stereotypical association with Paolo's city; thus, they can heal him. Hong's casual dismissal of Manny's suggestion and his invocation of "macrospace"—a concept he doesn't define and has no reason to believe New York City's avatars understand—suggest that he doesn't see them as equal members in the community of living cities.

When Veneza asks who the unconscious man is, Hong replies the man is São Paolo: "Who else could he be?" When Padmini asks how they're supposed to know, Hong tells her contemptuously that São Paolo and New York are the only living cities "in this hemisphere." Because São Paolo is the youngest city, he was supposed to help New York through the birth. When Padmini takes issue with Hong's rudeness, he expresses anger that New York's boroughs aren't more worried about Paolo, who wounded him, or how they can retaliate against his attacker.

Hong's contemptuous rhetorical question and rude explanations reveal his low opinion of New York City and its avatars. That São Paolo and New York City are the youngest living cities and the only living cities "in this hemisphere" hints at why: Hong may be prejudiced against them for their relative newness and geographical distance from the other cities. At the same time, though, Hong does seem genuinely concerned about Paolo.

Veneza, murmuring São Paolo's name, starts poking through the staff room freezer. Meanwhile, Brooklyn suggests that the creature they call the Woman in White must have attacked Paolo, but Hong insists she didn't. Bronca asks Hong how he knows. Hong claims that injuries like Paolo's only occur when one city's avatar steps inside another living city and the second city objects—so New York must have attacked Paolo. Manny points out that all the boroughs have been in the Center except—and then he cuts himself off, comprehension dawning.

The embodied boroughs' ignorance about the rules of living cities—in this case, about the injuries one living city can inflict on another—emphasizes that they have not been inducted into the living cities' community the way Paolo tried to induct New York City's avatar. That one of the embodied boroughs—Aislyn—could have attacked Paolo without the other four knowing, meanwhile, emphasizes that New York City's community is fractured.

Hong seems to conclude the boroughs aren't simulating their horror. He points out that New York City has five boroughs, while the Center currently contains four boroughs and Veneza. Manny argues that Staten Island and São Paolo must have had a "misunderstanding," since Staten Island's one of them, but Brooklyn speculates that attacking São Paolo fits Staten Island's MO: whereas the rest of the city votes Democrat and petitions for better public transportation, Staten Island votes for Republicans, favors cars, and agitated to keep tolls on the Verrazano Bridge high to discourage Brooklynites from visiting. When Manny points out that they need Staten Island to help the avatar, Bronca suggests they'll have to persuade Staten Island to join them.

Manny's insistence that Staten Island's avatar and Paolo must have had a "misunderstanding" again emphasizes Manny's love of and protectiveness toward New York City as a whole. Brooklyn's response, by contrast, suggests why the other boroughs might distrust Staten Island: it persistently attempts to distinguish and separate itself from the rest of the community. (The Verrazano Bridge—or, properly, the Verrazano-Narrows Bridge—connects Brooklyn (the borough) and Staten Island. The tolls to cross the bridge are unusually high.)

Hong says New York City's situation is "worse than London" and speculates that Staten Island has betrayed the other boroughs because she's realized the "danger." Bronca begins to ask what Hong means when Veneza interrupts, pulling chocolate candies from the freezer. She explains they're a Brazilian candy called *brigadeiro*, which the Portuguese side of her family eats "because yay colonialism." She feeds Paolo a *brigadeiro* while speaking Portuguese, which returns him to a regular color and wakes him up. He thanks her in Portuguese and sits up.

When Paolo first called an international number (presumably Hong) early in the book, he compared New York City's situation to London's—but although Hong makes the same comparison, neither character has yet revealed what the similarity is. Disturbingly, Hong also mentions some "danger" to Staten Island and maybe the other boroughs—which hints that the Woman in White may not have been completely deceitful when she suggested joining New York City's avatar and the other embodied boroughs would be bad for Aislyn somehow. Meanwhile, Veneza has mastered the art of conceptual/stereotypical thinking and realized that specifically Brazilian candies will give Paolo power.

Paolo asks Hong why he took so long to reach New York. Then he realizes Hong must have told the "Summit" about the situation and the Summit "balked." Hong replies that the older cities dislike younger cities and find Paolo in particular "arrogant." Paolo replies that he's justified in disliking the older cities, because they are ignoring what's going on in New York in favor of blaming Paolo's performance.

This passage reveals fractures and prejudices in the community of living cities. Although neither Paolo nor Hong explains what the "Summit" is, context suggests it is a governing body for the living cities—and this governing body dislikes younger cities, which has led them to misjudge the perilous situation in New York City.

Hong finds a picture on his phone, tells the others it should worry them, and shows it to them. The photo is a picture of New York City, taken from the air, in which Staten Island looks more distant from the other boroughs than it should. Hong tells them that it's unprecedented for part of a city to pull away from the rest in cityspace and for this action to affect "peoplespace" visibly. Paolo stands and says he's been trying to tell the other cities that the situation is unprecedented—the Enemy is acting strangely.

In this passage, Hong and Paolo reveal that New York City's situation—and, in particular, the Woman in White's behavior toward the city—is unheard-of. This revelation suggests that although Hong and Paolo are older, more experienced cities, they may not have the knowledge or even the right conceptual understanding of the situation to help the embodied boroughs' save their city.

Hong asks Manny whether he and the others managed to find New York City's avatar. When Manny says that they saw but couldn't locate him, Bronca remembers she recognized the tiles in their vision. She leaves the room (with the others following), goes to her office, and sees Yijing has left her a note reading "600K in new donations!!." Searching through a book in her office, *Beaux Arts Century*, she finds a photo of a tiled room and shows the others. Manny says the photo isn't of the avatar's sleeping place, though it has the same architectural style. Bronca explains that the room contains Guastavino tiles, part of an old New York-based architectural movement. Because many places that had Guastavino tiles have since been renovated, the tiles are only located in a few places throughout the city.

Yijing's note to Bronca reminds the reader of the community support the Center has received after the Alt Artistes' attack and thus of the power of community in general. Bronca's revelation that the embodied boroughs may be able to locate New York City's avatar by looking up which places have Guastavino tiles, meanwhile, demonstrates that in order to understand a city, a person must know its art (in this case, its architecture) and its history.


Veneza gets on Bronca's computer and starts searching online for Guastavino tiles in Manhattan. Meanwhile, Manny starts flipping through *Beaux Arts Century*. In a few moments, they've both identified the avatar's sleeping place as Old City Hall Station, a now-unused subway station. Brooklyn says that while people can't usually enter the station, the Transit Museum occasionally gives tours—and she can use a favor she's owed to get one. Hong says they'll "have to hope" that, even without Staten Island, New York City's avatar will get enough strength from eating the other four boroughs to save the city. Brooklyn, shocked, asks Hong what he means.

Just when the embodied boroughs thought they were making progress—they know where New York City's avatar is and how to get there—they learn that the avatar needs to eat them. Previously, Matthew warned Aislyn that the city would eat her if she visited it, and Brooklyn told Manny the city would eat him alive if he let it. In retrospect, both moments look like foreshadowing of the danger New York City's avatar poses to the embodied boroughs—a community devouring and annihilating the individuality of its various members.

CHAPTER 12: THEY DON'T HAVE CITIES THERE

Leaving for work, Aislyn sees a "white pillar" in her yard. She realizes the pillar, like the **tendrils**, is an alien thing only she can see. Walking to her car—a Ford hybrid Matthew loathes for anti-environmentalist reasons but helped her buy "because at least it's American"—she sees another pillar in the distance. She's going to her library job, which she's technically not allowed to have because the city requires a B.A. and she only has an A.A.—the head librarian hired her "off the books" in exchange for Matthew fixing the librarian's parking tickets. Aislyn doesn't drive many places other than her job, because Matthew keeps track of how many miles she drives and she's worried he's bugged her car with a GPS tracker.

That only Aislyn (as well as, presumably, other avatars and residents the city chooses to empower) can see the pillars and the tendrils emphasizes their alienness, the fact that they don't belong. That Matthew hates hybrids but helped Aislyn buy one because it was American made shows the conflicts and incoherencies within his prejudices. The revelation that Matthew checks how much Aislyn drives and may have put a GPS tracker in her car, meanwhile, illustrates once again that he is controlling to the point of abusiveness.

Aislyn gets in the car, looks at a **tendril** on her rearview, and asks the Woman in White to speak with her. Suddenly, Aislyn sees in her rearview mirror a white room in which the Woman, wearing yet another body, appears. The Woman says she's realized why Aislyn was angry and says Conall was "bad" and "foolish" to grab a city, who could have destroyed him. Aislyn thinks back to that morning's breakfast, where she learned Conall had convinced Matthew that he heroically fought off a trespasser. She clarifies that the Woman knows how Conall behaved.

The reader has just learned that Aislyn fears Matthew has put a surveillance device in her car. Now the reader learns that the Woman in White actually has *put a surveillance device—one of her tendrils—in Aislyn's car. The parallel between Matthew's abusive behavior and the Woman in White's makes clear that despite the Woman's friendly façade, she is trying to manipulate and control Aislyn. The trivializing language the Woman uses to describe Conall's assault of Aislyn—"bad" and "foolish"—also makes clear that the Woman is either downplaying what the tendril-infected Conall did or genuinely lacking the human concepts that would allow her to understand why Aislyn is so upset.*

The Woman in White tells Aislyn that the **tendrils** don't allow her to puppeteer people. Instead, they "encourage preexisting inclinations." Recalling a nature program about a parasitic fungus that zombifies ants, eats them slowly, and then causes their heads to explode, Aislyn demands to know why the Woman is sticking tendrils in people at all.

The Woman in White's claim that the tendrils "encourage preexisting inclinations"—rather than controlling people's behavior wholesale—gels with Bronca's belief that the Alt Artistes must have already been sympathetic to bigotry and violence before the Woman in White infected them. If the Woman is telling the truth, then the tendrils represent outside forces stoking a community's divisions, prejudices, and hatreds for its own ends—but the divisions, prejudices, and hatreds need to have already existed within the community. The parasitic fungus Aislyn remembers is likely Cordyceps—to which Manny compared the tendrils earlier in the novel. By again associating the tendrils with a parasite, the novel makes them seem like a horrifying yet merely natural phenomenon, rather than a weapon wielded by an intelligent entity. Yet Aislyn's question about why the Woman is infecting people implies that the infections are not natural or inevitable—they are the result of an unethical choice on the Woman's part.

The Woman in White, noting Aislyn's horror, asks to explain. Aislyn sees motion in her rearview, and then the Woman pixelates into reality in her back seat. Though Aislyn almost reacts with terror, she doesn't, for several reasons. First, her upbringing has "programmed" her to see "evil" in non-white, ugly, disabled, and/or male people. Though Aislyn knows the Woman isn't what she appears, she looks like a good person to Aislyn. Second, Aislyn subconsciously worries that if she screams and Matthew comes to police his property, the Woman may put a **tendril** in him—and Aislyn's terrified that a tendril will make Matthew's violent, controlling behavior even worse. Third, Aislyn is "agonizingly lonely," and she half-believes the Woman is her friend.

Though the novel often compares the Woman in White and her tendrils to natural phenomena—sea creatures, plants, fungi, etc.—here it describes the Woman pixelating into reality as if she were a high-tech hologram. By associating the Woman with advanced technology, this passage emphasizes that the Woman is an intelligent entity making choices that can be judged in ethical terms—not an unthinking animal or a disease that cannot help how it naturally behaves. The description of Aislyn as "programmed" to be racist, ableist, and scared of men, meanwhile, suggest that Aislyn's prejudices aren't natural or inevitable either—her family taught them to her. That Aislyn gives the Woman the benefit of the doubt because the Woman looks female and white—even though Aislyn knows the Woman may not be either of those things—show how thinking in stereotypes prevents people from really grasping the reality of their situations. Aislyn's fear that a tendril infection could escalate her father's abusive behavior makes clear that she senses both Matthew and the Woman are dangerous—yet the "agonizing[]" isolation she suffers as a result of her father's control over her life makes her willing to accept even an unsafe, abusive friendship.

The Woman in White tells Aislyn to start driving and pats her shoulder. Aislyn feels a sting and, realizing the Woman has tried to embed a **tendril** in her, flinches—but no tendril takes root. The Woman sighs. Aislyn refuses to acknowledge either the Woman's frustration or her own "relief," because she wants to "feel *some* kind of belief in herself" and so doesn't want to interrogate the "judgements and biases" that have led her to trust the Woman.

This passage explicitly addresses why Aislyn is vulnerable to the Woman in White's manipulations. Her "judgments and biases"—in particular, her racist bias in favor of other white people and her fear of men—make her trust the Woman, who looks white and female. Aislyn needs to reflect critically on herself before she can see the danger the Woman poses. Yet having experienced her father's emotional abuse and Conall's attempted assault, Aislyn desires the comfort of self-esteem and "belief in herself"—comforts incompatible with self-criticism. Ironically, then, Aislyn's abuse history makes her less willing to recognize that the Woman is behaving in controlling, abusive ways toward her. Yet the Woman's inability to infect Aislyn suggests that Aislyn still retains some internal defenses against the Woman's manipulations.

Aislyn points to the white pillar near her house and asks what it is. When the Woman in White claims it's an adapter cable, Aislyn asks what it's adapting. The Woman explains its adapting her reality to humanity's. For a moment, Aislyn is dumbfounded. Then the Woman again commands Aislyn to drive, saying she shouldn't draw attention to herself—the Woman can't protect Aislyn all the time, as proven by São Paolo nearly "g[etting] to her." Then the Woman celebrates Aislyn's rebuff of Paolo. To herself, Aislyn admits she liked hurting Paolo as she hurt Conall.

The Woman's claim to be protecting Aislyn—when the Woman just tried to infect Aislyn with a tendril—illustrates how abusers sometimes pose as their victims' defenders. Aislyn's pleasure at hurting both Paolo and Conall again shows how stereotypes and generalizations warp her thinking: because Paolo was non-white and male, Aislyn assumed he was as dangerous to her as Conall, though Paolo was in fact trying to help her.

Aislyn asks the Woman in White to tell her what's happening. The Woman says the pillars are "*possibility*," and she's been erecting them where our reality's "muons" are "friendlier." Aislyn, remembering that a park service employee eyeballed her sexually the one time she went to the park, asks whether the Woman is erecting the pillars everywhere she goes. The Woman says no—only places where Aislyn has "rejected this reality." Aislyn tells herself not to feel frightened or manipulated, even though she doesn't fully comprehend the Woman's explanation, because the Woman is kind, nice-looking, and truthful. The Woman praises Aislyn's tolerance.

A "muon" is a kind of elementary subatomic particle. The Woman in White's casual use of the term suggest that she comes from a species with highly advanced physics. That the muons are "friendlier" where Aislyn has "rejected [her] reality" again emphasizes that in the novel, thoughts, feelings, and beliefs can change the physical structure of the external world. This science-fictional conceit draws the reader's attention to how people's emotions and biases determine what world they perceive—as, for example, Aislyn won't let herself feel frightened and manipulated and so can't perceive the Woman's cruelty. That the Woman praises Aislyn's tolerance is, of course, a joke—Aislyn is willing to tolerate extradimensional aliens if they look like white women, but she's racist and xenophobic toward other people.

Aislyn returns to the subject of the adapters. The Woman in White stumbles over her explanation, complaining that humans don't understand their own or other realities. When Aislyn admits she didn't know there were multiple realities, the Woman tells her there are myriads, which is precisely the trouble. In the beginning, there was only one reality containing life, and it was "beautiful."

The Woman in White's distaste for multiple realities—her praise for a single, "beautiful," original reality—hints that she is able to manipulate racists and bigots because she shares their dislike of diversity and preference for homogeneity.

Suddenly, in the rearview, Aislyn sees the white room again and, inside it, a moving color and a round black object that reminds her of chocolate snack cakes whose name she thinks might have been "Ding Hos." The Woman in White, meanwhile, is explaining that there were no cities in the original reality, and that the original reality's inhabitants find cities "monstrous." She laughs sadly. Aislyn agrees that cities are monstrous—dirty, overcrowded, crime-ridden, and bad for the environment. The Woman insists that while Aislyn's claims are correct, cities are monstrous for another reason. Aislyn, seeing the Ding Ho suddenly pause, wonders whether it's real, a visual trick, or a weird daydream.

Aislyn's oddball comparison of the mysterious round black object to a snack cake suggest she lacks the relevant concepts to make sense of what she's seeing. That the Woman in White laughs "sadly" after explaining that the original reality's inhabitants find cities "monstrous" is strange—what reason does she have to be sad?—and foreshadows future revelations about the Woman's relationship to the living cities. Yet her insistence that cities are *monstrous reminds the reader that, according to Bronca, cities' births obliterate neighboring realities and all their inhabitants. Despite the Woman's abhorrent tactics, then, she has an understandable reason for wanting to prevent cities' births.*

Finally, the Woman in White explains that cities are monstrous because, rather than keeping to their "ecological niche," they are "invasive"—smashing into and destroying thousands of other realities: "numberless intelligent species are wiped out every day." When Aislyn expresses confusion, the Woman asks whether she's read Lovecraft. Aislyn has, a little, at the urging of a senior librarian coworker.

Just as the novel has previously described the Woman in White's invasion in terms of natural phenomena like predator-prey relationships, so the Woman compares living cities to an "invasive" species overflowing their "ecological niche." While the Woman clearly understands the horror of "numberless intelligent species [...] wiped out every day," she seems to treat cities' destruction of other intelligent life as a scientific and environmental fact rather than as an ethical problem. When the Woman invokes Lovecraft in her attempt to explain, the reader ought to be suspicious—as Bronca and Yijing have already explained, Lovecraft espoused intensely bigoted and fearful views.

The Woman in White tells Aislyn that Lovecraft was correct in seeing cities as fundamentally different. The cultural exchanges that occur in cities, such as eating new foods, learning new languages, or mimicking others' patterns of behavior, are excessive. Aislyn asks why you shouldn't learn languages; she once taught herself a little Gaelic, though she forgot most of it for lack of conversational partners. The Woman in White claims that she isn't judging humanity's "nature," merely diagnosing it as a problem—because when humans' urban cultural exchanges create a great city, that city destroys myriad realities and all their inhabitants. The Woman asks Aislyn whether, given that fact, Aislyn can understand why the Woman must intervene.

The Woman in White suggests that urban diversity and cultural exchange drive cities' births—and so are responsible for the deaths of neighboring realities and all their inhabitants. This odd piece of world-building casts diversity in a negative light. Since the Woman in White has invoked Lovecraft, we might expect her to be lying or confused—but Bronca, who has no reason to lie, also believes that diverse urban areas, in creating great cities, give rise to mass death. It is not clear whether the novel intends this part of its mythology to allegorize the environmental costs of large cities. The revelation that Aislyn once taught herself Gaelic but forgot it for lack of conversational partners both suggests that her xenophobia is limited to non-white foreigners—she's fine with foreign languages spoken by white people—and reminds the reader of her social isolation. Finally, in claiming not to judge humanity's "nature," the Woman suggests that human beings cannot help but build cities that destroy neighboring realities. By implication, this urban destruction is in human "nature," so humanity must be destroyed to be stopped. The Woman's invocation may remind the reader of the Woman's conversation with Bronca, in which Bronca denied the existence of fixed human nature—which hints that perhaps humanity's cities need not be so destructive.

Aislyn does understand, yet she wonders whether these horrible facts count as "*evil*." In her mind, she compares the Woman in White to a vegan coworker who tells Aislyn that when she puts honey in her tea, she's participating in bees' enslavement. Aislyn thinks this claim is incorrect—bees and humans are "symbiotic"—but also, honey isn't that big a deal.

The cities' births may not be "evil" inasmuch as the city residents who bring about the births don't know about or intend the deaths they're causing. Yet Aislyn's intuition that the deaths in question are like honey—just not that important—suggests either that she's unable to conceptualize the scale of death the Woman is describing or so xenophobic that she's incapable of seeing value in intelligent nonhuman life. That said, her memory that humans and bees are "symbiotic"—a word that can technically refer to parasitic relationships but usually refers a relationship between two species in which both benefit—hints at the possibility that humans and aliens from other dimensions could form mutually beneficial rather than destructive relationships.

Timidly, Aislyn suggests that humans and other entities could learn to live together. The Woman in White says, "It's been tried." She goes on to say that, since her creators made her to help them understand humans, she knows humans aren't inherently "evil"—but that "understanding doesn't always help."

The revelation that humans and extradimensional aliens have "tried" to cooperate in the past implies that—if the Woman is telling the truth—her destructive campaign against human cities isn't a kneejerk, vengeful reaction but a last resort. The Woman's reference to her creators reminds the reader that the Woman was constructed by entities that occasionally hurt her for failing in assigned tasks—in other words, the Woman is, like Aislyn, the child of abusive parent(s). The reader may also wonder what kind of creation the Woman is: a robot? A computer program? A genetically modified organism? Something else entirely? Finally, the Woman's defeated admission that humans aren't "evil" but "understanding doesn't always help" hints that while many conflicts may occur due to stereotyped thinking, faulty concepts, and other forms of misunderstanding, some conflicts are based on real, intractable clashes between different people's or groups' well-being.

Aislyn parks at the library and asks the Woman in White whether Aislyn should call her a Lyft. The Woman praises Aislyn's consideration, touches her hand, and asks whether she knows the Woman doesn't hate her and "wish[es] circumstances could be different." Touched and unable to square the Woman's friendliness with talk of "multiverses and inevitable doom," Aislyn reassures the Woman that she does know and that things will be all right. The Woman calls Aislyn "a good dimension-crushing abomination" and promises to protect her as long as possible. Then the Woman vanishes.

The mention of a Lyft reminds the reader once again that gentrification and homogenization of New York City, spurred by global companies, seems to predate the Woman in White's invasion. When the Woman tells Aislyn she "wish[es] circumstances could be different," she is revealing that she thinks destroying humanity is necessary and unavoidable, not really a choice—but also that, despite her manipulative behavior toward Aislyn, she may have some real affection for her, illustrating that abusers can care for their victims and still hurt them. Meanwhile, Aislyn's inability to comprehend "multiverses and inevitable doom" shows once again that she lacks the conceptual understanding to grasp exactly what the Woman in White intends to do.

CHAPTER 13: BEAUX ARTS, BITCHES

Hong is explaining that when London was born, it had more than 12 avatars—and then, suddenly, one, after which London was safe. When Hong expresses annoyance that Paolo hasn't already explained it, Paolo points out he's had no opportunity and also would have been more sensitive about it.

This passage reveals the significance of Hong and Paolo's previous comparisons between London and New York City: like New York City, London had multiple avatars. The winnowing of London's avatars from more than 12 to one suggests that surviving avatar consumed and appropriated the other avatars' identities—sacrificing diverse members of the London community to save the city as a whole.

Manny clarifies that Hong is talking about New York City's avatar eating the embodied boroughs. Hong compares the situation to Sodom and Gomorrah and then adds, "I'm told the Enemy killed the former before the merger was complete." The resultant disaster killed Sodom, Gomorrah, and two other cities not yet born. Hong says that if New York City's avatar doesn't eat the embodied boroughs and protect the city, its destruction will also cause destruction in New Jersey, Long Island, Pennsylvania, Connecticut, and maybe Massachusetts.

In the biblical book of Genesis, God destroys the cities Sodom and Gomorrah due to their extreme sinfulness. This novel repurposes the Biblical story to suggest that the death of living cities caused the destruction, not God. The example of Sodom and Gomorrah serves to illustrate the extreme, mythology-creating levels of destruction that will occur if the embodied boroughs do not sacrifice their lives for the good of the many.

Manny accuses Hong of lying to manipulate them. Hong replies that he's informing them of a necessary part of the process: when a "composite city" is born, the "primary avatar" must eat the "sub-avatars" that represent parts of the city to ensure the city's safety. When Bronca suggests that the eating could be a metaphor for something "spiritual" or "sexual," Hong says he doesn't know exactly what happened in London, but the sub-avatars disappeared, and the primary avatar was "traumatized."

Given the importance of abstract concepts, imagination, and so forth in the novel, Bronca's suggestion that the "primary avatar" might only need to eat the "sub-avatars" metaphorically, not literally, seems reasonable. Hong's perception that whatever happened in London "traumatized" its avatar makes his pessimistic take on the process also seem reasonable, but he still may be dismissing Bronca too quickly due to his prejudice against younger cities.

Manny tells Paolo there's no way he could have conveyed these facts sensitively. Paolo says that he would have explained why it's "necessary" for the embodied boroughs to sacrifice themselves. Padmini blows up at Paolo, calls New York City's avatar "that—thing," and shoves Paolo into a fridge. When Manny grabs her and prevents her from hurting Paolo, Padmini accuses Manny of wanting the avatar to eat him. Manny insists he wants to live and suggests that, given all the other strange things about New York City's birth, maybe its sub-avatars won't die. Hong agrees this is possible but asks whether they wanted him to conceal that in all other composite cities' births, "the sub-avatars have vanished." Brooklyn says no—they needed to hear it. Hong nods to her.

Paolo's claim that it's "necessary" that the sub-avatars die for the greater good is reminiscent of the Woman in White's belief that humanity must die to protect neighboring dimensions from humanity's cities. Both are making the utilitarian argument that it's ethically right to sacrifice a smaller number of lives to save a larger number. When Padmini reacts by calling New York City's avatar a "thing," it suggests that people sometimes stereotype or dehumanize others out of fear. Manny's hopeful suggestion that maybe the primary avatar won't need to eat them reminds the reader both that New York City's situation is unprecedented and that Manny, who is in love with the primary avatar, wants to think the best of him.

Padmini starts cursing in Tamil and English. Manny tries to convince her that New York City's avatar "has no reason to want to kill" them—at which point Bronca interrupts, saying Manny doesn't know that. Brooklyn adds that what the avatar wants doesn't matter—if he must kill the four of them to save the city's entire population, he should.

In this passage, Manny continues to exhibit an intense emotional investment in New York City's avatar—despite, as Bronca points out, not knowing very much about him. Manny's perceptions are based on his emotions and beliefs, not objective facts. Meanwhile, Brooklyn reiterates Paolo's utilitarian logic: it makes sense to sacrifice four lives to save millions.

Hong tells them they have no more time—traveling from the airport, he saw the **tendrils** making "structures" and a strange tower on Staten Island. Veneza summons the others to a window and points out a bizarre, organic-architectural structure over Hunts Point—when she saw it earlier, she thought it was art or an advertisement, until she found out a friend of hers couldn't see it. Bronca worries at how near the thing must be to her house. When Paolo asks what it is, Hong admits he doesn't know and that Paolo was right about New York City's strangeness.

That Veneza can see the tendril structures emphasizes that she has a special relationship to New York City despite technically living in New Jersey. Hong's admission that he doesn't know what's going on, meanwhile, reveals once again that he and Paolo lack the experience and concepts to guide the embodied boroughs' actions.

Bronca, horrified, points out six Latino teenagers on the street outside, three of whom are infected by the **tendrils**. She announces she's going for a walk to see what's happening. Manny insists on going with her. Veneza comes too. As they walk, they spot many New Yorkers infected by the tendrils. They come to an empty lot where a building has recently been demolished and Veneza, shocked, laments "Murdaburga," a burger restaurant she calls "a Bronx *institution*" that seemed to be doing well financially. Bronca goes to investigate and finds a poster explaining someone is building condos on the lot. She further explains that the families who used to live above Murdaburga must have been evicted.

The destruction of "Murdaburga" is a clear example of gentrification—a local restaurant and "Bronx institution" destroyed to make room for condos, which will presumably be homogenous, cookie-cutter structures rented by higher-income people. That the destruction of Murdaburga also involves the eviction of longer-term renters strengthens the association the novel is drawing with gentrification. Since Bronca, Manny, and Veneza discover Murdaburga's destruction while investigating increased tendril growth, the novel is linking the real-world phenomenon of gentrification to the novel's science-fictional alien invasion.

Veneza indicates to Manny and Bronca the **tendril** growth is all over the now-empty lot. Bronca, furious, says that the Woman in White must have been readying her attack before the city's birth, since it would take more than a day to obtain the relevant construction permits. Manny asks whether the Woman knew that New York City would be born. Bronca says she doesn't know, hits the poster, and notices the name **Better New York Foundation** on it. Manny examines the Foundation's logo. At first he thinks it includes the Manhattan skyline, but then he realizes the skyline is wrong—there's a building in it that resembles "Seattle's Space Needle," but lumpy, with a "polyp-like" structure on top.

The Better New York Foundation uses money and power to gentrify and homogenize cities. The Foundation's logo hints at this homogenization by including a building that resembles "Seattle's Space Needle" in Manhattan's skyline, an indication that the Foundation wants to make every city like every other city. Given that the Woman in White has previously been compared to a sea creature, the "polyp-like" structure in the skyline represents the true nature of gentrification and homogenization in the novel: alien invasion. That the empty Murdaburga lot is full of tendrils shows how gentrification and homogenization weaken cities, making them susceptible to further invasion by exploitative outsiders.

Bronca tells the others that the **Better New York Foundation** is the organization that offered the Bronx Art Center a strings-attached donation and that the Woman in White claimed to work for. Manny says it's also the organization that stole Brooklyn's brownstone. He explains the eviction letter Brooklyn received to Bronca and says that Brooklyn's lawyers have found cases of other buildings being sold off on pretexts or without cause. Bronca has an epiphany that the Woman in White has set "traps" all over the city, not because she knew when New York would be born, but because she knew it would be born at some point.

The Better New York Foundation is setting "traps" to catch quintessentially local organizations and buildings—the Bronx Art Center, Brooklyn brownstones—and subvert or destroy them, thereby gentrifying and homogenizing the city. According to the novel's science-fictional world-building, the Foundation thereby weakens the city by reducing its uniqueness. The Foundation exemplifies how outside money can suck the authenticity and life out of cities by gentrifying them.

Veneza speculates that maybe the Woman in White has constructed similar "traps" in any city she suspects may come alive. Manny looks up the **Better New York Foundation** on Wikipedia and discovers it was founded in the 1990s, with property all over the globe. When he skims some news articles about the Foundation, he discovers that its major activities have only been taking place for about five years. Veneza says something must have awakened the Foundation. Then, looking at Manny's phone, she notices a mention of the Foundation's "parent company TMW." Manny, following the link, discovers that TMW stands for "TOTAL MULTIVERSAL WAR, LLC."

The Better New York Foundation's true identity as part of a global organization, not a local nonprofit, shows how money can hide its source and gentrifying agenda by falsely claiming local ties. The name of the Foundation's parent company, "TOTAL MULTIVERSAL WAR, LLC," makes blatantly clear that the Woman in White or her creators founded the company to do battle against cities whose births are destroying nearby dimensions in the multiverse—and since the phrase "total war" can refer to warfare waged with no ethical restrictions, the name also makes clear that the Woman and her creators will use any means necessary to stop more cities from being born.

That night, the embodied boroughs, Hong, and Paolo assemble at the Bronx Arts Center. Manny tells them about the **Better New York Foundation**—which disturbs Hong and infuriates Brooklyn, whose house the Foundation stole. When Brooklyn demands to hear what Hong knows about the Foundation, he says that he and the other cities haven't noticed it operating elsewhere. Padmini asks whether they've looked. When Hong admits they haven't, Bronca says that the Woman in White has been using money to preemptively weaken gestating cities—and perhaps prevent cities from getting to the gestation stage—right under the living cities' noses.

That Hong and the other living cities failed to notice the Better New York Foundation is not surprising—with it, the Woman is weaponizing exploitative human economic systems, much as she also weaponizes human bigotry, against diverse urban communities. Because the Woman is acting like a human and weaponizing human flaws against humanity—because she doesn't look alien, how the living cities expect her to look—the living cities haven't been able to see past their preconceptions and notice what she's been doing.

Paolo says that even before he learned the Enemy had stolen bodies and begun talking, he informed the other cities that its tactics had changed. He blamed the Enemy for the failures of New Orleans's and Port-au-Prince's births, but the older cities suggested that "young cities of the Americas" were just "awakening prematurely."

It was not only the living cities' preconceptions about the Enemy/the Woman in White that prevented them from noticing her new tactics. It was also their prejudices against "young cities of the Americas"—potential members of their own community. Because they look down on young cities, the older living cities failed to see that New Orleans and Port-au-Prince weren't "awakening prematurely" but—more likely—were sabotaged.

Hong demands to know why the birthing process would suddenly alter. Paolo speculates that some stimulus external to this reality motivated the Enemy to change tactics—but, whatever the cause, the living cities should have looked into it. Paolo expresses regret that he let Hong convince him not to. Hong says he was trying to keep Paolo safe. Paolo, calling attention to his formerly broken arms, reminds Hong that cities aren't immortal—most die violently—and that he won't live "ruled by fear of death" or the Woman in White. Manny and Bronca, struck by the "undercurrent" in Hong and Paolo's conversation, exchange speculative glances.

Although Hong demonstrated worry for Paolo while Paolo was unconscious, Hong has also been rude and dismissive to Paolo and the embodied boroughs, suggesting that he failed to take Paolo's worries about the Enemy seriously because he shared the older cities' disdain for Paolo and New York City. In this passage, however, Hong expresses a desire to keep Paolo safe, and Manny and Bronca—the two embodied boroughs the reader knows have experienced same-sex attraction—detect an "undercurrent" in Hong and Paolo's relationship. The novel thus seems to be suggesting that romantic attachment to Paolo motivated, at least partially, Hong's desire that Paolo not investigate the Enemy's new tactics.

Addressing Manny, Padmini, Brooklyn, and Bronca, Paolo says he's witnessed a city's death and never wants to again. Manny asks whether it was New Orleans. Hong says no—the Summit sent him, an older city, to deal with New Orleans because "there are often complications with smaller cities." During Hurricane Katrina, before New Orleans's birth, its avatar was shot; a hospital gave her bad medical treatment and kicked her out while she was recovering from surgery because she lacked money. Hong found her and tried to help her, but she was too weak when the Enemy attacked at the city's birth. Her death caused the levees to break.

Using the medical language of "complications" to describe a city's birth reiterates earlier comparisons the novel has drawn between cities' births and human births (as for example when New York City's avatar was described as a midwife or when his water (mains) broke). During Hurricane Katrina in 2005, the levees really did break and cause massive flooding and destruction. By attributing this real-world horror to the Enemy, the novel is insisting on the evil of the Enemy's tactics.

Paolo says he was in charge of helping Port-au-Prince's birth. Manny brings up the earthquake, thinking about how many people died both during the disaster and in the aftermath. Paolo points out that New York is both more populous and surrounded by more large population centers than Port-au-Prince. If the Woman in White finds New York City's avatar while he's still asleep . . . Paolo trails off ominously.

Estimates vary as to how many people the real 2010 earthquake in Haiti, to which this passage refers, killed. At minimum, it killed around 100,000; some estimates suggest it killed more than 300,000. By attributing this mass death to the Enemy and arguing she could cause even more death in the New York metropolitan area, the novel is again making very clear how destructive and evil the Enemy's behavior is.

Brooklyn says the boroughs don't know sacrificing themselves will work without Staten Island. Veneza suggests they go find Staten Island and ask for her help. Manny realizes he dislikes the idea and wonders whether he's succumbing to "Manhattanites' collective distaste for the littlest, least-loved borough." All the embodied boroughs look "reluctant"—which strengthens Manny's suspicion that dislike for Staten Island is clouding their judgment—but Brooklyn suggests they do it.

Given Aislyn's racism and xenophobia, the other embodied boroughs could easily find legitimate reasons to dislike her if they met her. That they have avoided finding her for so long, despite knowing the danger the Woman in White poses to her, suggest that Manny is right—their preexisting stereotypes about "the littlest, least-loved borough" may have delayed their decision to accept Staten Island's avatar into their community. This delay may prove to have been a tactical mistake, since the other embodied boroughs seem to need Aislyn's help, but the Woman in White has had a long time to manipulate Aislyn for destructive purposes.


Manny argues they should split up—some going to find Staten Island, the others to find New York City's avatar. Bronca says she's surprised to hear this suggestion from Manny. When Manny says Bronca should want the avatar to survive too, Bronca retorts that *she* isn't in love with the avatar. Manny is embarrassed but snaps that he wants more from his relationship with the avatar than just to die for him.

This passage again implies that Manhattan has a special relationship to New York City as a whole, of which Manny's passion for New York City's avatar is emblematic. That Manny doesn't want to die for the avatar but live with him, meanwhile, shows that Manny's concept of love is broader and deeper than just dramatic self-sacrifice.

Bronca asks who wants to go where. As they assign themselves—Manny to New York City's avatar, Padmini to Staten Island, and so on—they feel motion in cityspace. Noises sound beneath them, and Bronca orders everyone to get out of the Center. As they flee, Bronca pulls a fire alarm to warn the keyholders. Manny, realizing they aren't fleeing fast enough, imagines the subway—and a subway car materializes to carry them across the street. Moments after, a giant pillar of **tendrils** explodes out of the ground, through the Center, into the sky. Bronca wants to save the keyholders, but the others tell her it's too late.

Where the embodied boroughs choose to go demonstrates their priorities: Manny, in love with New York City's avatar, wants to go find him; Padmini, terrified New York City's avatar will eat her, wants to flee to Staten Island; etc. Previously in the novel, the tendrils have needed to find something "sympathetic" in the things they infect to take root. In this passage, however, they destroy the Center despite Bronca having protected it from the Better New York Foundation's influence. The tendrils' growing power and violence suggest that while outside forces initially need to manipulate a community's own internal divisions and bigotries to infiltrate it, once the infiltration is successful, the outside forces can use brute violence to achieve their ends.

Manny spots a Checker cab driving down the street. It stops, and the window rolls down, revealing Madison. Manny, believing the city sent the cab, asks her to drive them to City Hall Station. When Madison agrees, he asks those going to Staten Island whether they have a car too. Bronca says she'll drive hers. Brooklyn volunteers to go with Bronca, and Paolo volunteers to go with Manny. When Veneza pulls out her keys and suggests she can drive some people too, Bronca demands she go home. Manny realizes Bronca is trying to drive Veneza out of the city because Bronca believes the Woman in White will win. Veneza reluctantly departs.

Madison's sudden and convenient reappearance illustrates how, in the novel, true New Yorkers will instinctively come to the city's aid. When Bronca sends Veneza out of the city, she seems to be implying that this isn't Veneza's fight and thus that Veneza is not a true New Yorker, not a part of Bronca's community. Yet Bronca's overwhelming concern for Veneza suggests that Veneza very much is a part of Bronca's community. Thus the novel is once again drawing attention to Veneza's ambiguous status: she's technically not a New Yorker, yet she loves the city and is loved by one of the city's avatars.

While Bronca unlocks her car, Padmini talks to Aishwarya on the phone, telling her to get the family out of the city. Brooklyn calls her father Clyde and tells him that one of her employees is coming to get him. Watching Bronca, Padmini, and Brooklyn leave, Manny reflects that of all the boroughs, he alone has no one he fears for—except New York City's avatar. Then Manny and Paolo get in Madison's Checker cab.

Yet again, the novel is emphasizing that Bronca, Padmini, and Brooklyn have attachments that may conflict with their duty to the city, whereas Manny does not: given his amnesia, his sole strong emotional attachment is to New York City's avatar. This fact reiterates Manhattan's special relationship to the concept of New York City. Yet given that the city stole Manny's memories and thus stripped him of possible previous attachments, it seems to have manipulatively and unethically encouraged Manny's exclusive fixation on its avatar. This reminds the reader anew that the city, though great, may not be "good" in the ethical sense.

As Veneza is driving toward her father's place in Philadelphia, she hears a noise from the back seat of her car.

The noise in Veneza's backseat suggests that she is in danger—which suggests in turn that she ought not to have left the others, as people are safer together.

CHAPTER 14: THE GAUNTLET OF SECOND AVENUE

While Bronca drives toward Staten Island, Padmini asks Hong where he found Paolo so she can enter an address into Bronca's phone. Meanwhile, Brooklyn finishes a call with her daughter Jojo. Bronca thinks maybe she should call her 30-something son, but decides not to, since they would likely argue.

Bronca's decision not to call her son, with whom she evidently has a combative relationship, emphasizes that her real community is not her family but Veneza and her other coworkers at the Bronx Art Center.

Bronca asks Brooklyn whether she's sending Jojo to stay with Jojo's father. Brooklyn says Jojo's father is dead. When Bronca asks whether he died from drugs, Brooklyn, affronted, replies that he died of cancer. Apologetically, Bronca explains she remembers Brooklyn rapping about relationships with men in the drug trade. Brooklyn retorts that often, those men are better than "your average nice upstanding predatory lender"—but also, her lyrics weren't always autobiographical, and she thought that "only white people" always took rap lyrics literally.

When Bronca assumes that Jojo's father died from drugs, she seems to be endorsing the racist stereotype that Black men are likely to be drug users or dealers. Bronca's explanation of her assumption—that she was extrapolating from Brooklyn's rap lyrics—suggests that preexisting stereotypes can influence people's understanding of art and also be reinforced by art. Brooklyn's response is twofold. First, by claiming that many men in the drug trade are ethically superior to "your average nice upstanding predatory lender," she seems to be arguing that men who sell drugs for economic survival are better than those who exploit others economically merely to get wealthy. Her comment that she thought "only white people" took rap lyrics literally, meanwhile, suggests that Bronca has made an important mistake in art interpretation—assuming that the artist is just drawing on her own biography rather than inventing creatively.

Though Bronca knows she's reacting to the pressure of the situation, she gets angry at Brooklyn. She points out that some of Brooklyn's lyrics seemed "real" to her and quotes some where Brooklyn threatened to shoot any woman who tried to have sex with her. Brooklyn replies that she's apologized for that song and given $1000 to the Ali Forney Center. Not mollified, Bronca asks Brooklyn whether she knows the numbers on violence against "queer kids."

Whereas Brooklyn has just argued that it's a mistake to take rap lyrics literally, Bronca is arguing that bigoted art, even if the bigotry isn't intended literally, can cause literal violence against minority communities. The Ali Forney Center is a real nonprofit serving homeless LGBTQ youth in New York City; that Brooklyn donated to them suggests that she wanted to make public amends for her past bigotry.

After a pause, Brooklyn says she knows her apology doesn't right the wrong. She explains that during her rap career, she was targeted with homophobic slurs and sexual violence due to her gender—and that she "passed that shit on" until some friends intervened. At that point, Brooklyn realized that she shouldn't mimic the behavior of toxic men. Sighing, Brooklyn tells Bronca that during her music career, many people she knew were intoxicated with fame and playing into anti-Black stereotypes for financial success.

Somewhat like Aislyn replicates the sexist, racist, and xenophobic thinking she learned from her emotionally abusive father, Brooklyn used to "pass[] . . . on" the sexist and homophobic abuse she suffered from men in the music industry. It was only due to her friends' intervention that she changed her behavior. This pattern suggests that while Bronca may have been right to tell the Woman in White that abuse victims can rise against their abusers and change the world, victims will only make positive change if they learn to direct their anger at their abusers rather than at other victims.

Seeing Brooklyn is in earnest, Bronca apologizes for asking whether Jojo's father died from drugs: "That was, uh, racist. Technically *prejudiced* because the power dynamics are basically flat, but . . ." Brooklyn admits the comment touched a nerve because she does know people who have died due to drugs. Bronca says she's "touchy" too, since she's the Bronx. Brooklyn replies: "And I am Brooklyn."

Bronca distinguishes between racism and racial prejudice because according to a common definition of racism, the perpetrator must occupy a position of greater racial privilege than the victim. Since Bronca is indigenous (Lenape) and Brooklyn is Black—both marginalized racial groups—Bronca believes that "the power dynamics are basically flat" between them, so they can't "technically" be racist toward each other, though they can display racial prejudices. Bronca's apology and her and Brooklyn's willingness to be honest about why they're "touchy" show that the two avatars are coming to accept each other and themselves as representatives of their shared community.

Bronca's phone reroutes them away from FDR Drive. Hearing FDR Drive mentioned on the radio, Bronca turns it up. She hears that a right-wing group called Proud Men of NYC is blocking FDR Drive to protest "feminist liberal nonsense" because "it's okay to be a white man." Bronca speculates that the **police** won't stop them and may target counter-protestors. She also thinks this demonstration of public racism is odd, since racists in New York are usually lower profile, lest they "get knocked the fuck out on the subway."

The protest against "feminist liberal nonsense" and for the sentiment that "it's okay to be a white man" comes directly after Bronca has alluded to the difference between racism and mere individual prejudices—where the difference is whether the racially prejudiced person occupies a position of racial power over their victim. No one occupies a position of racial power over white men in the U.S., so the novel is clearly mocking the protestors' implicit claims of reverse racism. Bronca's speculation that the police will tolerate white male protestors—but not counter-protestors—reminds readers that in the novel, the police are not true defenders of the city but rather parasites who enforce racist hierarchies. Her surprise that New York would be the site of a racist protest suggests that overt racism wanes in diverse urban areas where there are a sufficient number of residents willing to "knock[]" a racist "the fuck out on the subway."

Disturbed, Hong says that this incident reminds him of New Orleans—institutional failure and resurgent racism destroying the city's avatar at its birth. Bronca asks whether Hong is implying that the **Better New York Foundation** engineered this protest somehow. Hong says he doesn't know but usually, cities create good luck for their avatars—the embodied boroughs' bad luck is a sign of New York City's weakness or its opponents' determination to thwart them.

The possibility that the Better New York Foundation could be backing an apparently spontaneous protest by racist New Yorkers underlines how global companies can use their money to manipulate local politics. That such racist New Yorkers existed to be manipulated, meanwhile, reminds the reader that the Woman in White is exploiting preexisting tensions in the New York community.

Driving through Spanish Harlem, Bronca sees a Starbucks, almost invisible beneath white **tendrils**. Suddenly, a face appears out of the tendrils. Shocked, Bronca swerves. Then a second Starbucks garbed in tendrils lurches into the street at the car. Bronca evades it and stops further on. Peering down the street, Brooklyn says that every Starbucks is like this.

Starbucks, a global brand, is associated in the public imagination with gentrification—when a neighborhood is gentrifying, it gets a Starbucks. That tendrils have completely occupied the Starbucks franchises emphasizes that the tendrils represent how gentrification homogenizes cities and destroys their local cultures.

Hong explains that because Starbucks is ubiquitous, it makes the city "more like every other place." When he asks, snottily, whether Bronca has a plan, she says she'll "drive like a motherfucking New Yorker." She starts driving again and soon accelerates to 70 in a 25 mph zone. Her driving creates an energy envelope around the car, which shields it from the next Starbucks attack and seems to prevent the **police** from noticing her speeding.

In the novel, cities draw power from the concepts associated with them. Starbucks is a global brand associated with "every … place" rather than a particular place; ergo, its homogenizing presence makes particular cities weaker rather than stronger. By contrast, "driv[ing] like a motherfucking New Yorker" is clearly a place-specific concept and practice; as such, it gives Bronca power—and protects her from the police, the false defenders of the city who might seek to stop its true defenders, the embodied boroughs.

When Bronca and the others pass over the Verrazano into Staten Island, they can sense Staten Island's avatar. This sense leads them to a house with a white pillar growing in the front lawn. When they try to approach the house, **tendrils** explode from the ground and the pillar. Some tendrils become the Woman in White, flanked by eerie shadow creatures. When Hong tells the embodied boroughs that the situation is all wrong—that the Woman has never taken a human body or used speech before—the Woman comments that assumptions "make an ass of u and me."

That the tendrils literally create a body for the Woman in White suggests that they are physical extensions of her, as Brooklyn speculated they might be earlier in the novel. The identity between the tendrils and the Woman in White suggests in turn that she, as well as they, represents how outside forces can exploit divisions within a community to destroy it. The Woman's comment that Hong's assumptions "make an ass of u and me" displays the Woman's odd, rather juvenile understanding of human popular culture. But it also displays an important truth: people's assumptions and beliefs shape their perceptions, and so assumptions can blind people to objective reality.

Abruptly, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Hong are transported into cityspace, where they see a city looming between them and Staten Island. This city is larger than New York, entirely white, and full of things that at first seem like buildings but appear to be "breathing." Even looking at this city causes Bronca terror and pain. Then they're back in peoplespace—having just realized the Woman in White is a city from another reality. Hong, horrified to learn they've been fighting another city all along, says he doesn't understand. When Bronca asks the Woman what she really is, the Woman tells them her name is "*R'lyeh*." Bronca doesn't recognize the name but notices Padmini mouth a curse in response to it.

In this passage, the Woman in White is revealed to be a city. Since the Woman has previously stated that entities from her reality don't build cities but created her to understand humanity, the reader can infer that these extradimensional entities built the city whose avatar the Woman in White is specifically to bring it to life so that it could combat human cities. This explains the Woman's sadness that the entities from her reality find cities "monstrous"—her creators find her monstrous. It may also explain why they torture her; though they created her, they don't respect the kind of life that she is. "R'lyeh" is the name of a lost city, occupied by an alien entity called Cthulhu, from H.P. Lovecraft's 1928 short story "The Call of Cthulhu." The allusion suggests that the extradimensional entities trying to destroy New York and humanity are the same entities Lovecraft mentions in his fiction.

The Woman in White pretends to brandish an object "like a broomstick" in front of herself and tells them, "Youshallnotpass." Then she explains that Staten Island has joined her righteous cause and she's not going to let Hong or the other avatars try to change Staten Island's mind. She volunteers to fight them.

The Woman in White is loosely reenacting a famous scene from the 2001 film adaptation of J.R.R. Tolkien's Fellowship of the Ring *(1954), the first book in the* Lord of the Rings *trilogy. In the scene, a wizard named Gandalf the Gray battles a demon called a Balrog. As a result of the battle, Gandalf dies and is resurrected as Gandalf the White. Gandalf is a hero while the Woman in White is a villain; the novel may be using her identification with him—on the basis of their shared association with the color white—to subtly critique the racial whiteness of the science-fiction/fantasy tradition. That the novel bothers to make such a critique suggests that art and art traditions shape people's thinking and so it's important to treat them thoughtfully. Meanwhile, the Woman in White's refusal to let Hong and the other embodied boroughs speak to Aislyn suggests that she still isn't sure of Aislyn's loyalty and so needs to control the information and options available to Aislyn.*

CHAPTER 15: "AND LO, THE BEAST LOOKED UPON THE FACE OF BEAUTY"

Madison deposits Manny and Paolo at the Brooklyn Bridge/City Hall subway stop. Manny expects trouble when he sees **police**, some infected by **tendrils**, at the entrance; he hears them talking about a bomb threat. Yet the uninfected ranking officer insists the others let Manny and Paolo through, apparently mistaking them for Con Ed engineers. After Manny and Paolo enter the station, Paolo explains: "Those who would help protect the city see what they need to see."

From the beginning, the novel has represented police officers as false defenders of the city who abuse their power and enforce racism. Now, however, a police officer "who would help protect the city" gives crucial aid to Manny and Paolo. The novel, by violating the pattern of racist, abusive police officers that it itself has constructed, shows the limits of conceptual and stereotypical thinking in predicting how different people will behave (in this case, individual police officers).

Once Manny and Paolo reach the platform, they find a vacant, conductor-less train. Entering the train, Manny asks Paolo whether they should wait. Paolo asks whether waiting will make the train move. Realizing Paolo is trying, gently, to prove a point, Manny senses New York City's avatar, touches the subway car, and remembers his last subway ride. The train's doors shut and it begins to move.

Earlier, Manny mentioned having greater trouble channeling conceptual power than the other embodied boroughs, who have reliable techniques (e.g. Brooklyn uses music; Padmini uses math). Here Paolo is teaching him to actively channel conceptual power—in this case, the power in the concept of "subway"—to help find New York City's avatar.

The train takes them to the darkened City Hall Station platform. When Manny and Paolo disembark, Manny turns on his phone flashlight and leads the way. Paolo warns him that the Enemy will have spied on their journey and now knows whether New York City's avatar is. Manny finds a stairwell whose ceiling is tiled with Guastavino tiles and takes the stairs up. He finds the avatar sleeping on newspapers, senses his power, and immediately tries to touch him—only to find an invisible barrier preventing him.

Bronca was correct that New York City's avatar was sleeping in a location with Guastavino tiles, a detail that emphasizes the importance of understanding a city's art and architecture to fully understanding and loving that city. Manny's failure to touch New York City's avatar suggests that one borough isn't enough—the entire community of boroughs needs to come together to wake the avatar.

When Paolo asks Manny whether he wants to get eaten that badly, Manny concedes he didn't think of that but insists that he and New York City's avatar belong to each other. Paolo says he's jealous of the embodied borough's community, since São Paolo's birth was solitary. Manny asks whether Paolo knew New York City's avatar before his unconsciousness. Paolo says yes. Manny, imagining New York City's avatar left alone like Paolo, internally apologizes to him for how the boroughs' deaths will isolate him.

This passage acknowledges an oddity about the living cities: although each avatar represents a community, they do so alone. Their only true peers are other living cities' avatars—who presumably live, for obvious reasons, in different cities than they do. This logical oddity—and the loneliness the living cities suffer—suggests that there's something wrong or incomplete about each city having only one avatar.

Manny asks Paolo what New York City's avatar is like. Paolo, smiling, describes the avatar as prideful and angry, scared but brave, and full of enough self-love to realize there's more to him "than whatever superficialities strangers see and dismiss." Manny, regretting he'll die and not get to live in the city, tells Paolo he'll need the other boroughs to touch the avatar. Paolo says that they'll have to wait for Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Hong to succeed. When Manny expresses distaste for Hong, Paolo defends him, explaining that before embodying Hong Kong, Hong saw a lot of people die in the Opium Wars—and, after, saw a lot of other cities die as well.

Paolo's description of New York City's avatar as recognizing more in himself "than whatever superficialities strangers see and dismiss" suggests that resisting stereotype is inherent to New Yorkers' group identity. The First Opium War (1839 – 1842) and Second Opium War (1856 – 1860) were fought between China's last imperial dynasty, the Qing, and the U.K. (France fought alongside the U.K. in the Second Opium War). Paolo is revealing that Hong has suffered world-historical traumas both as an ordinary human and as a city.

Realizing Hong must be about 200, Manny asks whether embodied cities are immortal. Paolo explains that cities' avatars survive as long as their cities do, if another city avatar doesn't kill them. Manny asks whether the Woman in White could kill them. Paolo admits she probably could and expresses hope that the other cities will finally realize something strange has been going on. When Manny asks whether lots of cities die at birth, Paolo says that more have been dying recently—which supports the theory that the Woman has been sabotaging cities before their births.

After Paolo explains that city avatars can kill other city avatars, Manny asks whether the Woman in White could kill a city avatar too—which reminds the reader that neither Paolo nor Manny yet knows the Woman in White is, herself, a living city. As they seek to save New York City's avatar, they lack important information that might help them understand the reality they've been experiencing.

Manny asks about São Paolo's birth. Paolo says it occurred when Brazil's U.S.-supported military dictatorship planned to demolish São Paolo's favelas. Because Paolo lived in a São Paolo favela, the city selected him as its avatar. (Manny realizes, based on his knowledge of Brazil's military coup, that Paolo is 70 or 80.) Paolo tells Manny how he defeated the Enemy's minions by shooting them with a rocket launcher. Noting Paolo's capacity for violence, Manny suspects that Paolo, like Manny himself, harmed others before he became an avatar and wonders whether São Paolo chose Paolo because Paolo decided to change his ways.

Brazil's military dictatorship lasted from 1964 to 1985. That São Paolo chose Paolo as a gesture of resistance against the Brazilian dictatorship's plans for the city illustrates that cities may have different agendas than the countries of which they are a part—and that a community's government may not represent its authentic identity. In wondering whether Paolo decided to change his ways before becoming an avatar, Manny may be implicitly wondering whether Manhattan chose him despite his violent ways or because of them.

Suddenly, Manny hears strange mechanical noises, growing louder. He realizes the train must be moving, though it's vacant and without power. Manny realizes he needs to think of "a construct to channel the city's power," but he's suddenly unable to think of anything.

The sudden danger in this passage acutely dramatizes Manny's need to more predictably use concepts to summon power, the way Brooklyn does with music and Padmini does with math.

Meanwhile, Aislyn wakes up, hearing yelling outside her house. She knows Matthew is working, Conall is gone, and Kendra has drunk herself nearly unconscious. In her yard Aislyn finds a "maybe Japanese" man holding a red envelope "like a shuriken from one of the anime shows Aislyn used to watch" (Hong), an elderly "Mexican-looking" woman (Bronca), a Black woman whom Aislyn thinks she's seen before with dirt on her suit (Brooklyn), and a young Indian woman (Padmini). The Woman in White is hovering in the air above them. Aislyn notices other creatures in her peripheral vision but refuses to look at them.

That Kendra drinks herself unconscious implies the toll her sacrificed artistic dreams and emotionally abusive husband have taken on her mental health. Aislyn's inaccurate guesses of Hong and Bronca's ethnicities reminds readers of her limited, fearful interactions with people of other races, while her refusal to look directly at the Woman in White's shadow creatures highlights Aislyn's refusal to perceive the Woman's manipulative, controlling behavior toward her.

The Woman in White apologizes for waking Aislyn up. Suddenly Aislyn recognizes Brooklyn (Thomason) as Brooklyn (the borough), Bronca as the Bronx, and Padmini as Queens. She's sure Hong is a city—but not Manhattan. When she notices Hong's "foreign foot" trampling her garden, she gets furious: "It is as if Conall has broken a dam within her, and now every bit of fury she has ever suppressed over thirty years just needs the barest hair trigger to explode." She demands the other avatars get off her lawn, and an energy wave throws Brooklyn, Bronca, Padmini, and Hong into the street. The Woman claps.

Aislyn misdirects her rage at Conall's assault on Hong because his "foreign foot" touched her plants—or, in other words, because her preexisting xenophobia makes her comfortable expressing rage at non-white and foreign men. Contrary to Bronca's earlier claims, then, abuse victims don't merely need to fight in order to end their abusers—they need to fight the right people and direct their rage at the right targets.

Padmini, getting up, demands to know why Aislyn would attack them. Aislyn says she doesn't know them, and they were in her yard. When Brooklyn says Aislyn must know who they—and the Woman in White—are, Aislyn insists the Woman is her friend. Padmini calls Aislyn "crazy" and demands to know whether Aislyn knows what the Woman plans to do. Aislyn, whose father Matthew frequently calls her (and women in general) crazy, reacts with anger that she doesn't allow herself to show to her father. She tells them that the Woman's acting out of necessity and that in the Woman's reality, "people *try* to be decent."

Again, Aislyn misdirects her rage at her father's sexism onto Padmini; due to racism and internalized sexism, she feels comfortable contradicting a non-white, female stranger but can't make herself stand up to her father. Her application of her father's mantra about Staten Island—that "people try to be decent" there—to the Woman's reality shows that Aislyn has repressed her epiphanies that Staten Island's decency is a facade, and that the Woman is an alien entity. Instead, she chooses to conceptualize the Woman and her reality as basically similar to Aislyn and Aislyn's own reality.

When Aislyn sees the other boroughs' incomprehension, she thinks that while she once longed to join the city, now she wants to reject them. Aislyn snaps that maybe "the rest of the city" should be destroyed.

Aislyn already assumed that the other boroughs wouldn't care about her, because her father's emotional abuse has convinced her she's worthless. Now she is taking their understandable shock about her allegiance to the Woman in White as a rejection of her—and decides, petulantly, to reject them in turn. Her exclamation that maybe "the rest of the city" deserves to be destroyed shows that she still hasn't grasped the full implications of the Woman in White's mission: the Woman intends to destroy the entire *city, even if she saves Staten Island for last.*

Brooklyn tells Aislyn that Brooklyn's daughter (Jojo) won't die because of Aislyn. Brooklyn and Bronca move to take Aislyn with them by force. Aislyn is sputtering at them that her father's a **police** officer when the Woman in White blocks Brooklyn and Bronca's way and summons a doorway. Through the doorway, Aislyn sees a young woman unconscious and covered in slime a cave. Bronca calls out, "Veneza?" The Woman says that if they want Veneza back safe, they'll leave Aislyn alone.

That Aislyn would threaten the embodied boroughs trying to save New York City with her abusive father illustrates how badly Aislyn has confused those who hurt her with those who'll help her; it also, once again, associates police officers with destructive behavior toward the city rather than with defending it. That the Woman in White uses Veneza as a valuable hostage, meanwhile, suggests that Veneza is a true, valued member of the embodied boroughs' community in a way that Aislyn is not.

Hong points out that the Woman in White will destroy the city. The Woman says yes, but she'll be "civilized" and cause as little pain as possible while destroying our reality—she'll even create a mini-universe where some humans can live out their lifespans. Bronca tells the Woman not to call herself civilized while planning to murder everyone.

Bronca's implied belief that certain actions cannot be conducted in a "civilized" way—that they are definitionally not "civilized"—suggests that some projects or goals are so evil that people should never attempt them, no matter their reasons or how they might try to mitigate the evil effects.

When Padmini reacts with disgust to Veneza's cave, Aislyn realizes it's a mouth, belonging to the "Ding Ho," which may eat Veneza. Padmini, Bronca, and Brooklyn prepare to attack the Woman. Aislyn, convinced the Woman in White is her "only friend," wills Padmini, Bronca, Brooklyn, and Hong away.

Earlier, Aislyn associated the monster now holding Veneza in its mouth with a snack cake. Her conceptual confusion underlines how badly she has misperceived her situation: she thinks that the manipulative, controlling Woman in White is her "only friend" while wanting the people who ought to be her fellow community members to leave.

Back in the subway station, Manny and Paolo see a train covered in **tendrils** approaching. Suddenly, a mouth opens in the train's front. Manny begins to physically transform, his voice deepening, muscles enlarging, and skin sprouting fur until—thinking he should watch classier New York films—he becomes King Kong and attacks the train.

In the original 1933 King Kong *film, the eponymous giant gorilla Kong kills a number of monsters to protect a beautiful actress, Ann Darrow, with whom he has fallen in love. In this passage, New York City's avatar is playing the role of Ann Darrow, the damsel in distress. Manny's throwaway thought that he should watch better movies reminds readers that art is important because it furnishes people with the concepts we use to understand our lives—concepts that may be helpful or may be stereotypical and silly.*

Back at Aislyn's, Aislyn screams at Bronca, Padmini, Brooklyn, and Hong that they don't "*belong*." An energy wave powered by the Staten Island concept of belonging banishes Bronca, Padmini, Brooklyn, Hong, their car, the shadow creatures, and the Ding Ho. Because Aislyn wasn't intending to banish the Woman in White, she remains. She lands beside Aislyn and asks whether they're friends. Aislyn agrees. The Woman touches Aislyn. Aislyn feels a "sting," and the Woman reacts with triumph. While Aislyn feels comforted that a city—not New York, but still, a city—is her friend, more of the Woman's **tendrils** grow all over Staten Island.

By claiming that the other embodied boroughs (and Hong) don't "belong" and banishing them, Aislyn definitively isolates herself and Staten Island from the rest of New York City's community. The "sting" that Aislyn feels when the Woman in White next touches her implies that the Woman has finally succeeded in infecting Aislyn with a tendril—perhaps because Aislyn has rejected the city whose essence was protecting her.

CHAPTER 16: NEW YORK IS WHO?

Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza are all teleported in front of the Bull of Wall Street. When Bronca checks on Veneza, Veneza expresses horror at the strange reality, halfway between ours and the Woman in White's, where the Woman was keeping her. Padmini asks whether they've permanently lost the fight against the Woman, now that Aislyn has betrayed them. Bronca snarks that Aislyn's unique skill is "magic xenophobia" and then asks where Hong is. None of them know where Aislyn sent him.

The Bull of Wall Street is a statue near the southern tip of Manhattan. That Aislyn sent the others back to Manhattan suggests that she subconsciously associates Manhattan more closely with non-Staten Island New York City than she does any of the other boroughs. When Bronca calls Aislyn's Staten Island concept of belonging "magic xenophobia," it illustrates that concepts like belonging can bring communities together, but those concepts can also be used to exclude and marginalize those not considered part of the community.

Spying her car next to the Bull, Bronca says she'll drive them to City Hall. Padmini protests that it's pointless to let New York City's avatar devour them without Staten Island. Brooklyn says she's going—she refuses to admit defeat, even if Padmini does. Padmini, realizing that finding the avatar is their best chance to save the city, mournfully agrees to come with them. Brooklyn calls one of her employees and arranges for Transit Museum staff to let them into City Hall Station.

Bronca, Brooklyn, and Padmini ultimately decide to sacrifice their lives to save New York City even though they're not sure the sacrifice will even work. Their utilitarian logic in this case—sacrifice a few for the chance of saving many—is at odds with the way they shrugged off the devastating effects of cities' births on other dimensions. If they were truly committed to sacrificing a smaller number of lives to save greater, they might agree with the Woman in White that preventing cities from being born was preferable to killing neighboring dimensions and all their inhabitants. The inconsistencies in the embodied boroughs' ethical reasoning suggest that they don't have a consistent ethical outlook—and may be privileging the lives of humans over those of intelligent aliens because they belong to a human community and do not see alien lives as valuable in the same way.

On the way, Bronca sees many structures made of **tendrils**. Veneza tells Bronca the Woman in White is an extradimensional city avatar, trying to bring her city into our reality on top of New York, and points out a subtle shadow dimming the sun over the city. She urges Bronca and the others to act quickly.

Figuratively, gentrification turns a city into a different place by uprooting locals and replacing small businesses with global ones. The novel literalizes the idea that gentrification turns a city into a different place by having the Woman in White, who has weaponized gentrification against New York, bring a different city down on top of it.

The Transit Museum director meets Bronca, Veneza, Padmini, and Brooklyn at an entrance to the derelict subway station, where he gives them his flashlight and the keys. Inside, they find the **tendril**-infected subway train, destroyed. Paolo appears and asks whether Staten Island has joined them. Brooklyn is explaining how the Woman in White corrupted Staten Island when she sees Manny sitting with his back to the wall, naked and bloody. When Paolo asks whether Staten Island understands what she's doing by allying with the Woman, Padmini says she does and that they lost Hong when Staten Island banished them.

In this scene, all appears lost for the embodied boroughs. Although Manny has successfully protected New York City's avatar against the tendril-infected train, the New York City community has lost an apparently irreplaceable part with Aislyn's defection.

Manny, helped up by Padmini, suggests they try anyway. They all walk toward the sleeping avatar. Manny tries to touch the avatar again, but an invisible wall again stops his hand. Bronca, Padmini, and Brooklyn all try too—and all are stopped by the invisible wall. Through the skylight, Bronca sees the shadow over the city thicken. They're discussing how the Woman in White's city will destroy our universe when Veneza interrupts. When they look at her, she's covered in sweat, and then suddenly they see her as part of a city. Paolo announces that cities are defined by their inhabitants' beliefs rather than by political structures or borders. He grabs Veneza and drags her toward New York City's avatar.

Throughout the novel, Veneza has seemed special: she can see the tendrils when most ordinary people can't, and she has a loving relationship to New York City and to the Bronx's avatar, Bronca. Yet Veneza is from New Jersey and thus, technically, not a New Yorker. Now Paolo seems to be suggesting that Veneza being from New Jersey doesn't matter, because her beliefs—and not on which side of a state line she resides—determine which communities she belongs to.

Bronca, welcoming Veneza into the circle of boroughs around New York City's avatar, explains to her that people from Jersey City always claim to be from New York City, which is reasonable since Jersey City's closer to Manhattan than Staten Island. She asks Veneza who she is, and Veneza replies that she's Jersey City. When Manny asks the others, "who are *we*?", the avatar begins to glow, opens his eyes, and says, "We're New York."

Veneza believes herself and her part of the New York metropolitan area—Jersey City—to really be *New York. Because, in the novel, beliefs shape reality, Veneza is able to become New York City's fifth avatar, replacing Aislyn. With five embodied boroughs present, New York City's avatar is able to wake up.*

In cityspace, New York's avatar, Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza use New York concepts such as city noise, "sewer fire," Wall Street employees, muggers, and "helicopter parents" to attack the Woman in White's infection everywhere they find it. The Woman has transferred too much of herself from her own reality to retreat entirely, but New York City's avatars are destroying her, and so she uses Staten Island as an "anchor" to save herself. Meanwhile, the rest of New York City is freed of her.

New York City cannot completely purge itself of the Woman in White's presence, because one of its boroughs—Staten Island—has completely succumbed to her manipulations, welcomed her in, and rejected the rest of the city. Yet just as the Woman in White weaponized gentrification against the city, so the city's avatars are able to weaponize gentrification's opposite—authentically New York phenomena and people—to contain the Woman to Staten Island.

CODA

New York City's avatar is standing on the Coney Island boardwalk and contemplating his spirit "conjoined" with those of Manny, Bronca, Brooklyn, Padmini, and Veneza—this conjunction being what his eating them really consisted of. They're celebrating July 9th, the day New York declared independence from England—and their almost-three-week anniversary of becoming city avatars.

This passage reveals that Bronca was right to suspect the "eating" could be metaphorical rather than literal—which makes sense, given the novel's abiding interest in metaphors, concepts, and other abstract ideas. July 9th is the date on which George Washington ordered the Declaration of Independence read aloud in New York City—thus, it's a more local and authentic alternative to the 4th of July.

Paolo joins New York City's avatar on the boardwalk, where he's watching Jojo, Padmini, and Veneza play Marco Polo. Aishwarya, her husband, Bronca, and Manny are sitting on the beach. Manny, realizing the avatar is looking at him, meets his eyes—and the avatar looks away, thinking that while Manny is good-looking, he hasn't had an ongoing romantic relationship for a while by choice. Manny looks away too, and the avatar notes that Manny is very attuned to and considerate of his emotional responses.

This passage reveals the ambivalence New York City's avatar feels about belonging to a community. Although he's with the other embodied boroughs and their families, he's standing apart from them on the boardwalk—and although he finds Manny attractive and notes Manny's consideration, he's not sure he wants a closer relationship with him.

Paolo tells New York City's avatar that the situation "could be worse." When the avatar replies that it's bizarre, Paolo tells him that it's New York City's identity—which has shocked the older cities, who were assuming the situation would resolve the way it did in London, despite the extreme dissimilarities between London and New York.

That New York City has multiple surviving avatars shocks the older cities—which again suggests that the older cities have difficulty revising their concepts and beliefs or adjusting their worldview in response to new evidence.

New York City's avatar asks whether Hong's all right. Paolo says yes—after his unexpected teleportation back to Hong Kong, Hong summoned the living cities (the "Summit") to a meeting in Paris. New York City is also invited. Paolo says the other cities will want to talk about—and then he trails off, indicating Staten Island across the water, shadowed by an invisible object overhead.

This passage indicates that while the embodied boroughs (minus Aislyn) have defeated the Woman in White, she remains a threat to great cities and their unique communities around the world. She will not stop trying to do what she believes is necessary.

When Paolo says he needs to travel to the airport, New York City's avatar tries to hide his disappointment. Paolo offers the avatar his sublet, which he has rented through July. When the avatar contemplates being homeless again after July, Paolo tells him firmly that the embodied boroughs will "take care" of him and that they "need" him. When the avatar says the boroughs need him to survive, Paolo corrects him—the boroughs need the avatar in order "to be great."

Though New York City's avatar is holding himself somewhat aloof from the boroughs' avatars, he seems to have developed a fondness for Paolo and is sad to see him go. Paolo attempts to motivate New York City's avatar to enter into community more deeply with the other avatars by telling him that the boroughs need him "to be great"—which suggests that the boroughs are not truly great as individual people but only as a unit, the whole unit being what New York City's avatar represents.

After Paolo leaves, Padmini joins New York City's avatar and brings him onto the beach, where Veneza—complaining that she can sense the avatar's hunger—hands him a sandwich. The avatar sits down with the others, Manny moves to make room, hands him a drink, and welcomes him "back." The avatar replies: "No place in the world can compare."

The other embodied boroughs immediately make good on Paolo's promise that they'll take care of New York City's avatar: they feed him, give him a drink, and welcome him. New York City's avatar ends the novel with an affirmation of the city's uniqueness: "No place in the world can compare."

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