

Concentric: Literary and Cultural Studies 43.1
March 2017: 33-50
DOI: 10.6240/concentric.lit.2017.43.1.03

Anthropocene, What Anthropocene?

The City and the Epoch in *A Fine Balance* and *The Dog*

Simon C. Estok

Research Center for Comparative Literature and World Literature
Shanghai Normal University, China

Department of English Language and Literature
Sungkyunkwan University, South Korea

Abstract

Although a heavily contested theoretical space, the term “Anthropocene,” it seems, is here to stay, but theorizing about and understanding what it means in terms of the heterogeneity of urban spaces and their representations is productive and potentially epoch-changing. Embedded in the top end of the trajectory of human influence on the world, the cities of Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance* (1995) and Joseph O’Neill’s *The Dog* (2014) allow for important investigations into the Anthropocene and its origins, into growth and its limits and costs, into the place and participation of cities in the Anthropocene, into questions of despair, and into reasons for hope. One of the assumptions here is that while capitalism is not the cause of the Anthropocene, it is certainly one of the symptoms of the accelerated Anthropocene, a symptom present and inescapable in both *A Fine Balance* and *The Dog*. This article argues that there is good cause for hope, since cities are, to date, the most efficient organizations with which we have yet come up. As such, cities may very well end up being the necessary natural step—fraught though they are with growing pains—toward sustainable living, toward balance, and toward changing the trajectory of doom on which we are currently headed.

Keywords

Anthropocene, the city, sustainability, ecocriticism, *A Fine Balance*, *The Dog*

No mature models of urban sustainability are available today, anywhere on the planet.

—Gary Gardner
“Imagining a Sustainable City”

Stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters.

—Rohinton Mistry
A Fine Balance

Introduction

In a novel such as Rohinton Mistry’s 1995 *A Fine Balance*, we see a profoundly different city than in Joseph O’Neill’s 2014 *The Dog*, yet both, in their very different ways and through profoundly dissimilar settings, offer very distinct perspectives on and avenues of analysis about the Anthropocene. These two novels are exemplary models for theorizing about the relationships between “the city” and “the Anthropocene,” in part because they display a heterogeneity of urban spaces in the twenty-first century. Far from being a singular paradigm, cities (whether Saskatoon or Seoul, Nyíregyháza or New York, Dubai or Mumbai) participate in the Anthropocene in their own unique ways. As “the city” is a heterogeneous concept, no less is the term “Anthropocene” itself—a term not as yet officially adopted by scientists—a contested theoretical space. Moreover, to talk about the Anthropocene in the twenty-first century without centering on “the city” (in all of its heterogeneity) would be absurd, given the on-going migration to urban areas globally. Beginning with the very different cities Mistry and O’Neill represent, this paper will reveal the persistence of environmental issues in two very different urban narratives and will show the diverse ways that each critiques the viability of cities as sustainable groupings. Yet, in spite of the critiques, in spite of the enormity of suffering and despoliation and loss Mistry and O’Neill portray, both also paradoxically offer cities as places of hope and suggest that far from necessarily being the site and source of the future ruin written into the trajectories of the Anthropocene graph, cities potentially offer perhaps the greatest hope for ensuring that the Anthropocene is not the final curtain for humanity.

Very Different Cities

In *A Fine Balance*, the hair collector Rajaram notes what all of the other characters in the novel know (and what the people in the contemporary reality of

India that the novel describes also know): “thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place” (Mistry 171). People go to the city in *A Fine Balance* because it is a place of dreams: Ishvar explains to Omprakash that “there is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true” (89). But it is also a place of pressing material realities, and Om’s response is that he is “sick of the city. Nothing but misery” there (91). Not just in *A Fine Balance*: it is for the dreams of the city that the anonymous narrator of *The Dog* leaves New York for Dubai. The influx to cities, moreover, is neither a passing trend nor a geographical peculiarity. All over the world, people are gravitating to cities. Cities are here to stay. A higher ratio of people currently live in cities than at any other time in history. They are the new normal, a permanent transformation of landscapes molded as much by capitalist greed as by need.

The power of capitalism to transform landscapes is palpable in both *The Dog* and *A Fine Balance*. Dubai, as O’Neill describes it, is awe-inspiring. The narrator is gobsmacked in his initial responses to the city: “I was left with the impression of a fantastical actual and/or soon-to-be city, an abracadabrapolis in which buildings flopped against each other and skyscrapers looked wobbly or were rumped or might be twice as tall and slender as the Empire State Building” (11). And the narrator is careful to remind the reader that it is money that made this city what it is: “until very recently, this has always been an uneventful, materially poor, culturally static corner of the world, with inhabitants who did not prioritize their own future prestige” (196).

In the eyes of the developer, the ancestral home of Maneck Kohlah in *A Fine Balance* is a similarly uneventful, materially poor, culturally static corner of the world, one that needs to be developed. For Maneck, it is a mountain paradise, and “the beauty of the place” (205) arouses his topophilic longings.¹ He comes to understand that “Daddy was right, . . . the hills were dying, and I was so stupid to believe the hills were eternal” (585; ellipsis added). One of the balances Mistry presents in this novel is between topophilia and ecophobia, between Maneck’s love of this mountain paradise and the position of the developers—which is one of absolute disrespect, detachment, and objectification.

¹ Patricia Haseltine discusses Yi-Fu Tuan’s notion of topophilia as it relates to *A Fine Balance*. Tuan defines “topophilia” (literally, “the love of place”) as “the affective bond between people and place” (Tuan 4), and Haseltine argues that the “novel falls well within the parameters of environmental justice criticism” (191) in its subtle critique of the “development”/destruction of the Kohlah family’s mountain habitat, the unbalances and unsustainability of India’s push for growing the economy and “developing,” and in the fit of violence within the various hierarchies that the novel describes.

Patricia Haseltine is correct to see the environmental justice criticism Mistry makes here, and it is fruitful to augment Haseltine's argument by noting the isomorphic similarities between the descriptions of Mistry's Bhanu and the words of one of the most famous literary victims of environmental racism and injustice—Shakespeare's Caliban. To see them side-by-side, it is impossible to miss the similarities. Caliban explains to Prospero:

This island's mine, by Sycorax my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou camest first,
Thou strok'dst me, and mad'st much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't; and teach me how
To name the bigger light, and how the less,
That burn by day and night: and then I lov'd thee
And show'd thee all the qualities o'th'isle,
The fresh springs, brine-pits, barren place, and fertile.
Cursed be I that did so!—All the charms
Of Sycorax, toads, beetles, bats, light on you!
For I am all the subjects that you have,
Which first was mine own king; and here you sty me
In this hard rock, whiles you do keep from me
The rest o' th' island. (1.2.331-44)

As the narrator of *A Fine Balance* explains:

On Sundays a gaddi man called Bhanu came to tidy the garden behind the house. Maneck looked forward all week to being outdoors with Bhanu, wandering around the property and doing chores under his direction. The area beyond the first fifty yards, where it began to slope downhill, wild with shrubs and trees and thick undergrowth, was the most interesting. There, Bhanu taught him the names of strange flowers and herbs, things which did not grow near the front of the house with the roses and lilies and marigolds. He pointed out the deadly datura plant and the one that was its antidote, and leaves that mitigated the poison of certain snakes, others which cured stomach ailments, and the stems whose pulp healed cuts and wounds. He showed Maneck how to squeeze a snapdragon to make its jaws open. Late in the year, when the weather turned chilly, they gathered dead

twigs and branches as the afternoon drew to a close, and made a small fire. (208)

In both situations, a foreigner is taking control of the local: in *The Tempest*, it is Prospero; in *A Fine Balance*, it is developers. In both, a local guide knows everything about the place, more than anyone from the outside. We have here a critique of “the flawed development policy, the shortsightedness, the greed that was sacrificing the country’s natural beauty to the demon of progress. . . . The sides of their hills were becoming gashed and scarred” (213; ellipsis added); “the rain, which used to make things grow and ripen, descended torrentially on the denuded hills, causing mudslides and avalanches. Snow, which had provided an ample blanket for the hills, turned skimpy. Even at the height of winter the cover was ragged and patchy” (215). We see (in heavily gendered language) “nature’s rebellion” at “the hideous rape,” and “nowadays, every stroll was like a deathwatch, to see what was still standing and what had been felled” (215), while “lorries as big as houses transported goods from the cities and fouled the air with their exhaust” (214). This is what it means to be living in an age of global capitalism. This is what it means to be living in the Anthropocene.

Measuring Real Costs and Effects

Theorizing about the Anthropocene is all about measuring costs. Cities are undoubtedly costly, in many ways, but in a world of 7.5 billion and growing, the efficiencies of cities are not to be glossed over. Surprisingly little has appeared on this topic within literary studies. Research about urban ecology from an ecocritical perspective begins in earnest with Michael Bennett and David W. Teague’s *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments* (1999), a collection that challenges us to see “the self-limiting conceptualizations of nature, culture, and environment built into many ecocritical projects by their exclusion of urban places” (4) and urges us thereby to participate in “the study of the mutually constructing relationship between culture and environment” (3). A collection that looks both at urban spaces as they relate with the broader natural world outside of the city as well as at ways in which ecocriticism may be applied to theories about and representations of urban spaces, *The Nature of Cities* begins a conversation that—as the rural population globally continues to flock to cities—is an increasingly important one.

Very lately, literary work in the area of urban ecologies has begun to flourish in earnest, most recently evidenced in Christopher Schliephake’s 2014 *Urban*

Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture, a book that offers analyses “of cultural representations of contemporary urbanity” (xviii). Another recent example of interest in theorizing about urban spaces from an ecocritical perspective is in the forthcoming collection entitled *Sustainability and the City: Urban Poetics and Politics*, which, according to the Call for Papers that brought the forthcoming volume together, will consider “the ways in which urban environments define sustainability because cities are the primary home of the circulation of excess capital; class divisions; political resistance; friction between human and nonhuman worlds; and the confluence of art, policy, and social psychology in place-making” (Curtright n. pag.).

One of the questions in all of this work—including the current article and the entire special issue of which it is a part here—concerns the matter of sustainability: just how sustainable are cities? Recent research, to reiterate from one of the epigraphs to this article, recognizes that “no mature models of urban sustainability are available today, anywhere on the planet. And even at the definitional level, there is little agreement about what constitutes a sustainable city” (Gardner 3).

The city in *A Fine Balance* is a long-sustained and well-worn one, and the narrator draws a contrast between it and “clean, gleaming Dubai” (582). But for O’Neill, on the other hand, Dubai is not what it appears, and the focus of *The Dog* is on the false realities of the city. O’Neill offers two cities in the novel: Dubai and New York, each, in their own way, a moneyed city that flaunts its consumption, disregarding costs. New York is the city that has had its day: “the city looks ragged,” the nameless narrator complains, with even the glittering “three-quarters built Freedom Tower” appearing as nothing more than “a stump,” “a gargantuan remnant” of the city’s glory days: “the Belt is as worn-down as ever,” and “[t]he same battered NYPD saloons lurk roadside with the same lethargic and dangerous cops inside them” (219). This post-9/11 city, although it continues to be the financial capital of the world, is not a “brand new Dubai” (218) and is clearly a veteran of the ravages of economic booms and busts, of civil strife, crime, and terrorism. *The Dog*, then, is about unveiling illusions—the illusion of the American dream and its real costs, the illusions of an ever-upward philosophy of development, and of Dubai.

The narrator presents himself through pseudonyms (as “Godfrey Pardew” and its variants) and is comparable to the fantastical but illusory city in which he spends most of his time in the novel. Slums obviously are central to *A Fine Balance*. Such is not the case in *The Dog*. Although there are indeed slums in Dubai, the commonplace illusions about this city endure: “They got millionaires, billionaires. . . . every day, you got Lamborghinis crashing into other Lamborghinis, every day you got sunshine,

the gas is basically free, they got no taxes, it's heaven on earth" (10; ellipsis added). The narrator doesn't want to know "about the bargains that presumably underwrote [his] room being clean and their hands [the apartment servicing crew] being dirty," and he confesses to feeling "a fearful disgust at these scurriers as they intermittently appeared out of the walls and concealed spaces of the building" (45). He notes the contrast between his "chilled apartment" and what the construction workers—"men, who are in the blazing hot outdoors"—must experience. As with the apartment servicing crew,² the construction crew is also a racially dispossessed group—in this case, "South Asian men" (79). The razzle and dazzle of Dubai make these men virtually invisible.

The narrator speaks repeatedly about the falseness of the images, of Dubai being a place "where an elite of beautiful cosmopolitan tastemakers convenes in order to lead lives of extraordinary *luxé* and cachet" (151); of how "Dubai [. . . is a] land of signs to nowhere: . . . signboards that direct you to roads that have yet to be built" (29; ellipses added); of how it is a place of corruption and dubious justice:

contrary to its accommodating and modern appearance, for the non-national, the emirate is a vast booby trap of medieval judicial perils, and Johnny Foreigner must especially take great care when interacting with the local citizens (who constitute only 10 percent or so of the population) because de facto there is one law for Abdul Emirate and another for Johnny Foreigner. (114)

At the same time, the narrator is deeply critical of the hypocrisy of people from "catastrophically deforested, coal-built countries" who censure Dubai for its opulence and for all of the splurging and waste in this "desert playground" (201). Yet, there is no getting around the unsustainability and costs, no erasing of the mark of the Anthropocene of O'Neill's city. Or of Mistry's.

In Mistry, we have an unnamed Indian city by the sea, a bustling, loud, and lively place—contemporary, certainly, but without the glitz and shine of Dubai. Mistry describes the city as a predator: "This expensive city will . . . eat us alive, for sure" (77; ellipsis added). We see descriptions of social costs, "the hellishness of the place" (67), "the warren of laneways in the sordid belly of the city" (66), "the gloomy

² The narrator "couldn't place those strange brown faces . . . [he] didn't know whether these persons were Nepalese, Guyanese, Indians, Bangladeshis, Sri Lankans, Kenyan, Malaysians, Filipinos, or Pakistanis" (45; ellipsis added). The point is that they are exploited because of race. They cost less.

slum lanes” (161), the “poor children in the city, doing boot-polishing at railway stations, or collecting papers, bottles, plastic—plus going to school at night” (27), and children floating paper boats in rivers of shit and piss (68). Yet, people continue to flock to the city: it is “a very big city” (158), “it’s almost impossible in this city to find a house” (161), and “the time is not far-off when accommodation will be impossible to find” (49).

While Mistry’s city is old, grimy, and poor, O’Neill’s is—by comparison—new, sparkly, and rich. Each novel addresses the deep importance of environment in their respective cities and in their differing visions of development. The Indian city shows the effects of climate change like a baseball bat bunting a face; Dubai, on the other hand, flaunts human mastery over nature—with an indoor ski resort in the desert, no less. Both novels reveal cities that are, in a manner of speaking, at break-point. At one time, O’Neill’s narrator complains, there was a problem with overwhelming amounts of sewage in the fast-growing Dubai, for instance.³ What both Mistry and O’Neill take pains to represent is the fact that, to quote urban geographers Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson, “cities are not simply material or lived spaces—they are also spaces of the imagination and spaces of representation. How cities are envisioned has effects” (7). Both novels clearly critique the viability of cities as environmentally sound or suitable configurations; yet, both also present vibrant, living, changing cities, places that are in constant flux, are evolving and morphing and being reimagined.

With its capacity to be as real as we imagine it, the city poses challenges, one of which is about ideals of human agency. But the Anthropocene does more than simply offer such a challenge: it seems to posit the impossibility of the kind of human agency we have come to expect as our right, to assert our complete powerlessness to do what we have done before, to deny humanity the ability to re-make the world in such a way that ensures our continued survival and proliferation. The trajectory on which humans have lived, happily remaking the world to our benefit, does not point to a pretty future, to be sure, but if there is one thing that characterizes our species, it

³ The narrator explains that:

among the more embarrassing criticisms of the emirate is that it cannot deal, on a municipal level, with the huge and booming volume of digestive waste produced by its population. Much of the sewage is collected in septic tanks, whose contents are moved to the treatment plant in fleets of trucks. Apparently the lines of trucks waiting to enter the plant are so long, and the waiting is so unendurable and/or cost-ineffective, that some truckers have resorted to illegally dumping their loads behind sand dunes and in the city’s storm drains, the latter practice resulting in unfortunate incidents of fecal stuff turning up in Dubai’s otherwise tip-top swimming waters. I believe the situation is now under control. (132)

is our capacity to adjust and to change (not only our world but our behaviors) when it benefits us to do so (or when our well-being is jeopardized). The Anthropocene forces us to confront distressing facts, to envision worrying realities, and to face up to the effects of our nonchalance and ecophobia.

Recently, theorists of the Anthropocene, like ecocritics before them, have asked important questions about envisionings and effects. Adam Trexler begins his pioneering investigation of Anthropocene fictions with some of the following questions:

What tropes are necessary to comprehend climate change or to articulate the possible futures faced by humanity? How can a global process, spanning millennia, be made comprehensible to human imagination, with its limited sense of place and time? What longer, historical forms aid this imagination, and what are the implications and limits of their use? What is impossible or tremendously difficult for us to understand about climate change? How does anthropogenic global warming challenge the political imagination or invite new organizations of human beings to emerge? How does living in the Anthropocene reconfigure human economies and ecosystems? And finally, how does climate change alter the forms and potentialities of art and cultural narrative? (5)⁴

Yet, for all of its considerable merits (not the least of which is that it is really the first monograph dealing explicitly with cli-fi novels), Trexler's discussion seems to conflate the Anthropocene and climate change. Although climate change is clearly a part of the Anthropocene, the two are not synonymous. One of the things we might

⁴ These questions echo ones earlier raised by Rob Nixon:

how can we convert into image and narrative the disasters that are slow moving and long in the making, disasters that are anonymous and that star nobody, disasters that are attritional and of indifferent interest to the sensation-driven technologies of our image-world? How can we turn the long emergencies of slow violence into stories dramatic enough to rouse public sentiment and warrant political intervention, these emergencies whose repercussions have given rise to some of the most critical challenges of our time? (3)

observe that differentiates the climate change era of the Anthropocene⁵ from what precedes it is the sense of existential doubt, insecurity, and despair that it carries with it.

Trajectories of Despair

In a *New York Times* op-ed entitled “Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene,” Roy Scranton offers the nihilist set of suggestions that “civilisation is already dead,” that “there’s nothing we can do to save ourselves,” and that “if we want to learn to live in the Anthropocene, we must first learn how to die” (n. pag.).⁶ The assumptions here are that the Anthropocene is something new, that humanity has only recently begun to change the planet, the climate, the biosphere, and so on, and that these monumental changes are fatal blows. These assumptions, however, are palpably false. What *is* true of the Anthropocene (and Scranton makes this clear), is that it engenders a sense of fatality and despair—but we need to be clear that what we are talking about here is the late Anthropocene and that it is characterized by climate change (points Scranton does not make clear).

While it is important not to give in to despair, it is also critical to understand the miserable realities of the narrative of which we are the main character, “the story without a known ending; the looming sense of fatality; the creeping awareness that nothing can be put right” (Rose 215). After all, as Ishvar comments in *A Fine Balance*, “stories of suffering are no fun when we are the main characters” (377). Indeed, as geographer Lauren Rickards explains, “[m]ore than a neologism or mere geological label, the Anthropocene is a grand tale about humanity and its place in the world” (280), and that place is not an enviable one at the moment.

To fight despair does not mean to deny reality or to join the ranks of climate change skeptics; rather, it means trying to stop the trajectories of the great acceleration. These trajectories do not take us anywhere good. Because our capacity to perform such a feat seems so feeble, it should not be surprising that one of the key elements of the Anthropocene, to cite Alexander Stoner and Andony Melathopoulos, is a “widespread helplessness” (106). Ishvar feels this and explains in *A Fine Balance* that “everything ends badly. It’s the law of the universe” (456), a point echoed later

⁵ I want to be perfectly clear that if we use the term Anthropocene, then we *must* date it to the period in which humanity began to have a measurable geo/atmospheric effect, and that period *must* be at the commencement of agriculture. That’s when everything changed.

⁶ Scranton revisits these ideas in the expanded book version of the article. See, in particular, “Introduction: Coming Home.”

in the novel when the lawyer/proof-reader Vasantrao Valmik explains that “losing, and losing again, is the very basis of the life process, till all we are left with is the bare essence of human existence” (555). It is the ironic loss of agency in the Anthropocene that produces a sense of helplessness—ironic because it is the very force of human agency that has produced this problematical period of global history and its hellish cities.

But the city, as I have been arguing, is potentially both a hellish place and a place to which people flock, a place of topophilic longing. Both novels offer cities that are, for various reasons, tough to survive in, but this is not to say that either novel offers the city as a new space, a novel domain symptomatic of the Anthropocene (and all of the rhetoric of unsustainability that such would entail). Both cities show how important interconnectedness is for survival and yet how such interconnectedness is under threat in cities of the Anthropocene. Mistry explains that “the idea of independence was a fantasy. Everyone depended on someone” (432), and “the whole quilt is much more important than any single square” (480); O’Neill, too, shows that “solo survival is not and has never been humanly feasible” (129). Each novel shows capitalism as a network in which individuals struggle to fit, but it is a network that stresses the importance not of connectedness but of individualism. The individualism and the value for human agency (often to the exclusion of all other forms of agency) characterizing capitalism run very much counter to the sense of connectedness and ecological modesty required for sustainable living. Indeed, individualism is one of the great illusions *The Dog* unveils. It is surely telling that the narrator of this novel is unnamed, a speck of nothing. As his fabulously wealthy boss explains to him on a quick trip back to New York, “nobody has a name” (226).⁷ Within an ecological context, within the context of a world exploited and diminished, what possible use could individualism serve?⁸

It is crucial to avoid the privileging of the human as the site and source of agency defining effects in the Anthropocene. Recent work in what has been dubbed the new materialism has argued for the agency of matter, a point surely vital to how we imagine (from within ecocriticism) cities and their representations. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost argued in their truly revolutionary collection entitled *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (2010):

⁷ The city brings a similar loss of identity in *A Fine Balance*, and there is a lack of identity in cities in general: “It’s not good to go far from your native village. Then you forget who you are” (107), the tailor Dukhi explains. The city imposes a “cloak of urban anonymity” (121).

⁸ One reviewer of the book discusses this “futility of consciousness itself” in terms of the novel’s plot and theme: “*The Dog* turns in on itself in imitation of the dreadful circling and futility of consciousness itself. Its subplots go nowhere, as in life” (Osborne BR1).

the human species is being relocated within a natural environment whose material forces themselves manifest certain agentic capacities and in which the domain of unintended or unanticipated effects is considerably broadened. Matter is no longer imagined here as a massive, opaque plenitude but is recognized instead as indeterminate, constantly forming and reforming in unexpected ways. One could conclude, accordingly, that “matter becomes” rather than that “matter is.” It is in these choreographies of becoming that we find cosmic forces assembling and disintegrating to forge more or less enduring patterns that may provisionally exhibit internally coherent, efficacious organization: objects forming and emerging within relational fields, bodies composing their natural environment in ways that are corporeally meaningful for them, and subjectivities being constituted as open series of capacities or potencies that emerge hazardously and ambiguously within a multitude of organic and social processes. (10)

The implications here are manifold, as proponents of material ecocriticism have been quick to observe. The materials of the city are produced by and productive of the human.⁹ Jonathan Raban’s comments thus are as valid today as they were when penned in 1974:

Cities, unlike villages and small towns, are plastic by nature. We mould them in our images: they, in turn, shape us by the resistance they offer when we try and impose a personal form on them. . . . The city as we might imagine it, the soft city of illusion, myth, aspiration, nightmare, is as real, maybe more real, than the hard city one can locate in maps and statistics, in monographs on urban sociology and demography and architecture. (Raban 10; qtd. in Bridge and Watson 14; ellipsis in original)

⁹ See also Schliephake for extensive discussions about material agency as it relates to ecocritical theorizing about urban ecology. Schliephake lays out his theoretical bases on the topic in his lengthy introduction—see, in particular, xxviii-xxxiv, where he establishes the grounds for arguing about “how culture and non-human nature constantly interact[ing] in an (urban) environment” (xxxiv) forms the basis for political action and administrative politics.

There is, then, a tremendous malleability and heterogeneity of cities, and the contrasts are remarkably visible in back-to-back readings of *A Fine Balance* and *The Dog*. But cities do not—in fiction or reality—inaugurate the Anthropocene.

Ecocriticism and Urban Ecologies

What can the concept of the Anthropocene offer in terms of reading the past and of reclaiming the future from the trajectories of ruin to which the past(s) point? Is the Anthropocene a valid term, given that it is in the nature of life to do exactly what we do, to move *semper sursum*, and given that without natural predators or obstacles, any species would do its level best to take over? What would the world look like if mosquitoes had no natural predators? Or tomatoes? Ants? Super-viruses? How different would those -cenes be?

While the term “Anthropocene” is here to stay, both as a term and as a material reality, “its force is mainly as a loose, shorthand term for all the new contexts and demands—cultural, ethical, aesthetic, philosophical and political—of environmental issues that are truly planetary in scale, notably climate change, ocean acidification, effects of overpopulation, deforestation, soil-erosion, overfishing and the general and accelerating degradation of ecosystems” (Clark 2).

For Donna Haraway, “the Anthropocene marks severe discontinuities; what comes after will not be like what came before. I think our job is to make the Anthropocene as short/thin as possible and to cultivate with each other in every way imaginable epochs to come that can replenish refuge. Right now, the earth is full of refugees, human and not, without refuge” (160). Accomplishing what Haraway suggests, however, cannot escape materiality: it would leave an indelible and lasting mark. It would be another part of the Anthropocene. Again, let’s face it: the Anthropocene is here to stay.

If the notion of the Anthropocene has any interpretive value at all, perhaps it is less in the parameters of its temporal beginnings and end than in what it seeks to describe (though obviously these items are deeply entwined). What it seeks to describe is an historical caesura. Tobias Boes and Kate Marshall maintain that “all theories of the Anthropocene are premised on the historicist notion of an absolute break with the past: a hypothetical point in time when the human condition irrevocably changed” (62). To accept the term Anthropocene means to accept the challenge to see ourselves and our world differently, not within a model wherein “humans have become a rival to Nature” (Cook et al. 231) but one wherein humans are a radically destabilizing *part* of Nature, rather like an influenza virus is to its host.

Like an influenza virus, humanity can weaken the larger system of which it is a part, and that larger system may, as a result, get rid of it.

There is no way to overstate the importance of recognizing that we are expendable, that “the earth does not actually care whether we survive or not” (Head 315), and that it is nothing short of self-aggrandizement and hubris to think that everything has led up to and will end with us, the ultimate end of everything. The Anthropocene will not be short-lived: the effects will be long, and the early Anthropocene of the newly agricultural human societies is radically different from the accelerated Anthropocene in which we live (and I’m reluctant to use the adjective “late” here, since it seems that there is much more Anthropocene to come).

Notwithstanding the problems associated with the term, “the very idea,” as Alexa Weik von Mossner explains, “of the Anthropocene—regardless of whether it will become an official geological epoch or not—continues to be immensely productive for storytelling, inspiring artists to look for innovative and more adequate modes and media for conveying what it means—and what it can mean—when humans wield a geological force” (88). And story-telling and art are not to be underestimated or under-valued. Nor is their study. Timothy Morton puts the case well that “studying art is important, because art sometimes gives voice to what is unspeakable elsewhere” (12).

Mistry and O’Neill take us elsewhere, to two very different cities with two very different takes on the Anthropocene. Mistry leads us through the streets of an ancient city, streets that we feel and taste and hear, and we experience a strong visceral response to Mistry’s city and its noise: “[n]oise from the surrounding buildings did not abate. Radios blared. A man yelled at a woman, beating her, stopping for a bit when she screamed for help, then starting again. A drunkard shouted abuse, and there was boisterous laughter at his expense. The grind of the traffic was constant” (154). O’Neill takes us through a “velocity and immensity of infrastructural operations” (30) that boggles the mind, and we see

a city whose coastline featured bizarre man-made peninsulas as well as those already-famous artificial islets known as The World, so named because they were grouped to suggest, to a bird’s eye, a physical map of the world; a city where huge stilts rose out of the earth and disappeared like Jack’s beanstalk, three hundred meters up, into a synthetic cloud. Apparently the cloud contained, or would in due course contain, a platform with a park and other amenities. (11-12)

Mistry gives us a city where everything—down to human hair—is recycled; O’Neill shows a city in which people “either had no understanding of how money worked, no idea about profit or value, or else knew all about it but just didn’t give a shit” (11), a city where recycling human hair is unthinkable (and recycling does not come up in any way in the novel). The city in *A Fine Balance* is old, plagued by centuries of haphazard development; the city in *The Dog* is new and meticulously planned. The ancient city with clearly “tried and true” dynamics and operations hosts corruption: “you’ve no idea what kind of crookedness exists in a city” (300). The new metropolis is an experiment of sorts in untested territory, but territory with all of the technologies of tomorrow captained by all of the values, prejudices, and traditions of yesterday—indeed, the narrator is a lawyer who was hired for the express purpose of aiding and abetting a corrupt and fabulously wealthy family: “if there is an ass out there that needs cover,” the narrator is the person for the job (37-38). These are very different cities and very different sets of involvement with the Anthropocene, very diverse sets of struggles, and very similar economic imperatives. Capitalism is not the cause of the Anthropocene, but it is one of the symptoms of the accelerated Anthropocene—a present and inescapable reality, too, in both *A Fine Balance* and *The Dog*.

Conclusions

One of the things I have been arguing in this article is the notion that the Anthropocene far pre-dates cities. Cities, therefore, seem less to epitomize than to give evidence of the Anthropocene, to be symptomatic rather than causal. At the same time, though, I have been arguing that cities are here to stay and that, like any other living thing, they change, that the changing visions about cities has effects, and that our awareness of the kinds of changes required is the first step in making changes that we need to make. What can give us great hope is not just the push to change cities, “the new laws [that] say the city must be made beautiful” (Mistry 291). It is also that, given the facts that cities are here to stay and that “from a climate change perspective, . . . cities are already relatively green” (Dunham-Jones n. pag., ellipsis added),¹⁰ cities truly do represent our best hope of coping with the Anthropocene.

Whether capitalism will kill us or cure us is a debate for a different forum, but one thing is certain: limitless growth is a contradiction in terms. What the world

¹⁰ Dunham-Jones also notes that urban dwellers in the US have a much smaller carbon footprint than suburban residents (about one-third the size). Large cities also often have better mass transit systems, more organized recycling programs, and proximity of amenities that often obviates the need for cars.

would look like if mosquitoes—or tomatoes, or ants, or super-viruses—had no natural predators is probably similar in some ways to what the Anthropocene looks like: a -cene with a trajectory that leads to radical destabilizations. This is our -cene, the Anthropocene, and the trajectory of the great acceleration does not bode well. But the curtain has not fallen, and cities are, to date, the most efficient organizations that we have yet come up with and may very well end up being the necessary natural step—fraught though they are with growing pains—toward sustainable living, toward balance, and toward changing the trajectory of doom on which we are currently headed.

Works Cited

- Bennett, Michael, and David W. Teague, eds. *The Nature of Cities: Ecocriticism and Urban Environments*. Tucson: U of Arizona P, 1999.
- Boes, Tobias, and Kate Marshall. "Writing the Anthropocene: An Introduction." *the minnesota review* 83 (2014): 60-72.
- Bridge, Gary, and Sophie Watson. "City Imaginaries." *A Companion to the City*. Ed. Gary Bridge and Sophie Watson. Malden: Blackwell, 2000. 7-17.
- Clark, Timothy. *Ecocriticism on the Edge: The Anthropocene as a Threshold Concept*. London: Bloomsbury, 2015.
- Cook, Brian R., Lauren A. Rickards, and Ian Rutherford. "Geographies of the Anthropocene." *Geographical Research* 53.3 (2015): 231-43.
- Coole, Diana, and Samantha Frost. "Introducing the New Materialisms." *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics*. Ed. Diana Coole and Samantha Frost. Durham: Duke UP, 2010. 1-43.
- Curtright, Lauren. "Book Chapters for Sustainability and the City: Urban Poetics and Politics by April 1." *CFP-Call for Papers*. Department of English, University of Pennsylvania, 5 Mar. 2016. 15 June 2016. <<https://call-for-papers.sas.upenn.edu/cfp/2016/03/05/book-chapters-for-sustainability-and-the-city-urban-poetics-and-politics-by-april-1>>.
- Dunham-Jones, Ellen, narr. "Retrofitting Suburbia." *TED: Ideas Worth Spreading*. TED, June 2010. 15 May 2016. <https://www.ted.com/talks/ellen_dunham_jones_retrofitting_suburbia/transcript?language=en>.
- Gardner, Gary. "Imagining a Sustainable City." *State of the World: Can a City Be Sustainable?* Ed. The Worldwatch Institute. Washington, DC: Island, 2016. 3-10.

- Haraway, Donna. "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin." *Environmental Humanities* 6 (2015): 159-65.
- Haseltine, Patricia. "Tailoring Sustainability: Ecological Discourse in Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*." *Asian Journal of Management and Humanity Sciences* 1.2 (2006): 176-93.
- Head, Lesley. "The Anthropoceneans." *Geographical Research* 53.3 (2015): 313-20.
- McNeill, J. R., and Peter Engelke. *The Great Acceleration: An Environmental History of the Anthropocene Since 1945*. Cambridge: Belknap, 2016.
- Mistry, Rohinton. *A Fine Balance*. New York: Vintage, 1997.
- Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2010.
- Nixon, Rob. *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 2011.
- O'Neill, Joseph. *The Dog: A Novel*. New York: Vintage, 2015.
- Osborne, Lawrence. "Time Out Dubai." Rev. of *The Dog*, by Joseph O'Neill. *The New York Times*. Sunday Book Review 4 Sept. 2014: BR1.
- Raban, Jonathan. *Soft City: What Cities Do to Us, and How They Change the Way We Live, Think and Feel*. London: Hamish Hamilton, 1974.
- Rickards, Lauren A. "Metaphor and the Anthropocene: Presenting Humans as a Geological Force." *Geographical Research* 53.3 (2015): 280-87.
- Rose, Deborah Bird. "Anthropocene Noir." *Arena Journal* 41/42 (2013): 206-19.
- Schliephake, Christopher. *Urban Ecologies: City Space, Material Agency, and Environmental Politics in Contemporary Culture*. Lanham: Lexington Books, 2014.
- Scranton, Roy. "Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene." *The New York Times*. The New York Times, 10 Nov. 2013. 15 Feb. 2016. <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2013/11/10/learning-how-to-die-in-the-anthropocene/?_r=0>.
- . *Learning How to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization*. San Francisco: City Lights, 2015.
- Shakespeare, William. *The Tempest*. *The Riverside Shakespeare*. 2nd ed. Ed. G. Blakemore Evans and J. J. M. Tobin. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997. 1656-88.
- Stoner, Alexander M., and Andony Melathopoulos. *Freedom in the Anthropocene: Twentieth-Century Helplessness in the Face of Climate Change*. New York: Palgrave Pivot, 2015.
- Trexler, Adam. *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*. Charlottesville: U of Virginia P, 2015.

Tuan, Yi-Fu. *Topophilia: A Study of Environmental Perception, Attitudes, and Values*. New York: Columbia UP, 1974.

Weik von Mossner, Alexa. "Imagining Geological Agency: Storytelling in the Anthropocene." *Whose Anthropocene? Revisiting Dipesh Chakrabarty's "Four Theses"*. Ed. Robert Emmett and Thomas Lekan. Spec. issue of *RCC Perspectives: Transformations in Environment and Society* 7.2 (2016): 83-88.

About the Author

Dr. Simon C. Estok is the recipient of the Shanghai Metropolitan Government "Oriental Scholar" Award (東方學者) (2015-17) at the Research Center for Comparative Literature and World Literatures at Shanghai Normal University. Estok is also a Senior Fellow and Full Professor at Sungkyunkwan University, where he teaches literary theory, ecocriticism, and Shakespearean literature. His award-winning book *Ecocriticism and Shakespeare: Reading Ecophobia* appeared in 2011 (reprinted 2014), and he is co-editor of a book entitled *Landscape, Seascape, and the Eco-Spatial Imagination* (Routledge, 2016). Estok also co-edited *International Perspectives in Feminist Ecocriticism* (Routledge, 2013) and *East Asian Ecocriticisms* (Macmillan, 2013) and has published extensively on ecocriticism and Shakespeare in such journals as *PMLA*, *Mosaic*, *Configurations*, *English Studies in Canada*, and others.

[Received 25 July 2016; accepted 30 December 2016]