Tropic of Orange, Los Angeles, and the Anthropocene Imagination

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Abstract
This paper argues that Karen Tei Yamashita’s novel Tropic of Orange (1997) provides a prescient, Anthropocene vision of the city. The idea of the Anthropocene—a geological epoch dominated by human-driven changes to the environment—blurs tidy distinctions between the human and the natural. But literary and ecocritical depictions of the city have frequently relied on such categories, imagining the city as a distinctly unnatural space. Tropic of Orange offers an alternative urban vision, depicting Los Angeles as a complex ecological space, shaped both by material histories and by unjust social systems. The novel uses magical realist elements to reverse what Jean and John L. Comaroff have described as the “occult economies” of globalization, making the material elements of global exchange visible as they move through the city. Similarly, magical events draw together crowds of people, living and dead, who have been integrated into the city’s economy, making the human element of the city’s impact visible as well. By materializing the human and ecological networks that support the city, and by rejecting traditionally escapist and pastoral visions of the natural world, Tropic of Orange offers a complex vision of the city as a sociomaterial ecosystem. While the novel does not offer a fully-formed alternative urban vision, it does provide a cautionary tale about what will happen if we do not accept the fundamental challenges that the Anthropocene provides to conventional understandings of nature, ecology, and human responsibility.

Keywords
Karen Tei Yamashita, globalization, Anthropocene, ecocriticism, literature and the city, American literature
Either the Anthropocene will be democratic or it will be terrible.

—Jedediah Purdy
“Anthropocene Fever”

In Karen Tei Yamashita’s *Tropic of Orange* (1997), a character named Manzanar Murakami provides a unique vision of the city of Los Angeles. Manzanar, a former surgeon, walked away from his practice to become a conductor of traffic; homeless, standing above the freeways, he weaves the city’s sounds into an imaginative symphony. This practice attunes him to the city’s interconnected elements, which most urban residents overlook. “There are maps and there are maps and there are maps,” he thinks, as he gazes at “the complexity of layers [that] should drown an ordinary person” (56, 57; emphasis in original). Manzanar is not drowned by these maps, however; he “fearlessly recorded everything” in a “complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56). He weaves together “the prehistoric grid of plant and fauna and human behavior,” as well as “the historic grid of land usage and property, the great overlays of transport” (57). Manzanar’s traffic symphonies parallel one of the projects of *Tropic of Orange* as a whole: a project to “put down all the layers of the real map” of Los Angeles (81). This novel attempts to capture the ways in which the city is both “a great root system, an organic living entity” and a human social construction, marked by legacies of injustice and exploitation (37). *Tropic of Orange* follows seven characters through seven days of surreal, unnatural disasters, as the transportation of oranges and organs across the US-Mexico border literally warps time and space, smashing Mexico and Los Angeles together. Through this series of magical events, *Tropic of Orange* challenges conventional depictions of the city, blurring the distinction between humans and nature.

One way Manzanar’s perspective is unusual is in its awareness of the city as an urban ecosystem, neither fully natural nor manmade. Urban ecology attends to “the flows of energy and materials through [city] ecosystems,” examining both ecosystems within cities and cities as participants within larger-scale ecosystems (Gaston 1). Similarly, Manzanar’s vision blurs conceptual distinctions between the city’s constructed systems and the natural systems of the region. He sees “the very geology of the land, the artesian rivers running beneath the surface” of the city’s structures, flowing into “the unnatural waterways of the Los Angeles Department of Water and Power, and the great dank tunnels of sewage; the cascades of poisonous effluents surging from rain-washed streets into the Santa Monica Bay” (57). By attending to the various layers of Los Angeles, Manzanar observes how the city is
shaped by and in turn reshapes the natural systems supporting it. He is able to see the city as an “organic living entity” because the systems he maps defy neat categorization as entirely natural or artificial (37).

This attention to the natural systems supporting a city counters postmodern visions of cities as particularly immaterial. Critics including Marshall Berman, Doreen Massey, David Harvey, and Jean and John L. Comaroff have described how the postmodern experience involves various forms of dematerialization. Harvey identifies the phenomenon of “time-space compression,” referring to the ways in which instantaneous communication technologies and rapid travel radically transform experiences of the world. Massey uses the term “aspatial globalization” (For Space 81-89; “Imagining Globalization” 29, 34) to describe how the transport of humans and goods obliterates distinct localities and creates one homogenous socioeconomic singularity. Comaroff and Comaroff use the concept of “occult economies” to capture how global economic networks feel detached from material systems of exchange.¹ All of these critics describe how globalized experience is one where, in the oft-quoted words of Marx, “all that is solid melts into air” (qtd. in Berman 15). The city, framed as a hub of globalized capitalism and as a semiotic expression of postmodern fluidity, can come to seem equally unsolid. As Harvey explains, postmodern visions of the city “see space as something independent and autonomous” from any “social objective,” merely “a material base upon which a range of possible sensations and social practices can be thought about, evaluated, and achieved” (66-67). But by peering beneath the city’s surfaces, Manzanar uncovers more substantial, material elements shaping urban systems.

Manzanar’s vision models how Tropic of Orange imaginatively reverses the dark magic of “occult economies”; the novel unearths the material foundations of constructed spaces and the material exchanges supporting the digital flows of capital. For example, much of the plot centers on a single orange from a tree situated directly on the Tropic of Cancer in Mazatlán, Mexico. A material manifestation of the Tropic, “a line—finer than the thread of a spiderweb,” becomes caught in the fruit (12). As the orange gets transported north towards the US-Mexico border, time and space warp in the novel’s two primary settings, Mexico and Los Angeles. This distortion literalizes the idea of “time-space compression,” but reverses its amaterial qualities. The movement of the orange northward also drags all of the resources, people, and

¹ One aspect of what Comaroff and Comaroff describe as “occult economies” is the production of wealth through seemingly “‘magical’ means” (310). These economies have “a material aspect founded on the effort to conjure wealth—or to account for its accumulation—by appeal to techniques that defy explanation in the conventional terms of practical reason” (310). It is a world where speculation, not material capital, creates wealth, and where money is disembodied and digital.
history of Mexico to the border. The resulting physical proximity of Los Angeles and Mexico echoes their economic interrelationship, while the collection of people and products massed at the border rematerializes the abstract flows of global exchange.

With this hybrid, sociomaterial vision, *Tropic of Orange* challenges readers to rethink the very ideas of nature and the city. Conventional categorization posits nature as a realm separate from the social, untouched by human activity. But hybrid entities like concrete-lined rivers or transplanted oranges challenge such distinctions; when did such a river or an orange cease to be natural and become “unnatural?” We might also ask, as William Cronon does in his history of Chicago: “At what moment, exactly, did the city . . . cease to be part of nature?” (*Nature’s Metropolis* 18; ellipsis added). Manzanar’s symphonies resist distinctions between the “natural” world and the “unnatural” city, envisioning instead a dense web of “patterns and connections by every conceivable definition from the distribution of wealth to race, from patterns of climate to the curious blueprint of the skies” (57). Such hybrid vision seems increasingly necessary, given that global environmental phenomena such as climate change make the idea of pure “nature” less and less viable. If human activity is reshaping the climate of the entire globe, even the most remote places cannot be imagined as untouched. The city, then, might be imagined less as something distinct from nature, and more as an intensified collection of the layered systems everywhere shaping human interaction with the more-than-human world.

By challenging the conventional categories of “natural” and “urban,” *Tropic of Orange* offers a prescient vision of how we might rethink the city in a time of global, anthropogenic change. Such a vision could be described as an Anthropocene one, although that would be using the term anachronistically, since the 1997 novel predates its popular usage. Paul Crutzen is credited with introducing the term “Anthropocene” to contemporary debate, arguing in a 2002 article that the world may have entered a new geological epoch in which human activity is the predominant shaping force. Despite the slight anachronism, the idea of the Anthropocene provides a convenient synthesis of the ways in which Yamashita’s novel dismantles natural tropes and articulates an alternative ecological framework. *Tropic of Orange* envisions Los Angeles as a site of interconnectivity between natural and social worlds, where magical events function as extreme versions of the conditions humans will confront in an Anthropocene world. The distortion of L.A.’s environment and climate, a result of the orange and the Tropic of Cancer traveling towards the city, anticipates a world reshaped by humans. This reshaped L.A. is not the infinitely malleable city of postmodern fantasy, but a site where the many social, environmental, and historical maps of a changing world most obviously overlap. In this novel, then, the city
becomes a site of potential. Upon seeing the complex layers of the city, we can either return to fantasies of naturalness, or work to re-conceptualize the systems shaping our world. The questions the novel raises about ecological decision-making in a complex world thus mirror the questions defining debate about the Anthropocene. The novel asks: once we recognize the ways in which human actions have transformed the world, often through unsustainable and unjust systems, how do we begin imagining an alternative?

**Anthropocene, Capitalocene: Human/Nature Relations in a Time of Global Change**

In order to explain how *Tropic of Orange* offers a vision of the city consistent with Anthropocene issues, I want to explore how understandings of nature, materiality, and human action are transformed in the Anthropocene model. The Anthropocene fundamentally challenges the idea of “pure nature.” As sociologist Jason W. Moore explains, “the Anthropocene concept proceeds from an eminently reasonable position: the biosphere and geological time has been fundamentally transformed by human activity. A new conceptualization of geological time—one that includes ‘mankind’ as a ‘major geological force’—is necessary” (“Anthropocene or Capitalocene?” 3). With its emphasis on the ubiquity of human influence, the Anthropocene is an intriguing extension of the recent ecocritical deconstruction of nature. However, while ecocritical challenges to “nature” usually result from post-structuralist analysis, the Anthropocene challenge potentially connects to empirical evidence. Scientific debate about the legitimacy of the Anthropocene as a geological epoch hinges on the identification of discrete material markers. To designate a new geological unit of time, the International Commission on Stratigraphy (ICS) must vote to accept “a clear, datable marker documenting a global change that is recognizable in the stratigraphic record, coupled with auxiliary stratotypes documenting long-term changes to the Earth system” (Lewis and Maslin 173). Such a marker is known as a “Global Boundary Stratotype Section and Point” (or GSSP), colloquially referred to as a “golden spike” (n. pag.). Past GSSPs (or auxiliary markers) include shifts in carbon dioxide content in ice cores or changes in fossilized

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pollen from lake sediment. A “Yes” vote on the Anthropocene means that ICS scientists have similarly identified and come to consensus on the presence of a “golden spike” linking discrete, human-caused events to global changes. A “Yes” vote thus offers a scientific variation of the vision Manzanar provides, a mapping of the ways in which human and natural systems historically overlap.

The recent popularity of the Anthropocene concept is a result of the ethical implications involved in such a perspective shift. Jedediah Purdy explains it thus: “Saying that we live in the Anthropocene is a way of saying that we cannot avoid responsibility for the world we are making” (n. pag.). By erasing distinctions between humans and nature, the Anthropocene suggests that humans must take responsibility for the conditions of the natural world on a global scale. This new sense of responsibility has the potential to transform the ways in which humans imagine themselves as ecological agents. “The question,” Purdy argues, “is no longer how to preserve a wild world from human intrusion; it is what shape we will give to a world we can’t help changing” (n. pag.). Instead of cordonning off “natural” from “unnatural” space, an Anthropocene sense of responsibility suggests a need to, as Bruno Latour puts it, carefully create a “good common world in which everyone—human and nonhuman—wants to live” (130).

While Purdy describes the responsibility that the idea of the Anthropocene could generate, other critics fear the term will reinforce cultural traditions that foreground human control. For Moore, the concept of the Anthropocene does not go far enough in rethinking old dualisms of nature and society; it is still premised on what Moore calls “Green Arithmetic,” an understanding of the world as the additive product of two distinct entities, Nature and Society (“Anthropocene or Capitalocene?” 2). The danger is that, rather than pushing towards radical reevaluations of how we live in the world, the Anthropocene notion will simply lead to calls for more beneficent, “green” forms of human-centered control. As Eileen Crist argues, “the Anthropocene shrinks the discursive space for challenging the domination of the biosphere, offering instead a techno-scientific pitch for its rationalization and a pragmatic plea for resigning ourselves to its actuality” (25). Believing in the ubiquity of human influence, we may simply try to geo-engineer and innovate our way out of global crises without ever challenging the systems that perpetuated environmental degradation in the first place. In the words of Moore, “The kind of thinking that

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3 For the sake of concision, I have offered a simplified summary of the ways in which geological boundary decisions are made. There are alternative methods for designating a new geological period in instances when a single GSSP cannot be identified. All of these methods, however, require the correlation of historical events and specific, stratigraphic evidence. For more details on the process of stratigraphic decision-making, see Lewis and Maslin.
created today’s global turbulence is unlikely to help us solve it” (“Anthropocene or Capitalocene?” 1).

Such unreflective innovation may be particularly prone to reproducing social and historical inequalities, which a totalizing vision of the Anthropocene obscures. By attributing global change to the general category of “Anthropos,” the Anthropocene lumps humanity together into a homogenous force, akin to a killer comet or an ice age. Such homogenization erases distinctions between racial, national, and class groups. To put the criticism in Manzanar’s terms, the Anthropocene concept only gets down part of the map, capturing geological and climatic patterns but ignoring patterns of race and wealth distribution. As Dana Luciano explains:

> “Humans” as a whole are not responsible for causing the mess we are currently in, nor are they perpetuating it at equal rates. Naming the crisis after the species, [critics] argue, hides the social, not geological, histories of exploitation (of humans and “nature” alike) at the root of the problem. (n. pag.)

Once asymmetrical histories of responsibility are imaginatively erased, it becomes difficult to envision equitable solutions. Countries like China and India are chastised for accelerating industrialization without recognition of the sociomaterial systems within which they are competing. Meanwhile, within countries producing the most carbon, personal responsibility through lifestyle and consumption choices trumps government regulation, and large-scale interventions are imagined primarily in socio-technical terms. Instead of pushing towards ecological alternatives, the Anthropocene might only provide a new and improved rhetorical strategy for implementing minor changes within an unequal status quo.

The idea of the Anthropocene thus comes with equal measures of potential and risk. Faced with this new vision of the world, humans might either reimagine or extend existing sociomaterial relationships. Speaking specifically of climate change, Naomi Klein argues that:

> climate change—if treated as a true planetary emergency . . . could become a galvanizing force for humanity, leaving us all not just safer from extreme weather, but with societies that are safer and fairer in all kinds of other ways as well. . . . [T]he urgency of the climate crisis could form the basis of a powerful mass movement, one that would weave all these seemingly disparate issues into a coherent narrative about how to
protect humanity from the ravages of both a savagely unjust economic system and a destabilized climate system. (7-8; ellipses added)

But a recognition of disparate levels of responsibility and risk is an essential first step in assuring that climate change responses are equitable rather than unjust. That is, sociomaterial inequalities must be part of the Anthropocene map.

A number of critics have proposed alternative names for this epoch in order to better foreground such inequities. Moore, for example, rejects the term Anthropocene because it “makes for an easy story . . . [that] does not challenge the naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence inscribed in modernity’s strategic relations of power and production” (“The Capitalocene” 2; ellipsis added). He proposes the alternative term “Capitalocene,” articulating a vision of capitalism “as a way of organizing nature—as a multispecies, situated, capitalist world-ecology” (“Anthropocene or Capitalocene?” 6). This concept of world-ecology provides a more accurate way of rethinking nature/society dualisms and avoiding the replication of Green Arithmetic. Instead of seeing the world as the additive combination of material Nature plus historical, constructed Society, the notion of world-ecology “highlights the fundamental co-production of earth-moving, idea-making, and power-creating across the geographical layers of human experience” (Moore, Capitalism 3). Rather than imagining humans as active agents and nature as a passive object, world-ecology stresses that the natural world, economic systems, and human behavior are all co-productions. Capitalism, for example, is understood as “a way of organizing nature” (Capitalism 2; emphasis in original). “Capitalism makes nature. Nature makes capitalism,” Moore clarifies (Capitalism 18). Thus, the notion of the Capitalocene maintains the boundary-blurring power and calls for responsibility built into the Anthropocene while challenging us to eschew human-driven solutions worked out upon a passive Nature and within an inflexible economy. Inequalities of race, class, and gender are figured, not as problems added onto environmental discussion, but as issues integral to the organization of the present ecological world.

While Moore makes a compelling case for the term “Capitalocene,” I use the term “Anthropocene” throughout this essay, since it encapsulates a broader set of discussions in multiple disciplines. However, I want to maintain the focus on co-production and inequity that the Capitalocene makes visible. And indeed, these concerns have not been entirely absent from emerging stratigraphic arguments about the Anthropocene. Lewis and Maslin propose a number of start dates for the Anthropocene that correlate not only with a GSSP, but also with historical events linked to the development of imperial, colonial, and capitalist systems. One suggested
“golden spike” date is 1610. This year appears to be the midpoint in a dip in atmospheric carbon levels measured in Antarctic ice cores. With this proposal, the beginning of human-driven global change is linked not to the Industrial Revolution (as Paul Crutzen and Eugene Stoermer first proposed), but to first European contact. The 118 years separating 1492 and 1610 represent the amount of time it would take for the violent deaths of 50-60 million people, the abandonment of their farmland, the resultant return of woodlands, and the increased sequestration of carbon to show up in a measurable way. This theory of the Anthropocene (called the “Orbis hypothesis”) thus offers a coherent narrative that unites geological-scale human impacts to socioeconomic critiques. It is a story that challenges human/nature distinctions, recognizes human/non-human co-production of the world, and gestures to the potentially devastating impacts of human activity. It is also a story that recognizes violence and injustice as integral parts of environmental co-production. In other words, the “Orbis hypothesis” reflects a fundamental deconstruction of nature/culture dichotomies, offering instead a theory of historical world-ecologies (Lewis and Maslin).

*Tropic of Orange* begins to create a similar vision, a “coherent narrative” of a “world-ecology” that depicts Los Angeles as a “messy, bundled, and creative co-production” (Klein 8; Moore, *Capitalism* 3; Moore, “The Capitalocene” 11). Such a vision undermines not only conventional understandings of nature and society, but also visions of the city that derive from such foundational dualisms. Yamashita’s novel thus complicates a literary history of urban representation that imagines cities as the destructive antithesis to wilderness or pastoral nature.

**Dark City: Los Angeles and the Environment**

As I have already summarized, *Tropic of Orange* depicts the city as a site where the integration of natural, social, and economic systems becomes particularly visible. The novel thus shows how reimagined cities can help us embrace an Anthropocene reality. Cities can expose the inconsistencies and injustices in systems; they can also offer a site to begin imagining human actions as potentially ecological and responsible rather than as inherently unnatural. As Emma Marris argues, cities can potentially trigger a *gestalt* switch, one that replaces a “protected-areas-only, pristine-wilderness-only view of conservation” with a more comprehensive vision (135; emphasis in original). “The new view, after the gestalt switch,” she explains, “sees impervious surfaces—pavement, houses, malls where nothing can grow—as foreground and *everything else* as the background nature” (135). Seen this way,
ecological action can become less about protecting “a few shrinking islands of nature” and more about building a collective, productive environment (137). To accept this changed view of ecology is not to discount the value of wilderness, but to chip away at its mythical status. It is to imagine city spaces as worthy of protection, and it is to recognize that even untouched spaces can be shaped by human activity.

But this kind of gestalt switch requires imaginative labor, given the deep cultural history of nature/city distinctions. In ecocritical discourse, the classic text on these questions is Raymond Williams’s *The Country and the City*. Williams traces the ways in which the country represents “unmediated nature” while the city is equated with artificiality (3). In a similar vein, William Cronon’s *Nature’s Metropolis* illustrates how literature and history imagine the city as nature’s opposite. Speaking of his childhood attitudes towards Chicago, Cronon explains how the city “represented all that was most unnatural about human life. Crowded and artificial, it was a cancer on an otherwise beautiful landscape” (7; emphasis in original). In this trope of the “dark city,” urban space represents decay, corruption, and excess. Yet Williams and Cronon each show how country and city spaces are intertwined cultural productions. Tracing the history of Chicago, Cronon details how cities rely upon and in turn fuel the transformation of rural landscapes, “suggest[ing] that the boundary between human and nonhuman, natural and unnatural, is profoundly problematic” (xix). Williams tracks this distinction between city and nature to its historical roots, tracing literary visions of pure nature all the way to the Biblical Eden. There never was a truly “natural” time prior to the “unnatural” corruption initiated by the rise of the city.

Perhaps no city has as much potential to reveal the limits and contradictions of city/nature dichotomies as Los Angeles, the city at the heart of Yamashita’s novel. L.A. has loomed large in the American cultural imagination, first as an Edenic escape at the continent’s edge, then as a doomed symbol of human hubris. If Chicago provides Cronon with an example of the interrelationship uniting “unnatural” cities to the natural world, then southern California provides him with an example of how longing for pure nature can fuel ecologically destructive urban growth. With its juxtaposition of natural beauty and natural disasters, this region is “a perfect place for meditating on the complex and contradictory ideas of nature so typical of modernity” (Cronon, “In Search” 32). Mike Davis also chronicles how L.A. reveals contradictory attitudes towards nature and the city. His *Ecology of Fear* suggests that a kind of unnatural naturalness may be the city’s foundational dream. While the natural beauty of southern California’s shores and mountains served as a selling point during the city’s development, L.A. boosterism also relied on ignorance of the
region’s ecological history. While human engineering sought to make California a natural playground or paradise, it did so by attempting to impose stability on a landscape whose *normal* ecology incorporates wildfires, earthquakes, flash flooding, and violent storms.⁴

The paradox of southern California goes beyond ecological ignorance, relying also on sustained denial of environmental risk. This correlation between beauty and risk is not accidental; as Cronon explains:

> Many of the vices for which the region is most infamous . . . are simply the mirror opposites of the virtues for which it once was, or still is, famous. Without the faults and the quakes, the landscape would never have acquired its astonishing physical relief, the mountains that climb so abruptly out of that stunning ocean. (“In Search” 32; ellipsis added)

For Cronon, such tensions may be particularly visible in southern California, but they merely “exemplify[ ] so many tendencies of modern American culture” (“In Search” 34). In particular, the expansion of Los Angeles suburbs into the hillsides of southern California points to the ecologically troubling outcomes of our ambiguous relationship to the city and our longing for pure, natural space. Housing developments spread away from the urban center in pursuit of spectacular views, only to incur disproportionate risks of mudslides, flash floods, and wildfires. It is thus not disregard for the natural world, but rather love for nature as a consumable object, that leads to the ecologically invasive expansion of the city. The disaster-prone suburbs of Los Angeles thus suggest the importance of imagining alternative relationships between humans and the natural world. Aesthetic appreciation, even love for nature, does not guarantee the creation of a “good common world” in the face of environmental risk.

Yet these ideological visions of pure nature (and the consequent ambivalence towards the idea of the city) can be difficult to rethink. Roderick Nash, for example, upset nature lovers with the conclusion of *Wilderness and the American Mind*, where he suggests that the development of connected city centers amidst patches of untouched wilderness provides one of the best potential solutions to ecological crises. “There are simply too many people on the planet,” Nash argues, “to decentralize into garden environments and still have significant amounts of wilderness” (381). The

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⁴ Davis describes historical fluctuations in precipitation levels and temperature ranges, as well as periods of both relative geological and meteorological calm and turbulence (14-25). “Southern California . . . is Walden Pond on LSD,” he explains. “As in other Mediterranean and dryland environments, the ‘average’ is merely an abstraction . . . environmental fluctuations tend towards the exponential” (16-17; ellipses added).
strong reaction against Nash’s call for “developing beneficent forms of centralization” (383) speaks to the deep-rooted nature of the dark city mythos. It requires imaginative transformation for nature-lovers to see cities as agents of ecological preservation rather than as symbols of ecological doom.

**Visualizing an Anthropocene City: *Tropic of Orange***

Although *Tropic of Orange* does not offer a fully realized alternative vision, it begins to imagine the conditions necessary for a more inclusive and ecological city. To create such an alternative vision of nature and the city requires an almost magical form of thinking, and this is exactly what Yamashita provides. The novel makes use of science fiction and magical events to make the invisible material foundations and the excluded communities of Los Angeles newly visible. To accomplish this, as I have already summarized, the novel first reverses the tendency to imagine cities as immaterial. The dislocation of the Tropic of Cancer makes the effects of global exchange systems visible, materializing the conditions of a late-stage capitalist world. The movement of the Tropic northward towards the border also makes the exploited populations and ecosystems feeding Los Angeles’s economy visible. The mounting tension at the border and within the city offers a prescient vision of the options facing an Anthropocene world: learn to respect ecological limits and restructure unjust systems, or face escalating violence in the face of disaster.

*Tropic of Orange* illustrates how an impulse to retreat into nature and escape the city will not be helpful in navigating these options. The novel begins not in Los Angeles but in Mazatlán, where an L.A. reporter named Gabriel has attempted to create a rancho retreat for himself. Gabriel “just wanted a quiet place to write,” and he begins to build his second home “one summer when [he] felt a spontaneous, sudden passion for the acquisition of land, the sensation of a timeless vacation” (5). Gabe’s longing for escape echoes common tropes of nature writing, but his failed vacation home also reveals ignorance about the natural world. Gabe longs to “make something [he] can actually touch,” and so he plants a new tree every time he visits Mazatlán. These trees, however, keep dying. As his housekeeper Rafaela notices, “Gabriel insisted on planting trees that couldn’t survive in this climate” (10). The one tree that does survive is the single orange tree on the Tropic of Cancer. This tree is the product of multiple international translations, “maybe the descendent of the original trees first brought to California from Brazil” (11). And the single orange this tree produces is the product not only of global trade but also of climate change. The fruit, which captures the Tropic within it, is “much too early,” brought about by early
rains attributed to global warming (11). Far from producing escape from the city and its networks of commerce, far from offering access to pure nature, Gabe’s home instead produces a magical, material hybrid; the orange is the co-product of global warming, African bees, transnational trees, and pastoral fantasy (10-11). The orange, and by extension Gabe’s pastoral land, are revealed to be just as multi-layered as Los Angeles.

By deconstructing Gabriel’s pastoral retreat, the novel also reveals the privilege behind nature fantasies, disclosing how they mask the environmental risk and violence that fall disproportionately on women and communities of color. It is not Gabriel who ultimately suffers from his fantasy, but Rafaela, his indigenous Mexican housekeeper. Rafaela becomes entangled in violent, border-crossing networks of exchange when she stumbles upon an organ-smuggling operation run out of Mazatlán. This smuggling ring further undermines Gabriel’s vision of Mazatlán as a “natural” escape from the economies of Los Angeles, blurring organic visions of naturalness by depicting the body as a tradable commodity. After uncovering this ring, Rafaela is kidnapped, beaten, and raped; as Julie Sze argues, the novel directly links her assault to “the environmental cost of colonialism” (39). In a mythic, surreal battle, Rafaela imagines herself as a serpent, simultaneously fighting and reliving Mexico’s colonial history. Her assault is thus directly linked to histories of violence, as she remembers “the passage of 5000 women of Cochibamba resisting with tin guns an entire army of Spaniards” as well as “the scorched land that followed the sweet stuff called white gold and the crude stuff called black gold, and the coffee, cacao and bananas, and the human slavery” while battling her assailant (220-21).

Towards the novel’s end, Gabriel is returning to Mazatlán when he finds Rafaela’s body by the roadside. While carrying her back to his rancho, Gabe realizes that his pastoral fantasies were integrated with romanticized views of Rafaela. He feels embarrassed about “the romantic thing I felt for this woman,” who was not his girlfriend, as well as his obliviousness to the ways in which labor rather than romance structured their relationship (224). Just as he never saw her correctly, Gabriel also realizes he never truly saw Mazatlán: “I hadn’t recognized my own place,” he claims, and “perhaps had never recognized it” (226, 228). He deliberately connects his

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5 Julie Sze describes how Rafaela’s rape, along with the death of the novel’s other female character, Emi, connects to histories of environmental injustice. “It is no accident that of the seven primary characters, the two women are the only characters to suffer from graphic bodily violence,” she argues. “Being primary consumers and producers, women and in particular racialized female subjects are at the front lines in the battles over free trade and the environment” (37).

6 Sherryl Vint provides a detailed exploration of the ways in which Gabriel recognizes his initial pastoral fantasy as racist, sexist, exclusionary, and naïve (403).
fantasies about his house to his tendency to ignore realities about how labor and gender structure Rafaela’s life. In response to this recognition, Gabe reflects on his family’s snide advice: “what about investing in the homeland—East L.A.?” (224). *Tropic of Orange* thus suggests that, in the face of injustice, violence, and disaster, we may be best served by recognizing the exploitive fantasies that often underlie escapist dreams and instead investing in our cities.

Indeed, the novel imagines what Terry Gifford has called a “post-pastoral” alternative, adapting pastoral ideals to Los Angeles. As the Tropic is dragged towards the city, the distortion of space creates a massive traffic jam on the Harbor Bay Freeway. Spreading fires force the homeless out of their underpass shelters, and they move into the abandoned cars on the highway, creating a temporary community that is overtly utopian and pastoral. Unlike Gabe’s misguided Mazatlán home, the freeway community initially provides a hopeful response to disaster, where the dead spaces of the highway become living community space again. In contrast to Gabe’s doomed trees, the homeless residents start successful gardens under the hoods of cars after ripping out the engine blocks. And unlike Gabriel’s romanticized fantasy, which figures as a privileged flight from the city, the highway scene imagines the potential for collaborative transformation, a reclaiming of the most ecologically invisible spaces by the most economically invisible people. Thus, the novel capitalizes on disaster as an opportunity for building more equitable societies, and it imagines the city as a space that facilitates the collaborations that make such alternatives possible.

A fully transformed vision of the city, however, cannot stop at the city limits. *Tropic of Orange* also makes the material surroundings of Los Angeles and the marginalized people supporting its economy visible. Towards the novel’s end, Manzanar’s symphonic vision zooms out, situating Los Angeles within a global context that stretches “from the southernmost tip of Chile . . . to the Bering Strait” (170; ellipsis added). Looking over this expanse, Manzanar recognizes that “the grid was changing” (239). What Manzanar sees is the northward movement initiated by the Tropic’s relocation, and he anticipates a collision, when “the great land mass to the south” will “shift irrevocably . . . filling a northern vacuum with its cultural

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7 According to Gifford, while the pastoral mode is frequently idealistic, nostalgic, and focused on pure visions of nature, the “post-pastoral” mode imagines human activity as part of nature. While the “post-pastoral” can take many forms, one variation investigates how pastoral tropes can be adapted to address the “exploitation of our planet aligned with our exploitation of human minorities” (20-27).

8 For an examination of the ways in which the highway gardens reflect environmental justice issues, specifically by referencing gardens grown in Japanese internment camps, see Crawford.
conflicts” (170; ellipsis added). The figure at the center of this northward movement is Arcangel, a street performer and supernatural being who carries the Tropic-bearing orange. Arcangel claims to have lived for centuries, observing all of the stages of imperial exploitation since the first contacts with the Europeans. As he heads north, “everything else South” comes with him, “the very hemline of the Tropic of Cancer and the great skirts of its relentless geography” (197). Once he reaches the border, his confrontation with border officials further exposes the “occult economies” at work. He is able to see “waves of floating paper money: pesos and dollars and reals floating across effortlessly—a graceful movement of free capital” back and forth across the border, even as he and the people traveling with him are stopped, and “the border [is held] to his throat like a great knife” (200, 198). Once Arcangel crosses the border, a deluge of people and material goods follows, the flows of capital solidifying into a crowd of people, corn, bananas, coffee, and sugar cane. Arcangel also carries history, the murdered peoples and destroyed lands of the South, across the border with him: “the halls of Moctezuma and all the 40,000 Aztecs slain,” “the burned and strangled body of the Incan king Atahualpa,” “24 million dead Indians,” and “the rain forests, El Niño, African bees, panthers, sloths, llamas, monkeys, and pythons” (200-01; emphasis in original). This litany of events, people, and things serves as a reminder of the ways in which the economy of Los Angeles is built through the violent exploitation of people and natural resources. To truly capture all the layers of the city’s map means seeing and acknowledging these elements of its history, too.

Both the highway takeover and the confrontation at the border unmask “naturalized inequalities, alienation, and violence” and reverse “modernity’s strategic relations of power and production” (Moore, “The Capitalocene” 2). For a moment, in Yamashita’s magically transformed Los Angeles, the dead ecological zones of the freeway and the contested space of the border offer the possibility of a more just and inclusive world. This possibility only arises, however, because the invisible systems of the city became visible—because the many layers of the city revealed their co-production. The visibility of sociomaterial relationships thus plays an essential part in transforming the city. While disaster offers an opportunity to recreate the world in this novel, the democratic potential of such opportunity rests on the cultivation of a vision as multilayered as Manzanar’s. This vision eschews distinctions between nature and the city, finding instead a way to map injustice, materiality, human creation, and natural resources into a “complex grid of pattern, spatial discernment, body politic” (56).

Finally, Tropic of Orange offers a cautionary tale about what will happen if we do not accept this sort of fundamental gestalt shift. The homeless community on the
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freeway is routed by the “Army, Navy, Air Force, Marines, the Coast and National Guards, federal, state, and local police forces”; this attack triggers a general war, as “the rising tide of that migration from the South . . . joined the war with both wooden and real weapons, capital, and plunder” (240; ellipsis added). In a world violently reshaped by catastrophe, Tropic of Orange depicts the possibility of both hopeful and pessimistic responses. The legacy of our cities, our economies, and our cultural concepts, the novel warns, may be disaster-driven warfare unless we recognize class, racial, and gendered inequalities, then work to build durable and resilient alternative communities rather than naïve, doomed, escapist ones. In other words, as Purdy says, “[e]ither the Anthropocene will be democratic or it will be terrible” (n. pag.).

Conclusion

With its bleak depiction of disaster, gendered violence, and class warfare, Tropic of Orange could be considered part of the tradition of urban dystopianism. Within fictional dystopian worlds, the city is often a place of darkness, a manifestation of the greed and destruction that have ruined the world. Yet green, natural places play conflicted roles in these stories; from the fertile off-world colonies of Blade Runner (1982) to the garden-like train cars in the recent climate change thriller Snowpiercer (2014), green spaces are the refuge of the wealthy. The city (or urban-like spaces) become anti-environments: crowded, polluted worlds to be escaped. Left only with dark cities or green refuges, we don’t have many plausible ways to reimagine our world. The visions possible look nightmarish, and certainly unjust. We have what Nash called “the wasteland scenario” of “creeping urbanization,” a Blade Runner Los Angeles where “a ravaged planet . . . is paved and poisoned to the point that the world dies” (380; emphasis in original; ellipsis added). Alternatively, we have the preservation of a bright green future for a select few. As Noël Sturgeon explains, “It is quite possible to imagine that a green society could be created but only be available to the rich, while the poor live in a world of toxins, scarcity, and violence . . . the powerful may end up inside gated green communities while war and poverty rage outside” (5; ellipsis added). Octavia Butler’s Parable of the Sower (1993) imagines this exact scenario, the dystopian pinnacle of walled-off, close-to-nature suburbs.

Stories like Parable of the Sower suggest, as Sturgeon claims, that even if we cannot generate new ecological models based on an innate commitment to democratic inclusivity, perhaps we can generate them based on the unsustainable nature of exclusive green retreats. “One would hope that the morality of creating a green future
that included everyone would be enough to recommend it,” Sturgeon argues, “but for those who find that unconvincing, the dystopian scenario must be recognized as a short-term prospect” (5). In a world of escapist retreat, “the integrated biosystems of the planet will eventually affect the ability of all human communities to survive, ultimately denying the world-saving ambitions of an elitist environmentalist vision” (5). The “Orbis hypothesis” (Lewis and Maslin) offers a historical variation on such dystopian warnings, suggesting that the creation of a good world for the few, at the expense of entire populations, has already functioned as an engine driving the destruction of the environment. If the Anthropocene has imaginative power, perhaps it is the power to undermine short-term, exclusionary fantasies of nature. To help replace such fantasies, we need to develop new models of the environment, ones where human action is imagined as a co-production in concert with a complex, dynamic, sociomaterial ecosystem.

_Tropic of Orange_ does not offer a fully-formed alternative vision. However, it does offer qualified hope in its closing depiction of the city. A character named Buzzworm, struggling to reorient himself after surviving the military assault on the freeway community, models the difficult imaginative labor that will be required to change our perspectives of the urban. Prior to the Los Angeles disasters, Buzzworm had plans for building a better common world in his neighborhood. A self-styled “Angel of Mercy” who brokered peace treaties between gangs and knew the palm trees of the city intimately, Buzzworm advocated for “[d]o-it-yourself gentrification” or “genteification,” where the members of the city “[r]estore the neighborhood. Clean up the streets. Take care of the people. Trim and water the palm trees” (83). But when Buzzworm returns to his neighborhood at the novel’s end, he is disoriented by the ways in which the rest of the city simply returns to the status quo. All Buzzworm can do is follow his old advice: he cleans the porch, waters the palms, and tosses some seeds salvaged from the engine-compartment gardens into his yard. With “Manzanar’s symphony swell[ing] against his diaphragm, reverberat[ing] through his veteran bones,” Buzzworm takes a deep breath and gets back to work in his neighborhood (265). Driven by Manzanar’s layered vision, Buzzworm offers a tentative model for how to rebuild visions of the city, via slow transformations in concert with communities.

I am hesitant to suggest that imaginative shifts within fiction can translate directly into significant change of deeply-rooted cultural attitudes. I am hesitant to suggest that the small and local actions exemplified by Buzzworm are a sufficient response to the massive structural injustices made evident in an Anthropocene world. And, in the tradition of critics like Williams and Cronon, I have a complicated
investment in the environmental traditions I critique, ones that value wilderness and pastoral nature; while I can see the complex ecological systems present in the city, I prefer the forest and the backcountry, ideological as such a preference may be. But despite my preferences and hesitations, I am challenged by the Anthropocene to rethink my maps of the world. Even if Yamashita’s magical city cannot provide a full model for how to rethink nature and the urban in an Anthropocene age, her novel offers small imaginative shifts that help visualize the sociomaterial layers of a world-ecology.

By depicting the co-production of ecosystems and economies, by revising environmental literary conventions, and by exposing histories of injustice, Tropic of Orange offers a new mythology of the city as a place with ecological potential. The novel foregrounds material, environmental connections within Los Angeles, thereby resisting conventional depictions of the city as artificial and anthropocentric. This sociomaterial vision of the city exposes the material dynamics of injustice, challenging readers to imagine social change in terms of transformation within rather than escape from human-designed spaces.

**Works Cited**


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