

To the City of Murky Dreams

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This letter is addressed to the quintessential city, an urban imaginary that encompasses the hopes of planners, writers, and those entangled nature-cultures who populate them. From Ebenezer Howard's *Garden Cities of Tomorrow* that set off the garden cities movement, to fiction such as Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*, and Antoni Jach's *Layers of the City* that explore the socio-historical construction of urban imaginaries and more recently Alexis Wright's *The Swan Book* set in a climate changed future, cities can be seen as places of abundant resources or destructive development. A swell of these voices build throughout the letter as the many idealistic versions of the city entangle and prevent any one vision from solidifying. This letter will explore these contested imaginaries, particularly the way these imaginaries impact those who are welcomed, fed and allowed to prosper and those who are chased out, excluded, and destroyed. But this letter is also about particular cities: Jach's Paris, Calvino's Venice and Wright's Southern Australian City but also the Kombumerri country (Gold Coast), the city I live in and onto which I inevitably read these imaginaries. How might cities such as those built on Kombumerri country and Naarm be reimagined through critical posthumanism? Drawing on the work of Karen Barad, Astrida Neimanis, Donna Haraway and Val Plumwood, this letter meanders through the murky waters, entangled buildings and constructed garden spaces of literary urban imaginaries as I unsettle the quintessential city.

To the city of murky dreams,

I address this letter to the quintessential city; a place of murky dreams that glistens like a mirage on the literary horizon. You take shape in the colonial imagination. You emerge, all shiny metal and glass towers that are still dripping, rising up from a large body of water—the sea or a lake or a strong flowing river—to scrape at the sky. Perhaps you tout the tallest building in the world as your greatest achievement to date. A civilised and civilising place where clean and orderly (human) people busy themselves with industry and relax in your carefully manicured gardens unafraid of being set upon by unruly nature. It is important to emphasise that you are clean. Your dripping towers remind me that dirt is 'an insult to civilisation' and that humans who 'do not take care to avoid dirt, will (re)turn into animals' (Steele et al. 242). And yet dirt is essential for a city—we (that is humans, nonhumans, climatic and geological forces) mould it into forms, cover it up, organise it into things like gardens and must deal with the wastes that will ultimately deform and become dirt (Douglas 162). Almost as though she can read my mind, Mary Douglas interrupts my thoughts to say: 'the body is not a slightly porous jug' and 'a garden is not a tapestry; if all the weeds are removed, the soil is

impoverished' (164). The weeds, defined only as unwanted plants, get in the way of your ideal vision of order, like dirt and those who don't follow your rules. A utopia for some, a dystopia for others. I consult writer Italo Calvino: 'Cities,' he says, 'like dreams, are made of desires and fears, even if the thread of their discourse is secret, their rules are absurd, their perspectives deceitful, and everything conceals something else' (44). On a closer look, your edges waver under the heat from the sun—you are just a mirage laid over the city and beneath, another vision materialises. Alexis Wright is speaking with Oblivia from *The Swan Book* (2013). Oblivia tells us that 'in this closer glimpse of Paradise...much of the city had cracked... was breaking up, as though the land beneath had collapsed under its weight' (208). I carefully step over the fissures forming in the dirt around your apartment towers.

Let us sit for a moment in one of your gardens. A low-walled enclosure, fenced off from the vegetation beyond, where a green corridor runs along the edge of the city. In that remnant of the bush over the wall, I glimpse a resident koala, but the garden is carefully populated with birds, butterflies, and others who seem like fleeting visitors. An overhanging jacaranda drops purple flowers outside the garden, as though to question where you've set the boundaries. Ebenezer Howard is here, admiring some of his work. You know, he declares to no one in particular, I dreamed of a garden city where the 'beauty and delight of the country' could be brought to the 'crowded unhealthy cities' (6). People stop; a crowd gathers, as he talks about the utopian vision that has brought them all here, to the city, without severing their agricultural roots. Jon Christensen and Ursula Heise interrupt: but surely there were moral reasons for your gardens that go beyond clean air or mental health? He smiles—of course, of course. They look out beyond the garden to large houses on newly cut grassed verges and beyond even further, to the run-down houses in other suburbs without gardens. Then Christensen and Heise turn to Howard: hasn't this dream for a 'just and egalitarian society of good, righteous, and healthy citizens' just led to these 'leafy suburbs' that have made 'cities more segregated and unequal?' (556). I turn again to *The Swan Book* and this different kind of city, where 'the natural landscape was quietly returning and reclaiming its original habitat' (208). A new kind of garden was forming: 'Through the cracks in the footpaths small trees had sprouted, and ferns and grasses became obstacles through which people were struggling to steer a clear path as they walked... ferns and grasses... swayed from mossy walls and roof tops', and 'there were places on the roads not hit by heavy traffic where long grasses grew' (209). But this new mirage is not a utopia either. Wright's city is your future and your past that has become present, a product of the changed climate where seas have displaced many who must live in poverty on the streets and where many Indigenous inhabitants are excluded from the city altogether.

Our guide, Oblivia, points out that she never expected to 'see the riches of Paradise from a plane. *How come?* She thought about the Heaven people taken from the cities by the army and dumped in the swamp. They prayed all the time for the chance to see their paradise again'

(Wright 207). But Wright asks us to pay attention to those who are marginalised. They are the first to deal with crisis when it is only a wave that laps at your edges (Le Guellec-Minel para 7). A few spits of rain dry almost as soon as they hit our skin. Anne Le Guellec-Minel stops to open her umbrella and says to us: ‘the weather became erratic precisely because the people stopped caring for the lands under their custodianship’ (para 21). Those who hold power hide behind walls. They are the last people who can afford to use electricity on elevators and televisions, and who will plant trees to ‘muffle the sound of the ocean’ (Wright 212). The garden around me is becoming overgrown. Your public gardens are no longer for humans. Vines have tangled through the entrance gates to keep people out. Refugee bats and swans from other parks use the opportunity to claim the garden as their own (Wright 242). I scramble over the closed leafy gates to leave.

On the street outside the garden and direct from Paris, flâneurs are gathering to create their own imaginaries of the city. They pause at street corners or linger in bars to record their impressions, trying to make sense of these new social and economic conditions. They wander down the strip between the nightclubs and the beach where all the lovers have gone to end their night. The flâneurs are urban heroes; they are here to help us understand the complexities and chaos of urban life, so that it might become more palatable to humans as inhabitants, reducing our anxieties about safety and disorder (Benjamin in Shields, 67). They peer behind curtains, shine lights along darkened alleyways and cross the beachfront to reveal all our secrets. But they also say what belongs in the city and what does not. Or who belongs here, in this garden or street or shop, and who belongs in another area of the city and so everything is brought into order. Antoni Jach announces that there is ‘civilisation as far as the eye can see, habitations as far as the eye can see... a gigantic quilt... where everything fits together with an inexorable logic’ (92). This is the dream of urban planners, well mapped with everything in its place; a GIS utopia, the city fragmented into discrete parts (Christensen and Heise 455). Here residents, there industry, a corridor of green spaces in between. In this way you seem to go on forever.

I know you have told me in the way you’ve laid your security cameras that your spaces should be used as intended and if I look closely, I see you have laid many lures to make it so; bright lights, calming music and inviting scents welcome orderly consumers into shopping centres while certain kinds of plants are cultivated in urban parks and gardens to attract acceptable wildlife like butterflies and lorikeets (Wilson 182; Low 126). This must be what is meant by civilised nature, I suppose. In contrast, defensive architecture, CCTV and audio deterrents are employed to punish those who seek to use public spaces in unintended ways. Rounded seats and hand rests make it difficult for the homeless to sleep on benches at parks and bus stops, spikes on light poles and window ledges discourage birds from perching on office buildings and above public paths. You play classical music in urban hubs to deter the youth from loitering, and predatory bird calls outside cafes to keep the ibis out—neither work very well. I

turn back to Antoni Jach, who is tiring of the city and all the ways it conducts busy consumers around. I follow him down some steps onto the tram platform, his hands gesturing at the people who collect near the doors as though he is back in the crowded underground of Paris, and he says: 'You are now thrust into someone else's misery. You do not want to grow old in the corridors of the Metro... amongst a mass of feet that scurry by daily... a passionate massing of bodies on the platforms of the city' (20). All these people require food and energy and water much of which you pipe in from other regions and countries. Your hands have a far reach and your mouths devour large areas in pursuit of growth. As Jach gets on the tram, he mutters that 'our livers are rotting with endless consumption' and then he's whisked away (30).

Back outside, the mirror-like windows of your buildings reflect the city like a map. I follow your directions and find myself beside a creek that sucks water in and out from the sea like a lung. Wright reminds me that this is only one of the many flows of water across a city, and Oblivia proclaims that she had once 'heard frogs croaking in the drains where the rainwater poured in such profusion it was hard not to imagine an underground river flowing beneath the city' (Wright 209). Water is never far away in the quintessential city but, you tell me, it must be orderly water that contains itself to pipes and lakes. Swamps and wetlands have been drained, redirected and walled in (Giblett 227). We wander along the creek past apartment buildings. The banks have built up higher on this side so that when it rains and the creek swells, the water doesn't spill over and flood the buildings. Italo Calvino joins me on this walk and tells me of a city he knows that is 'said to rise over a deep, subterranean lake' where a thousand wells 'draw up water, as far as the city extends' (20). Some worship the lake, others the machinery and human endeavour that brings the water to the surface (Calvino 20).

But waters and humans are not as separate as you'd like us to think. The flows of water in the city multiply and permeate through everything. I stop to peer over this body of water that is you but also I, or has been, or will be. Val Plumwood asks where all this water has come from. She says, 'communities should always be imagined as in relationship to others, particularly downstream communities, rather than as singular and self-sufficient' (139). This makes Calvino wonder if this is the city at all. He says, 'you advance for hours and it's not clear to you whether you are already in the city's midst or still outside it' and when you wish to leave 'does an outside exist? Or, no matter how far you go from the city, will you only pass from one limbo to another, never managing to leave it?' (157-158). When he says *you* he means me or him or another but you, dear city, and I and others are intimately entangled. You do not exist without bodies and beings, without waters and buildings and gardens. Even those places beyond your city-boundaries as they are drawn up on maps, grow the foods and nurture the waters that feed you. You are made of us and we are made of those waters and soils, those relationships with buildings, and gardens, and others.

We have reached the head of the creek now, with a mouth that sucks water in and out and a neck that gulps water, splitting the golden sands of the beach. People frolic in the ocean, surfers write odes to the sea as they glide along perfect curls of water, others lounge on clean, soft sands. Calvino asks me to look again: 'You believe you are enjoying [the city] wholly when you are only its slave' he says (12). I strain my eyes to see tired workers enjoying a few moments away from the desk; sand trawlers sieving out plastic bottles and chip wrappers; plastic pieces, like brightly coloured stones polished in the waves, are choked in a gull's throat. Calvino nods 'the city, great cemetery of the animal kingdom...Man had finally re-established the order of the world which he had himself upset: no other living species existed to cast any doubts' (15). A group of environmentalists shake their heads at this 'urban corruption of nature' (Steele et al. 244). Green corridors are needed to purify these spaces. A green city is a clean and healthy city that repairs some of the barren 'brownfields' full of damaged urban natures (Bracke 9). But before this new kind of purified imaginary can settle, another subverts the image. There is a difference between dirt and soil, Robin Kimmerer says, as she looks up from a curb-side garden. Dirt is empty but soil is full of others, nourishing, needed (Kimmerer 234). You are looking a little less clean, your soils are showing beneath your carefully manicured green spaces. 'The dirty green cities we already inhabit invite greater attention to the variegated, impure relations that make up the earthly families to which we belong' (Steele et al. 247). And just like water, dirt becomes 'creative formlessness' Mary Douglas adds (162). Tim Low who has been peering at a family of possums in a rubbish bin says we can't just assume that nature wants to be natural. Some species thrive amongst the refuse of human lives. I know you expect me to see you as above all this 'nature', as you build your towers far above the dirt, but, even up there, the slow process of decay shows us that humans are not separate at all.

You are really starting to get blurry now; your quintessence is looking a little thin. I look to the sky and see that all that water shimmering in the air has made it up to the atmosphere and is forming clouds. The last remnants of your mirage fade away as the sun is hidden behind overcast skies. The city looks very different now. The new imaginary becomes clearer, laid over the city like a promise: In a front yard garden, Donna Haraway sprinkles mulch around plants, while two dogs play in the grass. She declares: we are all 'humus', 'we make with' and 'become with each other, like compost' (Franklin 50). Astrida Neimanis is down on the beach being rocked by the sway of the waves—'human bodies are hardly separate from... other watery bodies' she says: 'freshwater mussel, water filtration plant, seagrass, sunflower, raincloud, grandmother' the same waters flow through us all (4). In this new city every human and nonhuman knows they are made up of the same waters, soils and air. Space is given to the hills and the ocean. Swamps and wetlands are allowed to expand and contract without walls holding them in. Val Plumwood pauses at the street corner to make sense of this new city. 'Think what it would mean to acknowledge and honour all the places that support you' she says (159).

Yours sincerely,

A human entanglement of urban soils, waters, microbes and others

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