

U

Urbanⁱ

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I

imagine you are the urban trees living
in concrete pits, transplanted, cut down whenever
and wherever needed and now
reimagine
plants are your guide. You breathe in
each other, inversed
limbs and roots knotted.

imagine you are a civet crossing
the road that separates and kills earth
trembles under the marshmallow M-men
who devour fossil fuels and now
reimagine
infrastructures are portals connecting
spaces, times.

imagine you are the rivers
after rivers that are dammed
diverted, that never meet another river, your body policed
to service only some and now
reimagine
each drop from the tap
is your kin, irrigates your senses. Regrow
your aqueous tail.

imagine you are the home
of the living and the dead. Demolished, exhumed
bones exposed. Memories, ethos, webs of life erased
just to build another road another home
another park that is *sustainable* but sustains only
one mode of life and now
reimagine
a storied place storying
plants, animals, elements,
a more-than-human world.

imagine a city of
one rhythm **one** movement **one** text **one** kind of being and now
reimagine
a city of many worlds rooted
in situated care. Writing, memory
is multiple. You start the lines
light, echoes

and flounders inherit the story
reimagine
there is no place, no being
to transfer the damage onto. The inhabitants
of a more-than-human city share not only
the past and the present, but also
the future.

II

In Haruki Murakami's novel *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*, he describes a town surrounded by a perfect and impenetrable wall. Before newcomers are allowed to enter the space, their shadows must be cut off and left behind. As the shadows grow weak and eventually die, new arrivals gradually lose their memory and their mind, absorbed into a meaningless life and forever trapped at the end of the world.

In the past few years, I have been exploring another kind of "town", a much more spectacular techno-polis and an emblematic new-world city — Singapore. As a low-lying city-state-island, Singapore has built and surrounded itself with literal seawalls as it continues its sea reclamation and aggressive urban development. Being one of the most urbanised places in the world, and its recent pursuit of being the world's leading sustainable city, its mode of urban sustainability has broad and deep implications for the rest of the planet.

For much of human history, the urban has been seen as an exclusively human space that excluded nature.¹ Over the past decades, and in particular since the 1990s, scholars from a range of disciplines have interrogated a plethora of nature-culture, nature-society, human and more-than-human binaries, seeking to re-learn the inter- and intra-relations between human, nature and culture.² Recently, given the escalating effects of climate change and intense urbanisation, cities around the world seem eager to make the urban environment more "natural". Yet, when a flourishing eco-futuristic urban imaginary is enacted, it is often driven by a specific, narrow version of sustainability that is tied to both high-tech and persistent economic growth. Moreover, nature does not exist in the singular in urban environments and elsewhere. Instead, it is crucial to critically reflect on which natures have come to the fore, why, and at what cost to whom.³

In ecofeminist philosopher Val Plumwood's concept of shadow place, she highlights the danger of the neglected and denied places "that provide our material and ecological support".⁴ Plumwood's proposition provides a powerful opening to a new enquiry to the paradoxical imagining of a city as being hospitable to non-humans and at the same time relying on increasing controls and decoupling as a way to wall off environmental impacts or anything deemed undesirable. What is backgrounded in this process of intense urbanisation?

¹ Wolch, "Anima Urbis"; Metzger, "Expanding the Subject of Planning: Enacting the Relational Complexities of More-Than-Human Urban Common(er)s."

² Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late 20th Century"; Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*; Castree, "The Nature of Produced Nature: Materiality and Knowledge Construction in Marxism"; Braun, "Environmental Issues: Writing a More-Than-Human Urban Geography."

³ Davison and Ridder, "Turbulent Times for Urban Nature: Conserving and Re-Inventing Nature in Australian Cities." In line with a significant body of scholarship, I refuse the notion of a "nature" that is distinct from human life, and instead explore the multiple ways in which natures are imagined and co-constructed by humans and non-humans. For more key texts that take this topic up, see Soper, *What is Nature? Culture, Politics, and the Non-Human*; Cronon, "The Trouble with Wilderness: Or, Getting Back to the Wrong Nature"; Castree and Braun, eds., *Remaking Reality: Nature At the Millenium*; Haraway, *When Species Meet*.

⁴ Plumwood, "Shadow Places and the Politics of Dwelling," 139.

What kind of shadow politics are at work when some urban sustainable solutions are only beneficial to select groups of humans and non-humans?

During my time in Singapore, I visited the very few protected nature reserves that supposedly represent a “pristine” past and some secondary forests that are earmarked to be cleared for sustainable housing projects. I walked in the cemeteries where graves continue to be exhumed to make way for development, revealing the multifaceted implications of the displacement of humans and non-humans. As some *Kampong* (meaning “village” in Malay) residents welcomed me to their homes, they helped me to discover the sticky relations moored in the landscape, and the difficulties and hopes associated with living in a highly urbanised state. I also crawled to the edge of the reserve adjacent to a highway, imagining I was a pangolin seeking a path to the other side of the forest amidst non-stopping traffic. At a high-technological water production centre, I learned that the future of sustainable provision of clean water is premised on an illusory ecological invulnerability through wealth and science.

In the urban environment, the metaphoric peeling of shadows in Murakami’s novel is a long, meticulous process working on multiple spatial-temporal registers. With urban densification, infrastructures become layers of shadowy places as they intrude on the habitats of many, while the underground spaces of the city are increasingly positioned as empty spaces to be developed through the politics of invisibility.⁵ As with the residents in “the End of the World” that no longer remember the past without their shadows,⁶ the many urban inhabitants seem to suffer from various kinds of amnesia as their environment keeps being erased or unrecognised. These entwined erasures further help to sustain the dominant progress-driven narrative that continues to diminish other modes of life and time-making. Shadow places also enable and are enabled by multiple, distinct, and mutually reinforcing forms of oppression in the urban context.⁷ In the case of Singapore, not only natures and/or local citizens are controlled, but also the large numbers of foreign labour – employed to contribute (and are also subjected) to a particular kind of nature in the city – are implicated.⁸

In Singapore and beyond, who is allowed to take root, for how long, and whose contribution counts are situated in the larger context of social inequalities and exploited human and more-than-human labour. At the same time, as a highly compressed and dynamic environment, the urban is, in many ways, a vital and hopeful site for serious discussions around engaging with, or fleshing out these entangled shadow relations. Around the world, the imagining of a more natural and sustainable urban environment is ultimately an invitation to humans to enter into a more-than-human world, intentionally or unintentionally.

In light of this, the question is how urban reimagining might open up a more capacious and relational understanding of the urban that intervenes into human-centred, technocratic, capitalist urbanism, and also respects the “difficulties” of co-habitation and the compromises the city and many of its inhabitants need to make. My time in Singapore has shown me a kind of contingent hope as I attended to the alternatives that aim to reconfigure

⁵ Wang, “Re-Imagining Urban Movement in Singapore: At the Intersection Between a Nature Reserve, an Underground Railway and an Eco-Bridge.”

⁶ Murakami, *Hard-Boiled Wonderland and the End of the World*.

⁷ A significant portion of Plumwood’s work demonstrates and explores how modernity has imagined and worked to create human mastery over nature and importantly how that mastery was tangled up with other forms of intra-human domination, for example, Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature*, 52-53.

⁸ Singapore adopts distinct policies governing the lives of “foreign workers”, who are considered low-skilled. While foreign talent is positioned as a contributor to the nation’s development and encouraged to integrate as part of the population mix, the foreign worker is “structurally built into the economy as a transient category performing work shunned by, and at a wage unacceptable to, the local labour force”. See Yeoh, “Bifurcated Labour: The Unequal Incorporation of Transmigrants in Singapore,” 32.

contemporary urban approaches, from re-naturalising concrete drains and growing edible gardens in the cracks of the city, to building ecological corridors. Navigating the shadowy side of the city, still fecund with possibility, has taught me that foregrounding its more-than-human communities might offer ways of re-thinking, re-seeing and re-storying the urban – from a shadowless end of the world to a city of many worlds.⁹

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⁹ Murakami’s use of the motif of shadow in *Hard-Boiled Wonderland* may, at first glance, seem to be in a different context, yet I find this novel that also explores the themes of utopia and extinction very generative through an eco-critical lens.

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ⁱ Wang, Jamie. "Urban." *An A to Z of Shadow Places Concepts* (2021).

<https://www.shadowplaces.net/concepts>

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