

DESTROYING NEW YORK CITY: THE EMOTIONAL WORK OF FICTION

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CITIES ARE PLACES of deep cultural meaning. Their architectural structures tell of human histories, forming affective networks of societal needs. Cities’ “bodies” are in constant fluctuation to best accommodate their occupants. Cities also shape the people who live in them, just as they are shaped by their inhabitants. In many ways, cities become symbolic edifices of humanity’s control over nature. It is not surprising, then, that in imagining the apocalypse in its various forms, the city has become a focal point for both readers and writers.

Transcending mere locations on a map, cities—understood through geographer Yi-Fu Tuan’s theorisation that places can be understood “experientially”—may be seen as “centers of meaning.”¹ However, since the 1970s, cities have acquired meanings that transcend even this experiential form. Cities may be understood to have become a physical manifestation of, or a metonym for, humanity and the human species itself. In imagining the destruction of the city, for instance, we might

1. Yi-Fu Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” *Geographical Review* 65, no. 2 (1975): 153.

also imagine humanity's end. In Anthropocene fiction, this theme of collective destruction is particularly cogent, as it reflects the tangible threat of an eroding world. As Tuan wrote in her essay titled "Place: An Experiential Perspective,"

Literature and painting induce an awareness of place by holding up mirrors to our own experience; what had been felt can now be seen, what was formless and vacillating is now framed and still.²

In creating an awareness of place, literary texts can afford new understandings of how humanity functions within, and how humanity relates to, place. In the case of apocalyptic fiction, and particularly Anthropocene fiction, the place of the city becomes a metaphoric representation of humanity's fear—of death, societal collapse, the unknown, and more generally the ominous end of life. The still image reflected back in the textual mirror is one of an intricately linked, terrifyingly codependent society, firmly immersed in its city structure.

In the novel *Odds Against Tomorrow*, Nathaniel Rich explores the idea of the city, specifically New York City, as a symbol of social and societal structures.³ The novel portrays New York City as a cultural paradigm or an icon endowed with mythical powers; but it also imagines the city's brutal destruction. The novel illustrates the psychological impact that New York City's identity has had on society and social structures at large. This article contends that these representations of the city perform important emotional work. They transform the reader's understanding of place to pointedly illustrate the problematic nature of placehood within the anthropocentric age. Simultaneously, the novel's representations reimagine relationships between place and time. As this article will also contend, the emotional work of fictions such as *Odds Against Tomorrow* allows readers to reconcile themselves to the changing structures of the

2. *Ibid.*, 161.

3. Nathaniel Rich, *Odds Against Tomorrow* (New York: Picador, 2014). All subsequent page citations to the novel will be given in the text of this article in parentheses.

world—its ecosystems, geological make-up, climate—as well as to reimagine humanity’s role and future trajectory within it.

Odds Against Tomorrow captures the contemporary emotions many feel in the Anthropocene, including its sense of overwhelming anxiety. Many of these emotions are felt physically or may be described as “embodied.” The novel imagines New York City through a highly probable disaster scenario—that of a deluge caused by massive rainpour. Structured around this key event, dubbed “Hurricane Tammy,” *Odds Against Tomorrow* is divided into three parts: the antediluvian, diluvian, and postdiluvian. The novel follows protagonist Mitchell Zukor, a mathematics prodigy, through several stages of his life, including his professional life as a paranoid futurist forecasting the cost of environmental disasters, through his life as a survivor of the flood, and finally to his “postdiluvian” life as he embraces agrarianism. Mitchell’s emotional journey, from isolated automaton through to prophetic savior and finally to survivalist–naturalist–realist, has appealed to several general readers of the novel. In a *New York Times* review of 2013, Ron Currie Jr. suggested that Mitchell’s journey invites readers not just to adopt or imitate the protagonist’s recently acquired knowledge and skills but to participate in his emotional journey. As Currie puts it, Mitchell’s “emotional transformation” is “one that both convinces and sticks—and one that the reader may find value, perhaps even salvation of a sort, in trying to emulate.”⁴

In imagining Hurricane Tammy, the novel brings the Anthropocene into sharp focus, transforming the impact of anthropocentrism from a passive threat in the background to an active threat in the foreground. It also urges readers to consider the impending apocalypse. In a review published in *Rolling Stone* magazine, Julia Holmes describes the burning question that is asked, at one point of the novel, by a “mob” of people who, seeing him as some kind of prophet, seek Mitchell’s wisdom. “What’s

4. Ron Currie Jr., “This Time, Chicken Little Is Striking It Rich: *Odds Against Tomorrow*, by Nathaniel Rich,” *The New York Times*, April 9, 2013, <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/04/10/books/odds-against-tomorrow-by-nathaniel-rich.html>.

going to happen to us?” the mob calls out to Mitchell. But, as Holmes writes, it is the “slyly profound novel” that provides readers with the answer: “global warming, overpopulation, water shortages, supergerms. The future, it seems, is already upon us.”⁵ But the novel also asks, and perhaps answers, a series of related questions about place. If places disappear, and with them our affective networks of meaning vanish, will social structures and notions of what it means to be human, disappear as well?

Representations of New York City in *Odds Against Tomorrow* suggest that the city and its human inhabitants are intricately linked, and that humanity perceives its own survival (or demise) as contingent on the city’s existence. The novel explores how anthropocentric attitudes shape these understandings of the metropolis, and considers how the anthropocentric lens creates and perpetuates the myth of New York City.

The novel evokes anxiety, fear, and nostalgia in its construction of New York City in the first part; it then generates awe, ignorance and absurdity in its destruction of the City in the second; and, finally, in the last part, it engenders hope in reconstructing New York City. In doing so, the novel performs a kind of emotional work that is comparable to what Tuan describes in her observations about the function of art and literature. As Tuan suggests, literary descriptions and landscape paintings are “not themselves places” but capture and reflect reality back to the reader or viewer, allowing us to see, understand, and process certain emotions associated with the depicted place. A work of art, Tuan writes, “creates place materially as well as in the imagination.”⁶ *Odds Against Tomorrow* similarly creates a material and imaginative place—but with a transformative goal in mind: to stage a literary intervention to alter the current course of anthropocentric decline. However, before analysing the text in more detail, it is necessary to define the Anthropocene and anthropocentrism.

5. Julia Holmes, “Odds Against Tomorrow Review: The Future is Upon Us,” *Rolling Stone*, April 15, 2013, <http://www.rollingstone.com/culture/news/odds-against-tomorrow-review-the-future-is-upon-us-20130415>.

6. Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” 161.

7. Adam Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2015), 1.

The term “Anthropocene” refers to a new epoch in which humans have so significantly altered the earth that it may be thought to have entered a new geological age.⁷ It is a particularly important term for emphasising humans’ responsibility to and for the current changes to the Earth. As Adam Trexler writes in his book *Anthropocene Fiction: The Novel in a Time of Climate Change*, the term “may help to move [us] beyond the narrow questions of truth and falsity with regard to climate science,” because it “names a world-historical phenomenon that has [already] arrived.”⁸ Adopting this term represents a significant shift in thought, as it foregrounds the problem of anthropogenic climate change, reengages people with a sense of immediacy, and highlights the threatening and destructive force of our current epoch and its erosion of place. In fact, Trexler has called for more research “on the impact of climate change on specific places.” As he notes, “Places have specific histories that are simultaneously cultural and geographic. The meaning of places also changes as real disasters befall them.”⁹

While the Anthropocene, as a term and concept, recognises humans’ influence on the world, a similar term, anthropocentrism, is used to describe a way of looking at or thinking about the world that is completely centered on human needs and desires—to the exclusion of all other species, creatures, or things.¹⁰ Anthropocentrism can be seen as the cause and origin of the concept of the Anthropocene. As one of the early users of the term notes, the word Anthropocene was introduced to “capture this quantitative shift in the relationship between humans and the global environment.”¹¹ In the Anthropocene, the world becomes a commodity used and abused for human gain; in this period, humans adopt an attitude leading to the current climate change crisis. Evoking anthropocentrism, the Anthropocene is also a time in

8. *Ibid.*, 3–4.

9. *Ibid.*, 235.

10. See Will Steffen, Jaques Grinevald, Paul Crutzen, and John McNeill, “The Anthropocene: Conceptual and Historical Perspectives,” *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society A* 369 (2011): 842–867.

11. *Ibid.*, 842.

which humans are asked to acknowledge their role in creating the Anthropocene (and ending the Holocene—the current geological epoch) but also to mitigate anthropogenic climate degradation, and to decentre the anthropocentric perspective.

In order to interrogate the relationship between the human, social, and architectural structures of the Anthropocene, this article draws on formalist theories of place. Tuan's seminal article of 1975, cited above, conceives of places as both spatial locations and centres of sensory experience and visceral feelings. Places, she notes, are “known both directly through the senses and indirectly through the mind.”¹² Tuan's ideas are particularly relevant to cities, as these urban places are experienced by their inhabitants on both the micro- and macro-levels. Any specific physical space that is inhabited by an individual may be understood as “a small place” and one that “can be known through all the modes of experience,” Tuan suggests. But this same space might also be experienced differently. An individual may experience a place as a large space that “depends far more on indirect and abstract knowledge for its experiential construction” than on direct knowledge and experience.¹³

These different experiential dimensions of place are relevant both to the concept of the Anthropocene and the genre of fiction of the same name. They are relevant because one of the aims of Anthropocene fiction is to identify the interaction and overlap of physical spaces with mental or experiential understandings of places. In their study of the emergent field of environmental hermeneutics, Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, and Martin Drenthen claim that “environmental understanding is contextual understanding.” As they continue, environmental understanding “does not find itself in abstract space but is situated in concrete places or locations, and always within the particular cultural setting belonging to that place.”¹⁴

12. Tuan, “Place: An Experiential Perspective,” 152–153.

13. *Ibid.*, 152.

14. David Utsler, Forrest Clingerman, Brian Treanor, and Martin Drenthen, “Introduction: Environmental Hermeneutics,” in *Interpreting Nature: The Emerging Field of Environmental Hermeneutics*, eds. Forrest Clingerman, Martin Drenthen, Brian Treanor, and David Utsler (Oxford: Fordham University Press, 2013), 10.

In other words, the experiential dimensions of a place are not wholly abstract (or mental) but are referable to the concrete or physical features, as well as the cultural settings, of that place.

On one level, understanding one's immediate or "micro" environment is crucial to one's own conservation and protection—even survival. However, on a broader level, attaining abstract and indirect knowledge about one's "macro" environment becomes problematic, especially in the Anthropocene. Considering Tuan's theorisation of place, we may propose that it is the "macro" places that may in the Anthropocene cause the most social anxiety, as places intricately tied to notions of "humanity at large" and the imperative that, as the macroenvironment changes, so must we. For this progression to happen, humanity must dissociate itself from the societal structures that reinforce identifying only the immediately perceptible "micro" places. When living in an environment, species adjust incrementally over time, adapting to the environment's specific demands. What I call "macro" places, however—such as "a city or nation"—do not easily permit of this incremental adaptation. They remain abstract and connected to the "long history" of humanity (such as ages or epochs).¹⁵

However, it is the emotional work of fiction that can reenvision these macro places. By imagining the transformation of place, a reader can participate in living through the experience of change. The novel mirrors the reader's emotional journey in providing an architectural construction and destruction of place. The novel, in its construction of the place, also reveals the emotional status quo; and, in its destruction of the place, paves a way for emotional metamorphosis. The text can thus address the anxiety induced by the Anthropocene, allowing the reader to imagine the kind of structural transformation necessary for humanity to survive the anthropogenic age.

15. Tuan, "Place: An Experiential Perspective," 152.

Caroline Levine's proposition that "aesthetic and political forms may be nested inside one another," which she introduces in her 2017 book *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network*, further allows us to consider the ways in which humans are connected to the structures of place, and particularly to the structure of the city.¹⁶ By bringing Levine's concept to bear on *Odds Against Tomorrow*, we can examine both humanity's "nested" location within places, as well as the extent to which places might be "nested" in our cultural and political consciousness, "nested" as representations of humanity and the human species. In *Forms*, Levine suggests that her formalist methods diverge from those of traditional formalism. Rather than considering forms of literature and, for instance, a novel's forms as something that contributing to its status as an "enclosed" artistic whole—that is, "the work"—her method, she suggests, incorporates historicistic considerations of context.¹⁷ Levine's scholarship thus attempts to connect a work to its surrounding context, and proposes that the work in turn influences its context.¹⁸ This allows for the possibility that literary techniques—their forms and structures—can impact on the structures of the "social world" at large.¹⁹

Writing of the "nested" political and aesthetic forms, Levine posits that "each is capable of disturbing the other's organizing power" and that, "together, [these] multiple forms of the world come into conflict and disorganize experience in ways that call for unconventional political strategies."²⁰ The suggestion here is that different aesthetic and political structures may interact, mirror and collide with one another, disrupting any unitary or unidirectional influence of one upon the other. Such a proposition opens up the possibility of thinking about the effect of the Anthropocene on aesthetic forms and vice versa. Levine's theory also suggests the benefits of interrogating both how social or political forms may be "nested" in the physical structures of a city

16. Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2015), 1.

17. *Ibid.*, 67.

18. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

19. *Ibid.*, 1.

20. *Ibid.*, 16–17.

and how different narrative (or narratological) “forms” in *Odds Against Tomorrow* might interact with the social and architectural forms of the city. In essence, the task to be developed is to map how these physical and literary forms might “travel” – that is, how that move “back and forth across aesthetic and social materials.”²¹

The idea that aesthetic forms—such as that of fiction, or within fiction (such as the novel)—can disrupt “real-world forms,” such as cities and buildings and institutions, can inspire writers and other artists to incite political change. The idea is particularly motivating for those who write Anthropocene fiction, as it allows us (and them) to imagine that these fictions may influence real-world life in the Anthropocene. By diminishing structural confines, these forms of fiction can imagine new possibilities for society in which people and institutions are able to reorganise themselves in completely new and unique ways, outside the physical and symbolic shadow of the city.

In its narrative structure, *Odds Against Tomorrow* illustrates the nesting of social forms within the structure of the cityscape. In so illustrating this nesting phenomenon, the novel constructs and then deconstructs the idea of the Anthropocene. It suggests that for Earth to survive the Anthropocene, the human species must build, morph, and hybridise the structures of the contemporary world, and that we must transform the way we work and function within and on the landscapes of the world. Narratives that envision such a manner of survival and change, such as *Odds Against Tomorrow*, perform important imaginative work: they help to conceptualise how such structural and social changes can occur. In *Forms*, Levine observes how the work of her literary critic colleagues Susan Wolfson and Heather Dubrow has shown that “literary forms reflect or respond to contemporary political conditions.”²²

21. *Ibid.*, 5.

As Levine further notes, the reason why these accounts valorise literary forms is because they recognise that they “shape what it is possible to think, say, and do in a given context.”²³ In what follows, this article will examine the nested or imbricated structures that connect the city to humans in Anthropocene fiction—as well as the ways in which these structures are perpetuated, destroyed, or augmented. In examining these themes, the article will show how Anthropocene fiction invites readers to imagine how they can manipulate these same structures in the real world, whether for beneficial or detrimental consequences.

Constructing New York

Odds Against Tomorrow constructs New York City by drawing on several cultural perceptions and preconceptions of the place, thus creating a mythic outline. At the center of these images is the premise that New York City is indestructible, infallible, and indefatigable. As the “city that never sleeps,” New York City already possesses a range of mythic qualities that the novel reinforces, thus rendering it the very cornerstone or engine room of American nationhood and modernity. In fact, the cultural signification of the City is blinding.

In the novel, New York City and its inhabitants continue to move, work, and live through the drought and deluge, apparently believing the city’s structures are invulnerable, and ignoring any and all warning signs of the impending catastrophe. “An itty-bitty Category Four ain’t gonna hurt us! At least not for a day or two. This is New York City,” utters Jane Eppler (138). Jane is Mitchell’s colleague at FutureWorld, the consulting firm for which Mitchell works, and the only “firm to have predicted the flood” (20, 203). Through its creation and later destruction of the apparently indestructible New York City, *Odds Against Tomorrow* illustrates not just the hubris of those who

23. Ibid.

perceive, and rely on, ideas about place for their continued development—but the misguided nature of these perceptions at a time when adaptation, not stagnation, is required. The novel uses the real-world myth of New York to construct an apparently fictitious version, drawing on the connections and connotations readers already have. Trexler summarises the way in which cities—and specifically New York City—are not just objects or places about which social associations and ideas develop; rather, these places also harbour features and spaces specifically created to elicit certain emotions, ideas, and feelings:

Cities are, by definition, extraordinarily dense networks of affective bonds between people and place. These bonds are frequently disorganized and overlapping: people have millions of different associations with New York City's Central Park... Other features of the city are designed to organize social affect: monuments, skyscrapers, public buildings, and authorized views of geographical features, like riverbank parks or scenic viewpoints... Place is inescapably historical and political, in addition to being material and personal.²⁴

Just as cities themselves are designed to elicit specific affects, so is Anthropocene fiction designed to engender feelings about cities and places in readers. In *Odds Against Tomorrow*, emotionally charged signifiers—what Trexler calls “affective bonds”—are developed around the place of New York City to engender a broader feeling of connection to the city. The novel achieves this by painting a nostalgic portrait of New York City that continually refers to its real cultural landmarks. The novel frequently sets these nostalgic images of New York City against comparatively cold and affectless images of Mitchell’s “skycity”—a doppelgänger place that melds with Manhattan in Mitchell’s dreams. It is a place where “instead of cobalt-blue sky and sparkling skyscrapers extending indefinitely,” Mitchell sees “trees—giant soaring oaks perforating a green-black night” (139). The construct of the New York City is further complicated by another place that features

24. Trexler, *Anthropocene Fictions*, 76–77.

among Mitchell's thoughts: Camp Ticonderoga, a "summer camp for boys on a horseshoe-shaped lake twenty miles northwest of Augusta" (33). As the novel proceeds, Camp Ticonderoga is productively set against New York City as an idealized place symbolising of bucolic longing, and an escape from the deep anxiety of the unknown associated with Manhattan (38, 221).

Throughout *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the narrator makes reference to several specific places within New York, including Central Park, Times Square, Grand Central, and Wall Street. They become the quotidian background for Mitchell's everyday life; however, these nostalgic emblems take on important new significations as he encounters them in person. As Mitchell discovers, many of these landmarks are inconsistent with the way he imagined them. Grand Central, for instance, "was darker than he expected—larger too" (171). Similarly, the narrator links several well-known landscapes with equally well-known national history monuments in scenic description: "A long window overlooked the corner of Central Park and its brown softball fields. Directly below was the Columbus Fountain" (115). In connecting these landmarks, the narrator weaves together New York's landscape and political history to charge the novel with the overarching myth of New York City—that is, the city as it is imagined in our culture consciousness: an idealised version that tends to gratify the reader's desire to understand the symbolic or mythic "place" of New York City. But the novel also makes the reader aware of the double meaning of this place—its myth and reality—and invites the reader to engage in its dialectics.

At one point, the narrator describes Tibor, Mitchell's father. When the twelve-year-old Mitchell expresses a desire to visit the aquarium, "his father, old Tibor," cannot oblige his son, "command[ing] the cab to drive straight to Wall Street and Broad" (43). The scene that follows reveals,

both to readers and the young Mitchell, the mythical qualities attributed to New York City by its inhabitants:

“This is where America happens,” said Tibor. “Where we happen.” His passion for old American movies surfaced whenever he found himself overpowered by emotion. “Greed is good,” he said. “*Wall Street*, starring a certain Mr. Michael Douglas.” Mitchell had nodded solemnly in agreement. Tibor felt indebted to Wall Street because he owed his prosperity to a quintessentially American idea. (43)

In this scene, the novel engages with place on two levels: first, it refers to the actual Wall Street, and second, it enlivens the mythic notion of Wall Street created and reinforced by the city’s portrayal in *Wall Street*, the eponymous film. As Tibor implies, both versions of the place project the same ideal: “greed is good.” Fact and fiction intertwine as Wall Street and *Wall Street* become one. Tibor appears indebted to both versions of the place—a discovery that in turn suggests that the distinction between fact and fiction, Wall Street and *Wall Street*, is actually immaterial in *Odds Against Tomorrow*. The metaphoric place and the real place create a nostalgic longing for the lost American Dream as they become inseparable in the psyche of cultural memory. The episode also demonstrates the manner in which social constructs, such as cultural ethea and politics, are enmeshed in the imaginative and physical construct of a place.

As places with long, specifically human, histories—places made of what Trexler calls “dense networks of affective bonds between people and place”—cities are the predominant perpetrators of this simultaneously passive and active sense of place.²⁵ They represent the replacement of “real” environments with imagined, mythic, cityscapes of cultural memory. By reflecting contemporary New York City, and so holding up a mirror to place, the reader is made aware of just how unaware the “experience” of place is in

25. *Ibid.*, 76.

practical, lived reality. The novel illumines how people are more engaged with the concept of place than its actuality.

Skycity, the nightmare doppelgänger of New York City, is a place devoid of personal affect. It is a city without place, a no place (a heterotopia), a utopian or dystopian vision of efficiency and monotonous conformity with no beginning or end. The narrator illustrates skycity as it appears in Mitchells mind's eye:

It was a nightmare city, a phobopolis. It came to him in a blur of flashing metal and glass... he'd find himself in a silent, glass-windowed apartment. He was high off the ground, so high that he couldn't see the bases of the other skyscrapers. The sky was a rich, bright blue and the enormous steel edifices soared both as high and as low as he could see. He suspected that the towers never stopped, but extended infinitely in either direction. They were slender, the towers, and they swayed lightly. (74)

Mitchell's phobopolis—his city of fear—is constructed as a site devoid of personal place but endowed with the notion of the abstract city, the city without a name. This invention transforms New York City—one of the best-known cities in the world—into a nameless, placeless, void: a structure without emotional affect. The abstract, placeless city contrasts with and heightens the figural, mythic New York that is its other, a New York saturated with a sense of personal place. Skycity emphasises the organising affects and physical constructs that constitute cities at their most basic level. This place also envisions a humanity trapped within these constructs: “the skyscraper dwellers,” the narrator says of those in skycity, simply stare “forlornly from their glass windows” as they remain “imprisoned in their identical white rooms” (74).

Ironically, rather than disturbing the protagonist, Mitchell's imaginings calm and soothe his nerves (74). He imagines humanity trapped in the cityscape—interned in the physical edifice of the city. But the novel also envisions the “nested” forms of the Anthropocene observed by Levine—forms

that exist in both physical and mental realities.²⁶ By visualising humanity as a species imprisoned in the cityscape, the novel highlights both our immersion within and reliance upon the city. Holding out New York City as a representative figure, a case study, the novel also comments on the ways in which cities are theorised or conceptualised in general. The novel configures place as a construct of organising affects that not only configures society and its forms but contains them. By disturbing and destroying the organising power of the city, societal structures are opened up to adaptation and rearrangement to be transformed into more sustainable environments. This powerfully imaginative process in *Odds Against Tomorrow* enables the reader to envision new realities in the contemporary world, and even perhaps to identify the structures that prevent the creation of a sustainable landscape in the real world.

Wilderness, a concept that, like “nature,” has been used to advance essentialist ideas about environmental philosophy and ethics, has all the emotional associations of place without its physicality.²⁷ Wilderness thus represents something of a reversal of the abstract city or skycity. Wilderness can only be known through its antithesis—the city, or other man-made structures. As W. S. K. Cameron writes, “On reflection, neither ‘nature’ nor ‘wilderness’ exists: both have been socially and historically constituted.”²⁸ *Odds Against Tomorrow* uses the antithetic wilderness to affirm and enforce the character of the city, and specifically New York City. The notions of “wilderness” and “city” are contrasted in the notes of correspondence sent between Mitchell and his friend Elsa Bruner, a woman with a life-threatening illness who lives in a commune at Camp Ticonderoga. Elsa narrates her life to Mitchell through a series of postcards and letters that are primarily concerned with how she converts a summer camp for boys into a hippy commune. Her

26. Levine, *Forms*, 1.

27. See Utsler, et al., “Introduction: Environmental Hermeneutics,” 5.

28. W. S. K. Cameron, “Must Environmental Philosophy Relinquish the Concept of Nature? A Hermeneutic Reply to Steven Vogel,” in *Interpreting Nature*, 106.

descriptions of agrarian life amid the “encroaching wilderness” (33) provide a clear point of contrast to Mitchell’s city life.

When Mitchell asks Elsa to explain why she had “decided to risk her life for the privilege of living on an isolated farm,” Elsa sends “news of solar tubes, bidirectional net meters, and metal flashings; lists of crops and the seasons in which they would be planted” (63–64). Mitchell’s response is to defend the city’s many amenities:

In his own letters Mitchell made a point of listing the virtues of metropolitan life, primarily the attractions of total convenience: the way the city handles essential services such as food and waste with optimal efficiency, leaving you with more time (63–64).

The contrast solidifies the antithesis of the city and the wilderness. It juxtaposes the recognisable places of New York City (and the steely, man-made phobopolis of skycity), with the unknown, untamed, and wild of Camp Ticonderoga. This dialectical correspondence enacts a kind of bucolic longing—a longing for the days before the modern city—that has subsisted in literature since the Industrial Revolution, a reconfiguration of place and placehood that caused mass migration from the country to the city from the nineteenth century.²⁹

Mitchell envies Elsa, as he associates her country life in the wilderness with a life of heedless, carefree abandon. His envy perpetuates and reinforces his abstract idea that there once existed a simpler time, one that is associated with country life and is at the centre of his bucolic longing. This longing is another construct to emphasise the rigidity of the city; and it impresses upon the reader the city’s unnatural stillness in time (its stasis). Mitchell’s longing also works to construct the difference between what might be called “active” and “passive” places—the active wilderness encroaches; it is engaged with, cultivated, and fought. But the passive city is a

29. Lawrence Buell, “The Emergence of Environmental Criticism”, *The Future Of Environmental Criticism: Environmental Crisis And Literary Imagination* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell, 2005), 14.

backdrop—a place full of meaning but demanding no quotidian engagement from its inhabitant. It is seen but not heard.

New York City, skycity, and Camp Ticonderoga work in harmony to represent place as a uniquely human structure. Taken together, they illustrate the anthropocentric constitution of place. Humans create the meaning and identity of these locations—and they do so from an inescapably human perspective. The passivity and activity of place, described above, highlights the way in which humans envision their environment but remain disconnected from it. Having established anthropocentrism as problematic in Mitchell's imaginings and correspondences, *Odds Against Tomorrow* dissects the relationship between humans and the city to reassess how society views and interacts with place and the environment.

Deconstructing New York City

In order to destroy New York City, to collapse the conflated image of the metropolis that lies, stagnant, in our cultural psyche, its forms must be taken apart. Its nested structures must be divided into discrete and separate things. As Levine suggests apropos these nested forms, one is always capable of “disturbing” the “organizing power” of the other.³⁰ So must the structural forms of the New York City be altered in a way that disturbs the organising power of the city and its networks of affect. By such a method of deconstruction (and destruction), the mythologised image of the city—distant from the experiential environment—might be debunked and a sense of environmental agency restored. There are two ways in which *Odds Against Tomorrow* can be said to disrupt the human order, thus forcing the anthropocentric view of the city to shift. First, the novel depicts humanity's mock regression into savagery when it is left without a city within which to house its social structures. Second, the

30. Levine, *Forms*, 16–17.

novel depicts the eradication of the cultural landmarks of the place. It is through this process that the novel destroys the apparent boundaries between human bodies, the wilderness, and cities.

Odds Against Tomorrow shows us that, to shift away from the idea that humanity is embedded within the city, it is useful to decentre our human perspective of the city. The novel imagines this reconfiguration of the human order by utilising anthropomorphism. In the introduction to their edited volume, *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*, Katarina Gregersdotter, Nicklas Hållén, and Johan Höglund explain the way in which humans are a central but not singular force in determining the climate trajectory of the planet. As they write,

Thinking through the concept of the Anthropocene involves centring the human as the source of largescale eco- and geological change, but also displacing anthropocentric perspectives by seeing humans as just one piece among many in the planetary puzzle.³¹

The authors' observation entails considering how the term "Anthropocene" might be reshaped, realigned, and given new connotations to displace this human-centred perspective. In a 2012 article, Tom Cohen imagined the Anthropocene as a concept with a double meaning—a thing that expresses and encapsulates the problem of anthropogenic climate change while it also offers an opportunity to reconsider it.³² In his article, Cohen points to the problem of the prioritisation of the human in Anthropocene studies. His contention is that the Anthropocene conveys anthropocentrism and expresses the dominance of humans in its very terms. But Cohen also connects the Anthropocene with the idea of anthropomorphism:

The term "anthropocene" is curious, at once leaden and foppish. It carries a trace of the obscene... it seems the epitome of *anthropomorphism* itself—irradiating with a secret pride invoking comments on our god-like powers and ownership of "the planet."³³

31. Katarina Gregersdotter, Nicklas Hållén, and Johan Höglund, "Introduction," in *Animal Horror Cinema: Genre, History and Criticism*, eds. Katarina Gregersdotter, Nicklas Hållén and Johan Höglund (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 9.

32. Tom Cohen, "Po-lemos: 'I Am At War With Myself' or, De-constructionTM in the Anthropocene?," *Oxford Literary Review* 34, no. 2 (2012): 240.

33. *Ibid.*

Once again the dualistic meaning of the term Anthropocene, which is here both “leaden and foppish,” begs critical consideration. The figure of the city is the physical representation of anthropocentrism—an *environmental* anthropomorphism. It enforces a sense of human dominance on “the planet,” speaking to the egotistical, imagined “god-like powers” of humanity. *Odds Against Tomorrow* ridicules this anthropocentric view of the world. At certain points, the novel anthropomorphises animals to illustrate the city’s organising network of affect, suggesting it is the city’s structure that endows humans with human qualities. That is, the novel “citizenises” the “local vermin” of New York City (97), recognising them as both belonging to and participating in the deconstruction of the metropolis. The narrator articulates Mitchell’s ideas about the rats, pigeons, and other creatures inhabiting the city:

As a New Yorker of nearly three months’ standing he was well acquainted with the local vermin. They were citizens too, after all: the pigeons queuing at the street corner, waiting for the light to change; the rats loitering on subway platforms; the bedbugs snuggling in the mattresses, preparing for dinner. (97)

Through Mitchell’s eyes, the narrator envisions the actions of local vermin as human actions. Commonplace but uniquely human activities are projected onto these creatures’ activities. Thus personifying the vermin, the novel equates human and non-human animals. Anthropomorphism here serves to reveal a crack in the human order, ridiculing societal constructs and illustrating how the imagined, “god-like powers” of humanity are nothing more than willful ignorance and a reliance on an “us-and-them” mentality. The deconstruction of the human order continues in the following scenes, when the novel describes the animals’ prescience and foreknowledge:

The animals were always the first to know. It was that way with the warming world—the polar bear experimenting with anorexia, the marmot cutting short its hibernation, the American grizzly emigrating to Canada. And now the native New Yorkers were behaving erratically as well. The rats were traumatized; the pigeons neurotic, their dirty beaks nodding incessantly, like meth addicts; the roaches were downright hysterical, running suicides across the sidewalk. (97)

As the narrative develops, the figures of the knowing animal and the ignorant human are juxtaposed. Though animals emigrate and reconfigure their rituals as the environment changes, “Most New Yorkers,” the narrator notes, “carried on with their usual activities, pantomiming quotidian normalcy, as if nothing were wrong” (102). This juxtaposition may be seen as a metaphor for the contemporary world: while animals take actions to ensure their continued existence into the future, humans, though they analyse the issues of the Anthropocene, do little to change course. Mitchell will think to himself apropos this very problem: “And that was the old, familiar problem. Analysis without action” (97).

By humanising the animals’ actions, these scenes impart choice and will to these creatures. But the novel also offers a derisive commentary on anthropocentric notions in the Anthropocene, revealing them to be absurd. With these animals taking on human roles, the novel disrupts the human order and debunks the notion that humans occupy a unique space or place in the world. Furthermore, these scenes make clear that the city structure is merely a physical construction that organises affect; although, since it is so successful at engendering human affect, even the animals have become human in this place. Thus, in the city of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, humanity—with its solipsistic conceptions of place and society—becomes less and less enmeshed in the cityscape. The scenario prompts the reader to ask questions of the city: To

whom does the metropolis belong? What behaviors, identities, and relationships does it normalise, permit, or proscribe?

In the first part of *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the narrative uses place and places—landmarks, monuments, and so on—as agents that shape the way people experience emotions. The story not only creates “place” but connects the reader to place through popular culture and history. However, in Part Two of the novel, this carefully constructed sense of place is destroyed. The novel eradicates those “centers of meaning” described by Tuan as it depicts the aggressively encroaching wilderness. Place is thus overrun by nature. The significance of this destruction is most evident in the narrator’s absurd description of a submerged Grand Central:

No voices, no footsteps, no life. Only the sound of the water, parted by the canoe, lapping gently against the limestone walls. The stairwell to the lower level, on the eastern end of the concourse, was completely submerged, as were the tunnels off the main floor that led to the Metro-North tracks. And somewhere ahead, at the western end of the concourse, was the twinned staircase that led to Vanderbilt Avenue and high ground. And there were Mitchell and Jane in the Psycho Canoe, floating slowly across the giant floor of the concourse. (172)

For a city of more than eight million people, a silent and humanless Grand Central is an eerie idea. With hundreds, perhaps even thousands, of people passing through Grand Central Terminal on a daily basis, the station is a hub for human life; and its humanness is intrinsic to its sense of place.³⁴ In the narrator’s account, the station’s physical elements—stairwells, tracks, concourse—are now juxtaposed with the fantastical idea of canoeing through the station: an image that is self-reflexive and absurd in its unreality. The transformation of Grand Central’s physical and mythical proportions suddenly suggests the possibility, however improbable, that New York City may be destroyed.

34. See “Grand Central Terminal” (July 9, 2018) <https://www.grandcentralterminal.com/>.

Later, another scene debunks the seeming indestructability of New York City and of “place” more generally. The scene depicts Mitchell and Jane having a picnic in a flooded Central Park. When the narrator describes the couple, we learn they do not sit on a picnic blanket, much less the ground, but have “wedged themselves between the wide crowns of two oak trees near the northeastern corner of Central Park” (187). As the narrator then explains, this “underwater forest had seemed a good place for a noontime snack, hidden away from the rest of the floating city” (188). Here the contrast of the absolute normalcy of a picnic in the park against the bizarre image of these two figures eating among the treetops, high above a flooded, floating city, creates another self-reflexive and absurd image. Like the Grand Central scene, here again the novel, through what may be called this “deplacing” of New York City, vitiates the power of human agency—a power that has so forcefully been imposed on the world. At the same time, the novel highlights the overpowering strength of other dynamics: namely, climatic, nonhuman forces. The reversal of the anthropocentric viewpoint beckons the reader to compare the power of human and nonhuman agency, and demonstrates how the environment may become not merely a passive backdrop but an active force in human thought.

Imagining the destruction of place—as an abstract possibility, or even as an incremental reality is difficult. As Alan Weisman writes,

The notion that someday nature could swallow whole something so colossal and concrete as a modern city doesn't slide easily into our imaginations. The sheer titanic presence of a New York City resists efforts to picture it wasting away.³⁵

35. Alan Weisman, *The World Without Us* (New York: Picador, 2008), 21.

The incremental erosion of place, however, is a reality of the Anthropocene: the reporting of encroaching shorelines, melting

icecaps, and sinking cities is utterly unremarkable. The monolithic proportions of a city are no longer a guarantor of its fortitude or indestructability. In *Odds Against Tomorrow*, this sense of accelerating erosion is given expression in the merging of New York City and skycity, a phenomenon that creates an “unknown” cityscape devoid of place. The merger of these places occurs as Hurricane Tammy heads for New York City:

The gray clouds had sapped the coloration of the skyscrapers; every glass, stone, and steel surface had the same dull slate hue. It was as if Manhattan were assuming the qualities of his skycity—it lacked only the brilliant cobalt-blue sky of his dreams. When he reached the office building he was panting. A dismayed security guard stared pointedly at his shoes. They were leaking black dye onto the expensive carpet. He might as well have been walking on ink pads. (129)

Here there is an emphasis on the buildings’ construction materials—glass, stone, and steel, configured into skyscrapers; and these are also highlighted in earlier descriptions of skycity. This blazon of materials draws attention to the monolithic, man-made quality of New York City, stressing the seeming impregnability and eternity of the city. As Manhattan dissolves into skycity, Mitchell melts into the carpet. The passage thus aligns the erosion of structures with the erosion of the human, suggesting that people and places are interconnected, even in their destruction.

The novel further explores the interconnectedness of people and place through the objectification and consumption of human bodies. In the aftermath of Hurricane Tammy, the narrator describes the devastated cityscape in grisly terms: “The tunnel between the twin marble staircases was like a large, greedy mouth drinking the water. But clogging that mouth, and against the bottom of the stairs, were bodies” (173). Continuing, the narrator coalesces the bodies with the ruinous

landscape: “It was as if they had been stacked there on purpose... a grotesque human dam” (175). These bodies, described as “stacked,” “clogging,” and constitutive of a “dam,” are objectified and dehumanised; at the same time, they are juxtaposed to another anthropomorphised structure: the greedy-mouthed staircase. The juxtaposition of these elements represents a transference of autonomy and agency from human to object. The city is consuming its inhabitants, symbolically encasing and devouring them through its structures. The novel’s recognition of the manner in which human structures (and humans themselves) are embedded in the city prompts the reader to recognise the need to take apart—to deconstruct or decouple—society and the city: two things perceived to be imbricated and inseparable.

With the destruction of the city in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, the collapse of the human order seems imminent. How can society survive without its organising construct? In the aftermath of Hurricane Tammy, society appears to crumble. This is seen through the degeneration of society, a process by which savagery is normalised as humans adopt animal qualities and shed the orderly and rule-bound norms of civilisation. As the narrator observes: “Already they had become animals. Snarling, brutish, hateful. Was it that easy, the transition into savagery?” (170) The novel expresses the disappearance of civilised constructs through the characters’ metaphorical regression into animals and their return to a precivilised time. This devolution is further expressed in the destruction of agrarianism:

The vegetables had been uprooted and messily devoured, as if by wild beasts; all that was left were scraps of torn vine and the occasional tomato lying on the ground, rotten and burst, oozing white bugs. (223)

The violent, bestial destruction of the meticulously cultivated land converts human into beast, reversing thousands of years of

social development. The symbolic ruination of agrarianism may be construed as a hallmark of societal collapse. But the reader is taken even further back in time as modern civilisation devolves into caveman rituals:

The full horror of the scene took a few seconds to reach him. His eyes, as upon entering a cave, had to adjust to the darkness. But now he could see them—the men. Most of them were shirtless. They roamed the bunk areas like foxes, uncertain, fidgety, huddling low to the ground, moving in packs. When the air cleared momentarily between puffs of smoke, Mitchell noticed other men, deeper in the woods, their faces covered with mud and leaves, branches tucked into their pants in a crude camouflage. They were hunting. (224)

This image—going from light to dark—effects a metonymic reversal of the Enlightenment. The sensation described by the narrator’s simile—“as upon entering a cave”—implies our entry into the Paleolithic world of the caveman. More similes follow, depicting the men as animals: they are “like foxes” who are prone to “moving in packs.” The rapid regression into savagery is the novel’s way of realising what is perhaps society’s greatest fear: the collapse of the city and the concomitant destruction of society, a fear grounded in the belief that city and society are codependent. And yet, to counteract (and even to ridicule) the codependence of these constructs, the novel contrasts images of “savagery” with fleeting gestures at social norms, rendering the men comical. Though “most were shirtless,” the men “roam the bunk area” with “branches tucked into their pants” (224) in a comical pastiche of civilian dress and caveman disguise.

When asked who ruined Camp Ticonderoga, a woman reading a magazine provides an answer: “People. Human beings. Well, to be specific, men. It’s the men that did it. They’re doing it still” (223). The woman’s quick revision of her initial statement—blame is suddenly reallocated from all of the human race to only men (who are “doing it still”)—is comical, as the

woman sits only some twenty feet from a number of such men who act out barbarous savagery even now. Moreover, that this woman reads a magazine seems to heighten the comedic effect; her nonchalance seems to mock society's fear of the city's destruction, suggesting it may be a foregone conclusion, or even irrational. In light of this reading, it may be conjectured that the novel imagines the worst-case scenario of New York City's destruction not simply to scare the reader but, perversely, to assuage their social anxieties about the collapse of the city. If "place" is destroyed and yet humanity continues to exist, then the social fear of humanity's end might be overstated, even misconceived.

This insight allows readers to see how social structures may be divorced from the city. Thus shown to be disparate entities, the city and society are no longer contingent on each other for their survival. In so doing, the novel enables the reader to imagine real-world societal structures outside the confines of the city. It decouples the two concepts and opens up a new space for change and growth. This sense of "deplacing" is a reality of the Anthropocene, and therefore an important concept to explore and imagine in literature. In imagining the destruction of place, the novel makes it more feasible for readers to understand both the eventual disintegration of the world, as well as its reconstruction.

Reconstructing the *New New York City*?

In the world's current climate, imagining the future produces anxiety. This is well captured in *Odds Against Tomorrow*, which in Part Three asks several anxiety-laden questions: "What's going to happen next? To New York, to America, to the world?" (210) Conceptions of humanity and the anthropocentric world are imbricated in humanity's past and present. As Dipesh Chakrabarty has suggested, our human understanding is built on a historicistic foundation of

knowledge—a teleological knowledge that has developed through time—and it is this foundation that is used to also imagine the future.³⁶ But in the face of the Anthropocene, we humans stand before an unknown problem; we must learn to imagine ways to overcome the challenge of large-scale environmental destruction even though we have no prior experience with it.

Chakrabarty describes this problem, which is essentially tied to historical memory and learning, as the “historicist paradox.”³⁷ For him, “The discipline of history exists on the assumption that our past, present, and future are connected by a certain continuity of human experience.”³⁸ As Chakrabarty notes, however, this assumption does not hold when we face a period that is discontinuous with the past. As he explains, imagining a future becomes problematic when the unprecedented, erratic, and unpredictable nature of the present radically disconnects our world from its historical foundations. In these circumstances, the future extends “beyond the grasp of historical sensibility.”³⁹

In these circumstances, it is perhaps literature, and more broadly art, that is capable of performing the important and necessary imaginative work that is required to teach us how to change. This is because literature and art rely not on the continuity of historical experience but on the continuity of emotion to create affective landscapes in the present. Furthermore, it is perhaps this work that may be used to shift perspectives on place and the Anthropocene, allowing us to see past the “contemporary moods of anxiety and concern about the finitude of humanity” and to adopt a more optimistic outlook. In many ways, the desire to try and use historical understanding to connect the past, future, and present is emblematic of humanity’s connection to the city. After all, the city is the physical embodiment of human history. In its very

36. Dipesh Chakrabarty, “The Climate of History: Four Theses,” *Critical Inquiry* 35 no. 2 (2009): 197–198.

37. *Ibid.*, 197.

38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. *Ibid.*

form, the city represents the “continuity of human experience” through which humanity understands its past, present and future. However, with the collapse of the city—as it is often what is imagined in apocalyptic fiction—how might literature and art envisage the future? Can it bypass the historicist paradox?

This article has suggested that *Odds Against Tomorrow* uses the specific place of New York City to arouse certain emotions in the reader. The reader’s emotional journey is heightened by the novel’s construction and destruction of the city. The novel presents a model for the way in which the formal features of literature may be used to emotionally construct and transform societal structures. Rich’s narrative creates an emotional and active landscape—a volatile force that elicits particular emotions from its characters. As this article has contended, it is this affective aspect of the landscape—drawing on a history of common experience—that allows us to imagine a future that transcends the confines of place. The novel’s exploration of place makes apparent its inextricable connection to human agency and shows us how it is ultimately a construct of humans’ social organising systems. The way in which humans conceive of our environment is itself a social construct; and thus it is part of the anthropocentric problem. The novel’s imagined ruination of New York City presents readers with a choice: go forward and create new structures, orders, and forms or return to the old ones. Indeed, the novel makes these choices clear: Acceptance or denial? Creation or imitation? To create, reorganise, and rethink, however, there must be some element of destruction. As Levine suggests, adaptation is contingent upon disturbance.⁴¹ By destroying place, and the social organising systems enmeshed in it, the novel reveals the tenuous nature of these constructs. Summarising the work of Brazilian legal scholar Roberto Mangabeira Unger, Levine asks whether we might be able to adopt a new way of seeing “social life” as a “makeshift,

41. Levine, *Forms*, 17.

pasted-together order rather than a coherent system.”⁴²

The novel allows us to see the world in precisely this way. It draws “attention to the artificiality and contingency of social arrangements” and thereby opens up “a new set of opportunities for real change by way of feasible rearrangements.”⁴⁰

Through the use of practical imagination, *Odds Against Tomorrow* offers the reader a template for restructuring society. Fiction confronts the reader with choices, offering them the chance to participate in the narrative of the Anthropocene, as well as to imagine its reality and see its catastrophic potential. Fiction itself may then be seen as the process of pushing readers beyond the anthropocentric view and opening up insights from outside of ordinary human structures. Fiction thus performs⁴⁰. ^{Ibid.} an act of decentring. Of course, this claim raises a host of new questions: To what extent does fiction manipulate its reader? How might these ideas be translated into practice in the real world? Do certain fictive structures manipulate readers more than others? And is fiction just another way in which the anthropocentric myth of a coherent society is constructed or reinforced? We are at a tipping point in environmental change today; we face a kind of sorites paradox wherein we must remove grains from the heap of sand to discover when those grains no longer constitute a heap. In order to make decisions—decisions that humanity has never had to make, and which have no historical precedent—we need imagination to consider what we can change about society. Fiction can assist us in forming this new understanding of reality; it can teach us what in our society we must remove or rearrange so that place no longer constitutes a threat to our futurity.

42. *Ibid.*

43. *Ibid.*

