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# Introduction

*Adam Hansen*

In 2007, the United Nations issued a report into global population growth and distribution that contained some striking details:

During 2008, for the first time in history, the proportion of the population living in urban areas will reach 50 per cent . . . The world urban population is expected nearly to double by 2050, increasing from 3.3 billion in 2007 to 6.4 billion in 2050. By mid-century the world urban population will likely be the same size as the world's total population in 2004. (2–3)

In simple terms, this means that from now on, “for the first time in history,” the majority of the world’s population will live in cities. How can we comprehend the implications of this shift in human experience for individuals and societies? If we assume that part of the way human beings understand, reproduce and reshape their worlds is through the stories they tell about themselves and those worlds, then perhaps one way to address that question is to ask others: how have narratives, and our readings of them, prepared us for this? A city may reify the seemingly solid certainties of ideology and politics, where material reality plumbs the depths and scrapes the sky. How have narratives registered these realities? Given the rise of global cities, can they continue to do so? Cities are exciting, terrifying, overwhelming, lonely places, home and unhomely to millions: do

the structures of narrative mitigate people's estrangement from each other, or does narrative dislocation amplify the uncanny?

This special edition of *The Journal of Narrative Theory* aims to contribute to answering these questions, aggregating diverse narratives on, and discussions of, cities imagined and real, including Shanghai, London, St. Louis, Edinburgh, Bombay, Calcutta, Madrid, Barcelona, and Tokyo. As will become apparent, this aggregation and diversity reflects the subject. In *The Politics*, Aristotle avers that the ideal *polis*, or city-state, "consists not merely of a plurality of men, but of different kinds of men"; moreover, it is not possible to create the *polis* "out of men who are all alike" (104). Comparably, in a prototypical city narrative from 1610, Samuel Rid, a London-based prose-writer, despaired and marveled at the cultural diversity of his potential urban readership, in bilingual terms that speak to and of that proverbial diversity (albeit in a gender-inflected way, as with Aristotle): "Thus, *tot homines, tot sententiae*: so many men, so many minds" (386).

Perhaps the diversity of approaches contained in this collection might be considered problematic. Yet in cultivating diversity, we have not forgotten the etymological and social foundations of the city, or rather *civitas*—community. Cities may materialize separation and difference. Yet anyone who lives, or has lived, or even just *read* about living in a city, appreciates the necessity—and the difficulty—of negotiating spatial, material, economic, cultural, sexual, gender, ethnic and racial difference. Communities happen as much because of these differences as in spite of them. In turn, each essay offered here stands alone as a discrete piece of scholarship. But it is only by reading these essays together, with and against each other, that the complexity and plurality of the relationships between writers, critics, and cities can be realized. Community is as integral to this special issue as it is to cities.

That said, perhaps the correlation of cities and narratives might itself seem misleading or inappropriate: how can any literary discourse now reflect or react to the complexity of contemporary, globalized, mediated, urban life? The 2002 film *London Orbital* is a politicized collaboration between the writer Iain Sinclair and the film-maker Christopher Petit, comprised of footage of an endless motorway and seemingly vacant lots and dead spaces, disembodied voices, interviews, CCTV shots, and stills gen-

erated from observations of the M25, London's infamous circulatory traffic system.

Yet is this a visual complement *to* or compensatory supplement *for* Sinclair's book of the same name? Certainly, Sinclair's voiceover itself conveys his unease with literary modes, including his own: "The more polished the paragraph, the less I trusted the memory." Can writers recover and preserve what Sinclair and Petit dub in the film the "acoustic footprints" and the "fractured narrative" of their past and present urban subjects? If not, the need develops for a medium—like film, like *this* film?—better equipped to record the echoes and drifts, the phasings, hauntings and emissions, constituting and encircling a city. And yet, as Sinclair demonstrates with an annotated map, one can plot a series of literary resonances on the M25, from the work of John Clare to Bram Stoker, and acknowledging these conjures not only the ghosts of words, but also the ghosts of worlds evoked by them. For these artists, in forms old and new, narrative continues to construct, respond to, and inhabit the city.

Some theorists have been more hostile to the correlation of narratives and the urban. For example, in *The City of Tomorrow and Its Planning*, Le Corbusier projects "technical analysis and architectural synthesis" to construct "*a theoretically water-tight formula*" to plan the modern city (20). His plan offers "rules of conduct" to bring order to "That BEAST . . . the great city" (21). Marshalling statistics, percentages, diagrams, and models, Le Corbusier proceeds to detail how and why such order might be brought about: "*salvation*" comes in "uniformity," and any "creative art" is "based on geometry" (25). Seemingly, there is literally no room in this city, or its design, for anything fanciful, anything less than rational, objective, or empirical. Only this exclusion brings about the spatial and spiritual redemption of civilization. And yet the regulation about which Le Corbusier fantasizes produces fantasies of its own:

Suppose we are entering the city by way of the Great Park. Our fast car takes the special elevated motor track between the majestic sky-scrapers. . . . The traveller in his airplane, arriving from Constantinople or Peking it may be, suddenly sees appearing through the wavering lines of rivers and patches of forests that clear imprint which marks a city which has grown in accordance with the spirit of man: the

mark of the human brain at work. As twilight falls the glass sky-scrapers seem to flame. (29)

“Suppose”: from that word on, something fantastic happens, firing the imagination through a smattering of adjectives, a shift to the present tense, and even the introduction of characterization. Yet this is more than a fantasy, more, even, than Le Corbusier’s marketing of his own grand designs—in its linear form and subject, this is a narrative, and it returns in the most unlikely of places. In his very disavowals, Le Corbusier himself recognizes this, realizing the fictionality of what he has created, and how that fictionality threatens to detonate in the foundations of his dreams, as we realize in turn that his rational, redemptive program is itself a kind of story, no less creative:

This is no dangerous futurism, a sort of literary dynamite flung violently at the spectator. It is a spectacle organized by an Architecture. (29)

If narratives can occupy the city, and preoccupy urban artists and theorists, this is because in diverse locations, and at various times, cities have provided narratives with subjects, audiences, technologies of consumption and distribution; in turn, narratives show cities themselves, accommodating fragmentations and plurality, regulating otherness and deviance, and constructing the realities of urban life. The contrived architectonics, or chaotic tumults, of urban spaces and places have an inexorable materiality. Yet material conditions produced, and were reproduced by, the ideological modes, cultural forms, and types of literature scrutinized here. As Peter Stallybrass and Allon White affirm, “Discursive space is never completely independent of social space” (80). Hence contributors to this special issue consider the ways in which narratives realize the connections and contrasts between words and the world. Urszula Terentowicz-Fotyga adeptly explores how three contemporary London novels, Zadie Smith’s *The Autograph Man*, Iain Sinclair’s *Downriver* and W. G. Sebald’s *Austerlitz* evoke very different aspects of postmodern unreality. She suggests that while Smith plunges us into the reality of media simulations, Sebald writes of the loss of meaning as an effect of trauma, and Sinclair weaves a highly idiosyncratic web of fact and metafiction. For these writers, the city is also

a potential space of meaning-making. By doing this they move away from the “discursive narcissism” of self-referential fiction, and they distance themselves from the idea of language in which words refer only to words. Comparably, Malcah Effron focuses on a specific narrative genre—detective fiction—to argue that the successors of Raymond Chandler return to the realism of the “mean streets” by using real city settings. Yet though the detective genre typically assumes that all details are relevant to the investigative plot, the topographic details do not always necessarily relate to the mystery puzzle or to its solution. In this manner, they sometimes seem as superfluous as the details Roland Barthes uses to theorize the reality effect in nineteenth-century literature. In series by Ian Rankin or Sara Paretsky, the real setting generates the basis of reality that authenticates the speech. However, in John Lutz’s Alo Nudger series the setting challenges any ‘authentic’ language by highlighting generic conventionality. Reading these detective fiction details against Barthes’ notion of the reality effect, Effron engagingly demonstrates that, by using real city streets as settings for fictional crimes, contemporary detective fiction redefines the reality effect.

Shifting continents, but sustaining these concerns, Myles Chilton insightfully discusses the representation of Tokyo in the work of Murakami Haruki and Yoshimoto Banana. He suggests that one significant aspect of their literary production is the use of quasi-magical or near-improbable narrative moments. These twists of reality call attention to these texts as works of fiction, but they also raise questions about how writers in the present see Tokyo—and of course, due to the popularity of these writers, how these visions of Tokyo resonate with their readers. These improbable narrative moments seem to displace the enormity and material reality of Tokyo into controllable discursive realms. Yet Chilton suggests such moments compel not so much fictional escapes as rearticulations of the meanings that Tokyo might have for Japan in a globalized world.

Like squatters or migrants, then, narratives survive in various spaces in the voracious and expansive urban environment. This voracity, whether real or represented, can of course be horrifying. Hence when Harriet Carker (in Dickens’ *Dombey and Son*) watches “the stragglers who came wandering into London . . . footsore and weary,” covered in “dust, chalk, clay, gravel,” the capital becomes the nexus of a consumption that capitalizes upon the internally displaced and mobile as much as it causes their displacement:

Swallowed up in one phase or another of its immensity, towards which they seemed impelled by a desperate fascination, they never returned. Food for the hospitals, the churchyards, the prisons, the river, fever, madness, vice, and death,—they passed on to the monster, roaring in the distance, and were lost. (562–63)

In this sense, though, cities and narratives connect through their shared—and strained—inclusivity, as several of the essays collected here brilliantly convey. Hilary Thompson and Benjamin Fraser both investigate the capacity (or rapacity) of cities and narratives about them: their dual ability to incorporate or subsume other discourses, with profound implications for how those cities are experienced and conceived. Thompson contends that the colonial city provides an early model, not only of an outer laboratory, but of the scientific chamber turned inside out. Anita Desai's *Baumgartner's Bombay* and Amitav Ghosh's *The Calcutta Chromosome* imagine Calcutta as a teeming chamber where perilous elements interact. Outlining points of disagreement between psychoanalytic and postcolonial theory, Thompson suggests that both novels reconfigure the ground on which the two theories might meet. Interpreting Desai's description of wartime Calcutta as an exteriorization of the psyche's most interior pockets, Thompson claims that Ghosh takes this depiction further, making Calcutta an emblem not only of the scientific laboratory or the psyche's secrets but of the intersubjective psychoanalytic room turned inside out. When this chamber of commingling and memory is perceived as turned inside out, we see the colonial city as inverted laboratory, and as a passage point for diverse diasporas.

Fraser offers a comparably interdisciplinary, syncretic, and stimulating account of the powerful metaphor of the city as a living organism, traces its use in Spain from the city planning of the 1800s through novelists of the mid-to-late twentieth century, and finally locates it in the contemporary urban theories of Henri Lefebvre. Invoking the organic metaphor encouraged planners such as Ildefons Cerdà to do away with the contradiction and complexity of city life in favor of seeing the city in terms of a flattened, geometrical space. Yet when Spanish novelists of the mid-to-late twentieth century returned to this organic metaphor, they re-appropriated it to contest a simplistic view of cities through complex narrative strategies.

Hence, Luis Martín-Santos and Belén Gopegui portray the city as the site of internal contradiction. Furthermore, in recent years, the Barcelona-based Lefebvrian urban theorist Manuel Delgado Ruiz has revived the idea of ‘rhythmanalysis’ in order to frame city life as a mobile and unpredictable realm whose essence escapes the linear projects of contemporary urban design.

Of course, the unruly fragmentations of city life, and the conflicts they provoke or that incite them, have long fascinated, and long appalled, writers. St. Augustine opposed cities earthly and heavenly, and fixated on the fratricidal Cain founding a city in *Genesis* 4: 9–17 (596).<sup>1</sup> Lena Cowen Orlin has described early modern London as having “many guises” and “multiple identities” (3). In *Victorian Cities*, the historian Asa Briggs observed that the October 1888 *Quarterly Review* described an empire’s capital as being as “disintegrated as that of a coral reef in which every individual polyp has its own separate existence” (12). Frantz Fanon influentially detailed the compartmentalized, ghettoized zones of urban spaces that were produced by, and reproduced in, the ideology of difference inherent to colonialism (30–31). And Louis Wirth, the American sociologist of the urban, famously pronounced:

The contacts of the city may indeed be face to face, but they are nevertheless impersonal, superficial, transitory, and segmental. (12)

Cities divide and discriminate, often all the more viciously precisely because social and spatial divisions are hard to uphold when the past accretes and economic and cultural geographies cause desperation or compel interdependences. Raymond Williams acutely perceived the “sense of possibility, of meeting and movement” materialized but sometimes repressed in cities; to him and the authors he studied they represented “an experience of the future” (6, 272). Subsequently, Richard Sennett reconfigured the political potential of this idea:

The city brings together people who are different, it intensifies the complexity of social life, it presents people to each other as strangers. All these aspects of urban experi-



ence—difference, complexity, strangeness—afford resistance to domination (26).

To begin this collection, then, Belinda Kong departs from a common practice in contemporary criticism to take the nation or empire as the basic geographical unit of politics, and argues for a paradigm shift back to the city as a defining community of politicized life. She contends that 1930s and 1940s Shanghai—a site at the intersection of colonialism, nationalism, and cosmopolitanism—provides an archetype of the city as the supreme space of political power's and biological life's interchange. By focusing on two narratives of the city at war produced out of this milieu, Eileen Chang's *Love in a Fallen City* and J. G. Ballard's *Empire of the Sun*, Kong proposes a theory of the city as *biopolis*: a space at once of life's subjugation and atomizing, and also of life's survival and self-ordering. Chang and Ballard, both native to Shanghai, epitomize writers born into the city's colonial cosmopolitanism whose primary identification is with neither nation nor empire, but with Shanghai itself, as the biopolitical tension between those forces. Together, their texts demarcate two poles of the colonial cosmopolis's biopolitics and resurrect a theoretical understanding of the city as the original place of the citizen. Given its subject, Kong's paper also serves as a timely tribute to the passing of one of the greatest narrators of the urban.

As this introduction has tried to emphasize, these papers exhibit considerable and consistent theoretical verve to suggest what we can do with cities, and with narratives of and in them. We hope you enjoy what follows, and that the contributions provoke further questions.

## Notes

1. See Gerald L. Bruns, "Cain: Or, The Metaphorical Construction of Cities."

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