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After Humanity: Science Fiction after Extinction in Kurt Vonnegut and Clifford D. Simak

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Abstract

This article takes up the question of whether and to what extent humanistic values can survive confrontation with the "deep time" of the Anthropocene, specifically with the inevitability of human extinction. In particular, I focus on representations of human extinction and the emergence of sapient successor species in H.G. Wells's The Time Machine (1895), Kurt Vonnegut's Galápagos (1985), and Clifford D. Simak's City (1952), identifying in the latter two submerged humanisms that belie the surface anti-humanism and cosmic pessimism of the novels.

In August 2016 the Working Group on the Anthropocene presented to the International Geological Congress its recommendation that the Anthropocene should be formally adopted as the official name for the current geologic epoch. The working group has proposed that the new epoch should be understood as beginning somewhere around 1950—keyed primarily to the lingering radiological traces of atomic bomb detonations, but also to the explosion of plastic consumer detritus in the postwar period—and extend forward through the present into a near-term future that is already projected by scientists to be made increasingly unrecognizable by the disastrous collision of climate emergency, ocean acidification, sea level rise, desertification, and mass extinction (to only begin to name the many overlapping ecological crises we now face). The International Geologic Congress represents the cutting edge of formally recognizing the Anthropocene in scientific terms, ratifying the concept's wide adoption in the humanities as a framework for thinking about the present from an ecological perspective. Indeed, the growing academic consensus that "the Anthropocene," however defined, is the best and most accurate periodization for the current geohistorical moment in some sense only confirms what everyone already knows: that something has gone badly wrong with the Earth, and that "we"—however broadly or narrowly construed—are to blame.

I base this brief summary on an August 2016 report from the Congress in The Guardian. A not-quite-up-to-date summary of the Working Group's activities can be found at http://quaternary.stratigraphy.org/workinggroups/anthropocene/.
When I wrote about the 2013 film Snowpiercer and related ecological science fictions several years ago for Paradoxa 26 in a special issue devoted to “Sf Now” I spoke of the postapocalyptic, zombic necrofutures that now dominate our anticipation of our collective near-term future. In such broken futures—not only Snowpiercer but also The Walking Dead, The Hunger Games, Mad Max: Fury Road, Maddaddam, and so on—we see human survivors scavenging ruins in worlds of ecological disaster, or re-conscripted into slave societies dominated by totalitarian dictatorships, or struggling to invent the techno-miraculous novum that might somehow reverse the catastrophe in time to save everyone (or, indeed, even just save anyone). In the futurological fictions most closely attuned to the deep temporality exemplified by the articulation of the Anthropocene, we find this necrofuturological logic taken to its ultimate extension into maximum pessimism, accessing futures in which the efforts to survive all fail and the human species goes extinct. This maximum pessimism is in some sense inextricable from the Anthropocene as a scientific proposition, because its imaginative work of retrospectively reconstructing the present strongly suggests (if not presupposes) that the human species is not already present in the deep future to announce itself directly—and indeed the methods governing the larger system of geologic periodization would analogically suggest that in the post-Anthropocene context all obvious architectural, technological, and monumental evidence of us will have vanished so completely that the only way to recognize our historical presence is through the excavation of otherwise hidden geological evidence in ice cores and rock layers. To place the human species into geologic time, by way of the announcement of the Anthropocene, is by necessity to hurl us into the flux of emergence and extinction that otherwise characterizes the very-longue-durée history of the planet.

For this reason I have long been fascinated by what I see as the Neo-Romantic dimensions of the Anthropocene, which imaginatively reconstructs the impact of the human species on the climatological and geological record of Planet Earth from the standpoint of the far future (primarily by recognizing the scars of the long-term damage caused by capitalism). This deep futurological perspective becomes, in this way, a melancholically sublime premeditation of our own eventual social and species disappearance. To understand our era as the Anthropocene is to understand both our own civilization and the larger human species as hopeless terminal cases; if the “consensus future” of our Golden Age science fictional imaginings was an immortalized human species plying the stars in hyperspace galactic empires, the Star Trek future, the consensus future of Anthropocene science fictions is instead the
whisper-quiet, mournful vistas of *Life after People* and *The World Without Us*, a planetary graveyard so totalizing and Ozymandian that even our mausoleums have rotted away to dust. “When we contemplate ruins,” Christopher Woodward reminds us, “we contemplate our own future” (2); this has never been truer than in the proclamation that we are now living in the Anthropocene, and the future we contemplate is lonely, and much too quiet.

We might think here of the spellbinding and disturbing ending of Wells’s *The Time Machine* (1895)—one of a handful of works that might be said to have inaugurated the very idea of science fiction as a distinct genre in the first place—which registers the structure of feeling that is produced by evolutionary and geological thinking, and which I argue characterizes the depressed mood of the larger Anthropocene over a century *avant la lettre*. The last sequence of *The Time Machine* sees the Time Traveller voyage from the brutal necrofuture of the bovine Eloi and the predatory Morlocks even further up the line, to the end of life on Earth, a world where all trace of human achievement has utterly disappeared and the only things left are “monstrous crab-like creatures” sunning themselves (and chasing their prey, giant butterflies which make ghastly “harsh screams”) in the light of a dying sun (84-85). Here already, over a century before the scientific articulation of the concept of the Anthropocene by Paul Crutzen in the pages of *Nature* in 2002, we find that our grandest utopian ambitions for scientific and social achievement can do us no good; nothing can stave off “the shattering implications of time’s inhuman duration” that the human species is marked for death (Alkon 50). Even at the beginning of science fiction, then, this is already futurity’s end—its weird, unbearable, inevitable end.

In that deep-future era “a sense of abominable desolation” now hangs over all things; the Time Traveller calls the effect “appalling.” He travels on, further and further still, finding more and more desolation and darkness until at last:

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2 Darko Suvin’s analysis of the book focuses intently on its interior logic of class-struggle-as-speciation, paying particular attention to the excised kangaroo/centipede version of the entropy chapter which sees a “degenerate humanity” devolving (in a sort of reverse “Descent of Man”) into “as many species as the descendants of the mud fish who fathered all the land vertebrates” (Wells *Reader* 22-23). The implication of this removed chapter would therefore be that the re-animalization of the human species actually culminates in these crabs (the post-Morlocks) and butterflies (the post-Eloi). See *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* chapter 10.
The darkness grew apace; a cold wind began to blow in freshening gusts from the east, and the showering white flakes in the air increased in number. From the edge of the sea came a ripple and whisper. Beyond these lifeless sounds the world was silent. Silent? It would be hard to convey the stillness of it. All the sounds of man, the bleating of sheep, the cries of birds, the hum of insects, the stir that makes the background of our lives—all that was over. As the darkness thickened, the eddying flakes grew more abundant, dancing before my eyes; and the cold of the air more intense. At last, one by one, swiftly, one after the other, the white peaks of the distant hills vanished into blackness. The breeze rose to a moaning wind. I saw the black central shadow of the eclipse sweeping towards me. In another moment the pale stars alone were visible. All else was rayless obscurity. The sky was absolutely black. (86)

In this transcendent vision of ultimate entropic sublimity, the apocalyptic end of all life, the Traveller spies out of his peripheral vision some other, moving, tentacled thing, and the horrid sight of this new monstrosity causes him almost to faint—but “a terrible dread of lying helpless in that remote and awful twilight sustain[s]” (86) and animates him sufficiently to return to his machine and begin the long journey back home to his own present, a place and time the Traveller’s depressing journeys have now revealed to him as both hopelessly flawed and inevitably doomed, in multiple ways, to total ruination.

Wells thought often of extinction. As Christina Alt has detailed, he often used mankind’s ability to make other animals extinct as a marker of its supreme technological powers—but at the same time extinction’s final judgment on all things seemed to horrify him at a fundamental level. “The long roll of palaeontology,” he wrote in “On Extinction,” “is half-filled with the records of extermination: whole orders, families, groups, and classes have passed away and left no mark and no tradition upon the living fauna of the world.” He was particularly aghast at the way mass death had passed over mankind as a result of European colonialism, famously noting the tragic case of the Tasmanians in The War of the Worlds and bemoaning the precarious situation of the “Red Indian” (forced into “interbreeding with their supplanters”) in “On Extinction.” His grief over these human and nonhuman extinctions presages the one he knows will someday come for Homo sapiens as a species; he projects onto the endangered bison the recognition of an imminent bisonless future that is really our recognition of our own eventual disappearance, and says “for them the future is blotted out, and hope is vanity” (624).
At the opening of his essay “The Extinction of Man” he likewise notes that “it is part of the excessive egotism of the human animal that the bare idea of its extinction seems incredible to it,” going so far as to imagine a Cephalapsis in a primordial ocean bemusedly contemplating the notion of “A world without us!” The essay then goes to imagine possible scenarios for an imminent extinction of the human, against the backdrop of our steadfast denial of our extinction’s very possibility. In his grim Mind at the End of Its Tether (1946), the last book published during his life, Wells returns to this unhappy anticipation of human extinction, and declares it final: “To a watcher in some remote entirely alien cosmos, if we may assume that impossibility, it might well seem that extinction is coming to man like a brutal thunderclap of Halt! … There is no way out or round or through” (46: 50).

This is why, I think, the sensation of time travel in The Time Machine is primarily characterized by seasickness and nausea, by the “horrible anticipation … of an imminent smash”—and only secondarily by “a kind of hysterical exhilaration”: “…with a kind of madness growing upon me, I flung myself into futurity” (42). I find that the articulation of the Anthropocene, however scientifically accurate or politically useful it may be, makes us feel both queasy and mad in much the same way as the Time Machine—it hurls us into our own future, which it frames as a fast-approaching crash.

In other recent projects on science fiction in the Anthropocene I have sought “solutions” to the depressive psychological and philosophical traps the Anthropocene lays out for us. Perhaps futilely, still in search of something like hope, that remains my intent here. In the context of this special “global weirding” issue of Paradoxa I will focus on two of the “weirder” manifestations of the science fiction of the Anthropocene from Clifford Simak (City) and Kurt Vonnegut (Galápagos), each originating decades before the concept was formalized by geologists. What is weird in both novels is their uncanny presentation of a world without us; these are stories of deep-future ecologies that have been utterly depopulated (of humans) and radically transformed, where all traces of our civilization have been largely or entirely wiped away. I have tended in the past to call such stories Quiet Earths, narratives of worlds after our collective deaths which we are allowed to glimpse only through the imaginative, impossible perspective of the ghost who can (or who is condemned) to observe without interfering—but I am drawn also to Donna Haraway’s recent framing of such visions as not the Anthropocene but the Chthulucene, which despite its alternative spelling (from chthonic, subterranean, rather than Cthulhu) nonetheless always also prompts for us visions of Lovecraft’s unthinkable, incomprehensible
monstrosities. The joy of the Chthulhocene, despite its menace, is that life survives, as Haraway explains in one joyous articulation of the concept in an essay at the online journal e-flux titled “Tentacular Thinking”: “The unfinished Chthulucene must collect up the trash of the Anthropocene, the exterminism of the Capitalocene, and chipping and shredding and layering like a mad gardener, make a much hotter compost pile for still possible pasts, presents, and futures.” The reframing of the Anthropocene as the Chthulucene presents our moment as one still containing energizing possibilities for life, rather than only maximum death—a key formulation for my readings of both novels.

Ramin Bahrani’s transcendent short film “Plastic Bag” (2010), narrated in the wonderfully melancholic voice of Werner Herzog as inner monologue of the bag, can provide a brief introductory of the structure of feeling that is made possible by Chthulcenic rather than merely Anthropocenic fantasy. The first conceit of the film is that the plastic bag is conscious, and experiences every moment of its life from its birth (when it is used to ferry a customer’s goods home from some late capitalist superstore), through its re-use as to carry food to and from work or tennis practice, and finally to pick up a dog’s excrement and be discarded into the trash and taken to a landfill. The second conceit of the film is that the bag is not only conscious but immortal, as the plastic it is made of will never disintegrate—and so the film subsequently takes us on a million-year tour of the future, through the total disappearance of human beings into the next age, as the bag is blown by the wind through a now-empty earth before ultimately coming to rest with others of its brethren in the Great Pacific Garbage Patch. The negative markers of the Anthropocene that characterize “Plastic Bag” direct our attention to yet another possible recasting of the Anthropocene—what James W. Moore has dubbed the “Capitalocene,” to mark the local and historically specific force of capital that has committed this crime against the future (as opposed, via that Anthro-, to trying to pin the blame on all of humanity as such). What we recognize in the geological record as our legacy from the futurological standpoint of the Anthropocene is the evidentiary patchwork of poisons, garbage, spiking global temperatures, radioactivity, and fossils of all the living things that we killed.

The immortal bag, initially horrified and disgusted by animal life, eventually comes to value animals more than even itself—and so in the film’s stunning final moments calls back through time to its creators in the name of its own negation, saying “I wish you had created me so I could die.” The bag calls for its own non-existence first in the name of its own personal exhaustion but secondly, and more importantly, in the name of the animals who yet survive in the post-
human world of the Capitalocene, animals it once found monstrous but now sees as beautiful, as more worthy of survival than himself. In deep-futurological texts about human extinction the status of animals is inevitably a major concern: we discover in the future of the animals and their ability or inability to survive in the world we have made for them a retrospective final judgment on our species. Often this produces a depressive utopian vision of a particularly anti-humanist sort; our recognition of the sacredness of animal life and our guilt over “the sixth mass extinction”—another proposed designation for the Anthropocene that centers its nonhuman victims—leads to a sort of anguished desire for collective suicide, as the only way to stop the human species from killing again and again and again and again. Sometimes that anguished desire is made manifest by the actions of the story’s antiheroes—“The Last Flight of Dr. A,” by Alice Sheldon (writing as James Tiptree, Jr.), from 1969, is an early example of the form, while more recent examples include Twelve Monkeys (1995) and the titular first book in Margaret Atwood’s Oryx and Crake series (2003)—while in other cases it simply happens on its own, as the inevitable consequence of evolutionary time. Characteristically, when we see the end of the human race narrated in such fictions—through, of course, the distortive lens of a narrative perspective that allows us as readers and viewers to impossibly survive species death—we typically experience the sublime throb of our own totalizing erasure with relief that at least it happened in time to save the animals, so that at least something, somewhere, might survive our poison. We slide, misanthropically, from the recognition that someday humanity will die to the darker suspicion that it should.

But this suicidal ideation, a longing for extinction that challenges and perhaps even at times surpasses the fear of it, warrants some additional consideration—as while we may live in the Anthropocene we do not make our homes in that hyperbolic timescale but rather in the much smaller, much more local temporality of human life. To the extent that the concept of the Anthropocene shocks us into some new relationship with our sense of our society, and/or of human nature, its speculations and articulations of a future of human absence thus retain philosophical and political implications for the present, for the way we live before extinction. In each case, no matter how estranged from our moment it may be, the art object remains a human one, and indeed a fundamentally human-centered one. In what follows I will explore how the tension between human and animal that arises out of the extinctive futurological imagination of the Anthropocene can ultimately shock us into a new and better relationship with the present in works by Vonnegut and Simak, locating in each book submerged, weird humanisms that belies the
surface anti-humanism, pulling back from the brink of Anthropocenic despair and reconciling us instead to our fragile, broken, wretched, beautiful, doomed, striving species.

“It Almost Made Me Love People Just as They Were Back Then”: *Galápagos*

The perverse appeal of that depressive wish for a final end for humanity can be in seen in the short snippet Kurt Vonnegut published in the first issue of a short-lived literary journal I founded with some fellow MFA graduates in 2004, *Backwards City Review*: “Where do I get my ideas from?” Vonnegut writes:

You might as well have asked that of Beethoven. He was goofing around in Germany like everybody else, and all of a sudden this stuff came gushing out of him.

It was music.

I was goofing around like everybody else in Indiana, and all of a sudden stuff came gushing out.

It was disgust with civilization.

The sense of “disgust” that Vonnegut suggests undergirds his work is perhaps nowhere more visible in his oeuvre than in his 1985 novel *Galápagos*. *Galápagos*, like the other works I have been discussing in this article, conceptualizes history not at the level of the individual actor or the national imaginary but from the inhuman perspective of “species time.” The novel is the story of the end of humanity, narrated retrospectively from a position one million years in the future by a ghost who, it turns out, is Leon Trotsky Trout, the son of Vonnegut’s beloved and beleaguered Kilgore. Leon has watched as a tiny group of shipwrecked tourists stranded on the Galápagos Islands has led to the evolution of a small-brained dolphin- or sea-lion-like successor species to *Homo sapiens*, while on the mainland the rest of humanity has been felled by the lethal combination of social catastrophe, ecological collapse, and (especially) by the rapid global spread of a virus that radically inhibits women’s fertility by attacking their eggs, rendering child-bearing impossible—events all brought about, Leon tells us, in one way or another, by the destructive interventions of our too-big brains.

In this respect Vonnegut in *Galápagos*, like Wells above and like Simak below, can be thought of as an early anticipator of the Anthropocene. As we read *Galápagos’s* articulation of the emptied, posthuman world
of a million years from now—written, we should note, in the wake of Vonnegut’s own conflicted and possibly half-hearted suicide attempt in 1984—we discover Vonnegut’s ghostly narrator crafting an unexpectedly utopian life for the dolphin-humans now inhabiting the Galápagos island chain, despite the seemingly anti-humanistic “achievement” of their devolved smaller brains and the radically truncated scope of their lives both in terms of creative potential and life expectancy (they are incapable of most of the higher cognition we associate with the human species, and die at thirty, when they lose the last of their teeth). The dolphin-humans are covered in a sleek fur with atrophied fin-like arms and much smaller skulls and brains, both to improve their speed and maneuverability in the water—evolution having reselected for a few ideals of human perfection reflecting humanity’s new biological niche.

They eat only fish, and live only on the Galápagos Islands—there is no globalization or empire, and no attendant production of poverty. There are no marriages and no tools; no weapons, no war, no slavery, no torture or violence; no money; no clothes, no shame; there are no tombs, no burials, no real concept of death; no names, no life stories, no lies, and no capacity to represent yourself as something you are not. They have very short childhoods, do not grow old, do not know that they personally will someday die, and, we are told, have no belief in God; in not having the concept of God, “they know exactly what this world really is,” says Leon darkly (129). They have no sculpture and no art, no writing, books, or literature. There are no marriages, and no heartbreak: after nine months of life, people even forget who their mothers are. They have no conception of race, ethnicity, or class. And it’s not all negative theology, either: we find that the dolphin people care for each other, living communally in a sort of hyperprimitive communism; they all still laugh on the beach when someone farts, grieve the inevitable loss of a sibling to a shark, comfort each other when sick or hurting or sad.

Galápagos is thus essentially structured as a kind of obscene dare: will you choose the weird posthuman world of the dolphin-people, or will you choose our world, with all its needless suffering, its lies and deceptions, its insanity and destructiveness both on the level of society and on the level of the individual? Galápagos juxtaposes a traditional Western historical sense of human progress and technological achievement (exemplified by the dull and lifeless recitations of the pocket computer Mandarax, an “Apple of Knowledge” which is ultimately hurled into the sea by the novel’s Noah and New Adam, Captain von Kleist) with the possibility of a better future that is made possible precisely through the end of all progress, creativity, ingenuity, and innovation. “Nobody, surely, is going to write Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony—or tell a lie, or
start a Third World War,” Leon announces near the end of the novel—a dialectical juxtaposition Leon sardonically takes as proof that, even in the worst times, times like ours, there still really is “hope” (283-284). The novel thus dyspeptically reframes the history of Homo sapiens in the context of geologic time as a short and miserable blip between the evolution of two much happier species of primates: a land chimp living in Africa and a sea chimp someday living in the Galápagos island chain. And most scholars of the novel read Galápagos in exactly these terms, with most understanding the intended meaning of the novel to be identical to Trout’s judgment that their primitivist future is certainly better than our miserable present. “Vonnegut at last overcomes his misanthropic humanism,” says Robert Tally, in a representative reading of the book, “not by abandoning the mis ‘misanthropy,’ but by abandoning the anthropoid” (132). Charles J. Shields, author of a recent lengthy biography of Vonnegut, similarly describes Galápagos as “distinctive among his work because it’s the only novel-length prediction he ever makes about the future of the human race, not just individuals, that’s optimistic” (368)—optimistic, again, in the very particular sense of looking very much forward to the total extinction of the human race.

I suppose in the end I read the book as a kind of utopian dare too, with the same overall orientation, but I want to complicate that reading a bit with a few observations. I want to call attention to what is flattened in the novel when we focus simply on the distinction between human futurity and that of the dolphin-people. Chief among the possibilities left out by the standard framing of the novel as a “choice” between deluded humanism and maximum misanthropy is Leon’s silence on the question of indigenous futurism, a subtle aspect of the novel which most readers have omitted. The island civilization that follows ours and precedes the slow evolution into dolphin-humans extends out of the (fictional) nearly extinct Kanka-bono tribe in South America, as a plurality of the stranded tourists (and all but one of its fertile women) have Kanka-bono heritage. So the splitting into an us-vs.-them future is already actually a triad, because there is actually already a third, middle term: the long Kanka-bono civilization, which we are told actually makes it at least until the year 23,000, twenty thousand years—that is, more than twice the length of recorded history. (That’s when we are told the last marriage happened, and for all we know the civilization might have lasted longer still, post-marriages.) Galápagos thus, on the one hand, ideologically aligns “primitivism” and the end of technological progress with human extinction as such in a mode that we may find somewhat disturbing, even racist, from a contemporary postcolonial perspective—but at the same time he asserts that the indigenous modes of existence are far more
sustainable, far more enduring, and far more satisfying than those one would find in the metropole. It’s not necessarily humanity as such that is doomed in Galápagos, as much as the decadent industrialized West. Weirdly, Leon himself has essentially no interest in this civilization, to an extent that rightly makes my twenty-first students a little uncomfortable with the novel as they continue to read the book—but Vonnegut leaves us enough tantalizing clues about the Kanka-bono future to make it clear that this is Leon’s failing, not Vonnegut’s.

It is Leon’s lack of interest in the civilization that, I would argue, serves as a prophylactic against Galápagos falling into the trap of indigenous romanticism that would also function as a kind of racist fantasy (albeit from the other direction). We learn so little about the Kanka-bono civilization and its long history—and because Leon is invisible and the rest of humanity has vanished we never have the typical sort of colonialist confrontation between “us” and “them” that would allow for either a positive or negative comparison. All we have is this one brief glimmer of an apparently successful alternative to colonialist history that Leon chooses not to explore in his own narrative of human history, fixating instead on the much briefer and much more catastrophic cultural milieu from which he originated.

Leon’s general unreliability as a narrator—the selectivity in what he notices, the assumptions and biases that structure his determinations of what is good and bad in what he sees—becomes increasingly important in the second half of the book, as we begin to see another crack in the binary that has been established between the present and the future: Leon’s own backstory, which not only contains potential mental illness (he has previously been hospitalized for “nervous exhaustion,” i.e., PTSD, and had contracted syphilis, as Oliver Ferguson has noted in pointing to a possible reading of the book as entirely Leon’s delusion), but which also contains a second narrative development which could quite easily become the hinge-point of an “Occurrence at Owl Creek Bridge”-style twist in the narrative: his accidental decapitation during the construction of the boat that eventually takes the tourist-colonists to the Galápagos Islands.

The idea that Leon is deranged or deluded is the sort of provocative and seductive misreading of the novel that becomes more and more attractive the longer one thinks about it. It explains a number of otherwise troubling features of the book: the fact that Leon seems to have access to a lot of information that he shouldn’t have; that he can supposedly manifest himself physically, but never does; that a million years absolutely alone with no one to talk to doesn’t seem to have affected or altered his personality in the slightest; and, mostly crucially, that many
of the features of the dolphin-people that are most attractive to him seem to come directly out of his own unhappy experiences. Leon—who committed atrocities in Vietnam for which he cannot forgive himself, and who lost his mother when she abandoned the family when he was young, and whose own brief foray into reproductive futurity ended in an abortion, and who died much too early—imagines a utopian world in which both his own crimes and his own grief are impossible, in which parenting no longer happens, and in which no one survives long enough to grow old.

As we begin to doubt Leon, even just for the sake of argument, the book opens up in a multitude of alternative possibilities and readings:

- as noted above, that one way or another he has made it all up;
- that he is somehow fundamentally wrong about *Homo sapiens* and about the dolphin people, and the comparison between them;
- and/or that he has missed something important in the telling of his story, perhaps especially that he has missed the influence of the divine in these events. Leon remains a convinced atheist even though he has survived his own death, spoken to the ghost of his dead father at length, and has seen a blue tunnel leading to an afterlife; he insists that he witnessed nothing but the natural hand of evolution in these events—but he has also detailed many moments in the narrative in which people seem to have been saved by inspired thoughts and actions they cannot adequately explain even to themselves. As Tally points out in his reading of the book, even an unthinkable horror like Hiroshima, whose nightmarish radiological legacy provides the “colony” in the Galápagos islands with a helpful mutation that accelerates their evolution into dolphin-people, becomes a kind of “lucky break” or fortunate fall within the terms of the novel—a fact Leon simply brushes off without any examination.

It’s with this last idea I want to end this brief reading of *Galápagos*-as-perverse-wish. It’s a commonplace to think of *Galápagos* as Vonnegut’s “Darwin” novel, but few link it back to the sequences involving atheism and Darwin at the end of *Slaughterhouse-Five* (another book which people frequently misunderstand by confusing Vonnegut’s characters’ values with his own). We are told in chapter ten of *Slaughterhouse* that the Tralfamadorians are not interested in stories about Jesus, but they are interested in stories about Darwin, “who taught that those who are meant to die, that corpses are improvements” (268-269). The narrator of *Slaughterhouse* rejects this view. In fact, Kilgore Trout does too,
in one the longest discussions of one of his stories in *Slaughterhouse*, which is the story of the time traveler who goes back in time to see if Christ actually died on the Cross—and it turns out he did, which in the context of the story is a perversely hopeful thing because it leaves open the possibility that he really did rise from the dead too, that the miracle was real (259-261).

Where is Christ, Vonnegut’s or otherwise, in *Galápagos*? (A strange question to ask of a very famous atheist, perhaps, but hear me out.) There isn’t much room for someone like Christ in Leon’s worldview, which is all Darwin (and indeed the whole book is written a little bit in the style of a book from Tralfamadore, with everything depicted dyschronologically in a single burst all at once, and whose overall logic does seem to affirm the notion of death as improvement). But all the same there is a little bit of Christian love, or something quite like it, at the very end of the novel, a story Leon tells us about his life that doesn’t fit with the totalizing anti-human pessimism of the rest of the book. It’s the story of how he went AWOL from Vietnam after his atrocities and became a refugee in Sweden.

Leon goes to see a private physician while hospitalized because he has contracted syphilis from a prostitute during his convalescence from exhaustion, and he fears that the Marines will dock his pay during his treatment if they find out. The doctor talks to him about his illness, and about his war crimes, before finally revealing that he is a huge fan of Kilgore Trout’s writing (the only such person that Leon has ever met). (The scene in this way is a distorted version of what happens to Billy Pilgrim during his own convalescence in *Slaughterhouse*, again calling us back to that novel.) This event causes Leon to burst into tears for one of the few times of his life (he hadn’t cried during his war crimes, or when thinking about them afterwards, or even when his mother left). But he bursts into tears at the thought that “in the eyes of one person, anyway, my desperately scribbling father had not lived in vain.”

“The doctor made me cry so much that I had to be sedated.” Leon goes on. “When I woke up on a cot in his office an hour later, he was watching me. We were all alone.” The doctor offers to prescribe Leon a “very strong medicine” for his ailment—by which the doctor means not syphilis, but his enlistment in the army. “He said he had friends who could arrange to get me from Bangkok to Sweden, if I wanted to seek political asylum there.” “But I can’t speak Swedish,” Leon says. “You’ll learn,” the doctor replies. “You’ll learn, you’ll learn” (323-324).

This whole beatific sequence is an awe-inspiring act of love, generosity, and resilience that (we have been told) could never happen in the
ostensibly utopian dolphin future that Leon endorses, and which in fact belies almost every other anti-human conclusion of the book, from the pointlessness of creative acts to the unalterable cruelty and stupidity of *Homo sapiens*, to the shark as the supposedly perfect animal, “needing no improvements” (316-317). And the trick has actually been in front of us the entire time: this is a novel ostensibly about universal death that requires a writerly human voice to serve as its narrator, a ghost who will now happily step through the blue tunnel to the afterlife because the dolphin version of the human race will now exist unchanged forever, and therefore nothing interesting will ever happen again. *Galápagos* is, in the end, a human story after all, a story about and for us that only one of us could tell.

In the end Vonnegut thus pulls the rug out from under us and calls on us to somehow “still believe” in the possibility of transcendent value, over and against the surface nihilism of the rest of the book, “in spite of everything” — as in the well-known Anne Frank quote that serves as epigram for the book and is frequently discussed inside (1). Reading Vonnegut in the Anthropocene we find an ambitious and seductively utopian articulation of the Quiet Earth, only to be induced to reject its bleak anti-human nihilism—and subtly returned, instead, to a much more traditionally humanistic paradigm that insists upon the primacy of human values in human historical time, not in “deep time,” but on the scale of the individual human life and interpersonal human kindness.

This reorientation of values, necessary for survival, is something the tourist-colonists who become stranded on Santa Rosalia are nonetheless never quite able to effect for themselves—by and large they all remain unhappy for the rest of their lives, a striking number of which end in suicide—but it is something that their mostly Kanko-bono children and grandchildren are quickly able to make real. “After the last of the old people died,” the next generations “become a family which included everyone,” with a common language and a common religion and some common jokes and songs and dances and so on.” Here is a nearly secret human(ist) utopia, sandwiched between the human dystopia of the present and the weirdness of the dolphinic future, and making only the briefest appearance in the novel despite inaugurating a social order that both outlasts “us” by tens of thousands of years and far outshines us in terms of social cohesion and basic decency. “It went very fast—that formation from such random genetic materials of a perfect cohesive human family. That was so nice to see. It almost made me love people just as they were back then, big brains and all” (299). The long triumph of the Kanka-bono civilization, and its slow twenty-thousand-year-plus transformation into the weird utopia of the dolphin-people, suggests
the possibility of a radically different relationship between humanity and nature in which neither party is either dominant or threatened—a balance of which *Galápagos*’s ghostly narrator regrettably records only the most tantalizing traces. The same erasure would be found, strangely, in the geological record as well; to the ecologically minded reader of 2016, part of what seems most attractive about this third possibility for human futurity in *Galápagos* is, precisely, that there is no Kankabonocene.

Everything Is Going to the Dogs: *City*

The other novel of human extinction in the Anthropocene I will discuss similarly takes on the problem that destabilizes *Galápagos* and other speculative works of the Anthropocene: the inability to critically apprehend a world devoid of human beings on the basis of any ethical or aesthetic judgment without some apprehending and conscious subject to do the judging. *Galapágos* solved the problem by adding in a ghost; *City* solves the problem by translating the human power of judgment to Uplifted animals and artificially intelligent robots. In doing so, Simak finds a remarkable avenue to explore whether humanism might itself have a future, even if Western civilization (and indeed humanity itself) does not.

*City* is an even earlier novel of the Anthropocene than *Galápagos*, anticipating the geologic articulation of the concept by over fifty years; perhaps in part for this reason it is much less uncommitted to the principle of total human elimination that now more firmly grounds this mode of speculation. This inventive and very unusual novel—a “fix-up” novel in that it links eight (and in the second and some later editions, nine) of Simak’s published stories through a delightfully unique framing narrative I will describe below—describes the creation of a species of intelligent Dogs (*Canis sapiens*) by humans and the subsequent total disappearance of human beings from Planet Earth. What we experience as *City* is in fact written retrospectively from the far-future perspective of the Dog civilization that emerges in the absence of humans; the interstitial “fix-up” chapters between the short stories describe the efforts of Dog historians and mythologists to excavate the true history lurking behind their inscrutable myths, which use sacred words like “Man” and “City” and “war” that have no material meaning for them. (Of course most of the Dogs, like Bounce and Rover, are sophisticated enough to know that humans are only a myth; it is only truly fringe thinkers like Tige who believe the myths must describe real beings who once actually existed, once upon a time...)
Thus, where Vonnegut’s naturally selected human successors have lost our intelligence and become more animalic, Simak’s Dogs have gained it and become more human (and, as suggested by the absence of war, simultaneously more humane as well). But despite their gifts the Dogs’ capacity to reconstruct their true history from the available evidence is still quite limited; it is only the human reader, living in the Dogs’ deep past that is our present, who is able to read and understand these myths as the true story of an Uplifted *Canis sapiens* whose intelligence was scientifically augmented by human beings, who subsequently completely disappeared.

The Dog civilization today reads as a version of Anthropocenic retrospective futurity, though in this case the future can only barely recognize us. (The memory of humans retained by a more insidious capital-A Ant civilization elsewhere in the novel is perhaps even more Anthropocenic still; what the hive-mind-like Ants remember of humans is the neurotic memorialization, inscribed everywhere in their hidden city, of a human kicking over an anthill.) In particular the book is utterly infused with the Neo-Romantic melancholy of the Anthropocene, a philosophical orientation which cannot look at the world without seeing, first, an irresolvable rupture between us and the natural order, and, second, the haunting anticipatory memory of our own deaths. Animals—no doubt due to the combination of their maximum innocence with the threat of mass extinction—become a key location where the chronic grief that permeates and structures our sense of what it means to live in the Anthropocene plays out.

In the Anthropocene animals are always at least a little bit sad, because they are threatened with extinction; or because they are already functionally or literally extinct; or because they are trapped in zoos and water parks that we now recognize, too late, to be horrid torture chambers—while at the same time seeing that those zoos may be their only hope for species survival of any kind—or because they are trapped living alongside a companion species (the human race) that cannot be trusted and in any event does not seem long for this world either. In an animal studies class I taught as a senior research capstone for English majors at my home university in Spring 2016, this intersection between futurity, incommensurability, and the animal became inescapable, almost palpable, as the semester went on: the more we studied, and the more we anticipated a future of loss, the more the class became permeated by what one of my students called a mood of “debilitating grief,” from which we could find no exit, and only rarely consolation.

This mood of chronic grief provides an additional complication to the barrier between human and animal that is already derived from our use of language. When Joan Gordon read *City* for a *Science Fiction Studies*
forum on animal studies, she closed her piece with Alice Kuzniar’s lengthy rumination on melancholy and animals: “Melancholia means that, however close we are to the canine pet, that closeness can never be enough and we are always conscious of the obliqueness and imperfection that govern our communication with it.... But the ideal of crossing that barrier motivates... writers and artists... they attempt to come closer to the animal, all the while melancholically despairing at not being able to do so” (Kuzniar 11, qtd. in Gordon 463). In recent Uplift fantasy—science fictions that imagine animals being raised to human intelligence, including language use—these two strains of sadness frequently align: in such science fictions we typically imagine that if the animals could talk, they would tell us how much they despise us.

We see this sort of ventriloquism at work in City as well. “I wrote City in a surge of white-hot rage at the stupidity and cruelty of the human race,” Simak once wrote in response to a fan’s inquiry, paralleling the despair that moved Vonnegut to write Galápagos. “I build myself a world of the kind in which I thought I would like to live and because such a world could not be based upon humanity, I built it upon dogs and robots.”

For many readers of Simak, even those who like City, this mood of despair becomes the poison that kills the book. John Dean in his 1982 reading of the novel (also from Science Fiction Studies) finds the novel to be something like laced candy:

We must guard ourselves against Simak’s argument in City. He is a writer of remarkable fluency and charm. But his narrative strategy in City is deplorable. He cannot pursue self-knowledge in the wilderness beyond the range of his own sweet dreams. He is stubbornly, perversely transcendental in his pastoral vision of nature. As David Pringle has rightly said of Simak: “He is a genuine conservative writing within a revolutionary genre, an enemy in the camp of progress.” (75)

Simak’s despair and negativity and his misanthropic, dyspeptic suspicion of both humanism and progress make him, for Dean, Pringle, and others, a sort of snake in the garden of SF.

This flinching rejection of Simak, I find, flattens the actual multiplicity of the novel’s complex articulation of deep time, its refusal of that sort of deep-temporal closure and its rejection of the end of human species. While the one-sentence capsule plot summary (“humankind dies out, and the Dogs forget us”) seems to posit only one sort of possible future, as with Galápagos the novel leaves open multiple strands of possible futurity, including some futures that include us and some that don’t:
First, humans don’t actually go extinct in the novel, we come to discover; the main line of humanity moves to another plane of existence like the energy beings in Star Trek, or the sublimated civilizations in Iain M. Bank’s Culture series, while some un-sublimated humans persist in cryogenic suspension under the Earth and still another group is taken to another dimension to live safely apart from the natural world it can no longer encounter safely;

- the Dogs and the other Uplifted animals disappear too; they are eventually forced to leave Earth behind for another dimension as well, making City in this sense a doubly or triply Anthropocenic novel;

- the Ants then have their turn with the original Earth, before eventually disappearing themselves;

- finally we are left with only the Dogs’ robot caretakers, who (as in Asimov, a writer with whom Simak was in close conversation) persist in their own posthuman civilization among the stars.

Nowhere is this futurological multiplicity more evident than in the forking of the novel itself, which is now available in two forms: one with a 1970s-penned “Epilog” and one without. I find this textual history fascinating; while many people read City’s most famous story, “Desertion,” as its fulcrum, I think the true fulcrum now may weirdly be the half-present “Epilog.” “Epilog” was written much later than the other stories and is somewhat incompatible with them, both tonally and narratologically; it breaks the logic of the interstitial “fix-up” chapters because it takes place on the original Earth after it has been abandoned by both Man and Dog, and isn’t one of the stories the Dogs tell, and it is “couched,” as Bruce Shaw puts it, “in an even darker mood” (494) than the rest of City. Whether or not “Epilog” properly qualifies as part of City is thus now very much up for debate: My “SF Masterworks” reprint edition from 2010 doesn’t include Epilog, while the 2015 Kindle edition from Open Road Media does.

“Epilog,” if it is included in City, ends City on a very strange but very Anthropocenic note. The Robot Jenkins, who has caretaken the Dogs

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1 Or perhaps the opposite, a non-Anthropocenic novel: living now on a new planet in another dimension, the Dog civilization will neither find architectonic traces of the vanished human civilization nor experience a disrupted, climate-changed future as a result of our ecologically destructive practices today.

2 Indulging myself with a final brief return to Wells, I cannot help but stop to note that Wells imagines an ant-led apocalypse wiping out humanity as one of the futurological scenarios in “The Extinction of Man.”
over the many centuries, now exists in an abandoned Earth devoid of Man, Animal, or Robot (only lower-case mice and ruins remain). At this point he is the only one with any memory of anything—he possesses in himself the memories the Dogs have forgotten. But Jenkins’s attachment to his memory is unhealthy and neurotic; he refuses to leave the site where the Human civilization ended and the Dog civilization both began and ended, that is, the Webster family house, where he once labored as a servant, even though there is now nothing there but ruin and absolutely no reason for him to be there anymore.

Finally two of the “wild robots” (261) from earlier in the novel, who left Earth to found a robot civilization in the stars, return to retrieve him. They now beg Jenkins to come with them: “There are worlds out there.” Andrew was saying, “and life on some of them. Even some intelligence. There is work to do…. We have room for you and a need of you” (263).

The past is barred to Jenkins; he can’t go back in time, and he can’t go to where the humans or the Dogs have gone. At the same time he can’t die, and he can’t forget. His long millennia of existence have given the immortal Jenkins a god-like omnibenevolence; in “Epilog” he has even come to love the Ants that, in the eight-story version of City, are its primary villains. Now Jenkins loves everything: Earth, Man, Dog, Ant, memory, everything—so much so that he can’t bear the thought of leaving any of it. (As in Asimov, City’s robots seem to embody the best traits of humanity without retaining any of the worst.) Jenkins’s relationship with time has become remarkably, starkly Anthropocenic, despite (or perhaps because of) his personal immortality:

Once there had been joy, but not there was only sadness, and it was not, he knew, alone the sadness of an empty house; it was the sadness of all else, the sadness of the Earth, the sadness of the failures and the empty triumphs. In time the wood would rot and the metal flake away; in time the stone be dust. There would, in time, be no house at all, but only a loamy mound to mark where a house was stood. (263-264)

Here we see the inescapable sadness of the Anthropocene, what is so very haunting about the concept: someday, not only will all this be gone, but even all trace of it will be gone. Jenkins’s grief comes from his inability to find any way to reconcile himself to that future of permanent loss. “It all came from living too long, Jenkins thought—from living too long and not being able to forget. That would be the hardest part of it; he would never forget” (264). Perversely, both forgetting and not-forgetting become equally terrible choices in the blank future of the Anthropocene.
In the end Jenkins does seem to choose life over death, in spite of everything, though the depiction is subtle and ambiguous: he returns to where Andrew is waiting for him and, it seems, prepares himself to leave Earth too, unable to bring himself to say goodbye and unable (as a robot) to even weep, as he wishes he could (264). But he does, it seems, find a way despite his sadness to move on. What Simak may have intended as a very tragic ending to his City narrative can become for us instead, as readers in the Anthropocene, a gesture of adaptation and survival—a radical refusal of death in the name of adaptability and resilience, subtly returning us to a much more traditionally humanistic paradigm that insists upon moving forward, on healing, on finding ways to continue to live even when life seems impossible.

"In order for us to adapt to this strange new world" called the Anthropocene, writes Roy Scranton, "we're going to need more than scientific reports and military policy. We're going to need new ideas. We're going to need new myths and new stories, a new conceptual understanding of reality, and a new relationship to the deep polyglot traditions of human culture that carbon-based capitalism has vitiated through commodification and assimilation. Over and against capitalism, we will need a new way of thinking our collective existence. We need a new vision of who 'we' are. We need a new humanism..." (19). Values, philosophies, and identities—like species—must evolve or die—or, in a more properly Darwinian framework, we may say instead that they must evolve and die, that the one force drives and is driven by the other. Scranton thus calls his book Learning to Die in the Anthropocene: Reflections on the End of a Civilization. This paradoxical call to live by dying invites us, as in Fredric Jameson's well-known formulation, to "think the break itself" (232)—not to revel in the blankness of the emptied-out Anthropocene but to begin to imagine historical difference in an era that increasingly asserts that the future has only one possible path, towards universal death. In Vonnegut and Simak we see two early attempts to use science fiction to produce new humanisms suitable for the world of the Anthropocene—weird humanisms that are indeed so "new" that they aren't even quite human anymore, and which nonetheless speak directly to our crisis of hope today.
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