

Anthropocene becomes the world: Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, and Paulo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* as world literature

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Great nations write their autobiographies in three manuscripts—the book of their deeds, the book of their words and the book of their art. Not one of these books can be understood unless we read the two others, but of the three the only trustworthy one is the last. (Ruskin iii)

Abstract: The topics of Anthropocene literature have a perceived global relevance that is greater than that of literature in any other period in history, and Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*, Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, and Paulo Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* show this clearly. These books hit common global registers, at once dealing with issues such as urbanization, corporate capitalism, and climate change as common concerns while vigorously valuing and affirming cultural heterogeneity. The topics of these novels virtually guarantee their position as world literature. Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi offer hope rather than doom-and-gloom on topics that are of pressing global concern. In the process, they reveal that Anthropocene fiction has, by its very topicality, a propensity to being world literature, whatever the greatness or weakness of its national origin. Theorizing about world literature thus needs to grapple more decisively than it has with what cli-fi and Anthropocene fiction offer.

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The rise of the power of nations clearly is reflected in the global reach of their culture—a fact made plain through many examples: Greece and Rome produced their best literature when they were in their heyday; English literature (indeed, the language itself) became current during the growth of the British Empire; American literature (often through Hollywood) garnered phenomenal impacts that began in the American Century; Korea won its first Booker Prize with Han Kang's *The Vegetarian* in 2016 as Korea grew in wealth and power; and so on. If, however, it were only the “great nation” factor that determined what was and what was not to become “world literature,” then we would have problems accounting

for the popularity of a book such as *Anne of Green Gables* or of a Trinidadian author such as V.S. Naipaul. There is clearly more at play than the power of the nation. One might argue that literary structure is a guarantee of the success or failure as world literature of any given piece, but this kind of argument is ethnocentric: it ignores the various ways that various cultures tell and understand stories. Topicality is clearly important and accounts for a lot of the entry of many texts into the ever-shifting body of world literature. The topicality of climate change fiction (cli-fi), like Anthropocene fiction in general, reformulates established notions about and redraws the boundaries of “world literature.” These destabilizations (the central focus of recent work in “variation theory”) merge with trends that move solidly against the self-conscious writing of “nation” characterizing much of postcolonial 20th century literatures. These 21st century responses occur synchronously with, but independently of, the presuppositions driving migration and diaspora literatures. By imagining intercultural communities in ways that are both anticipated by and in conflict with Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities,” the politics of representation in Anthropocene fiction has important implications for questions about relations between universality and relativity, normativity and difference, and environment and Self. Three very different recent novels speak to these issues in compelling ways: Indra Sinha’s *Animal's People*, Rohinton Mistry’s *A Fine Balance*, and Paulo Bacigalupi’s *The Windup Girl*. The topicality of each of these novels virtually guarantees a global readership and thus membership within the fluid community of “world literature,” and arguably each does so by disseminating the atmosphere, customs, and settings of the local to global audiences, without either erasing the local or commodifying it as cultural spectacle.

Among the many Anthropocene issues Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi present is “the city.” While of course cities have been a part of human life for a very long time, the problems of over-crowding and pollution in Anthropocene cities are unique, even as the cities themselves exhibit enormous diversity. The heterogeny of cities across the globe (from Saskatoon to Seoul, from Nyíregyháza to New York, from Dubai to Mumbai), however, tempt us into believing that that urban differences necessarily outweigh the similarities. Perhaps they did in the past, but with the growth of imperial powers, a certain level of uniformity became as much a part of the urban landscape as people themselves: “From New

York to Beijing, via Moscow and Vladivostok, you can eat the same junk food, watch the same junk on television, and, increasingly, read the same junk novels” (Brennan 140). It is not a new phenomenon, and some may argue that the city itself is the introspective product of the colonial mind, but one thing is certain: it is the city in which imperial power most and best expresses itself—a point Kenneth Clark noted long ago in his BBC series *Civilisation*. In the opening moves of this impressive and ambitious production, Clark describes the uniformity of Roman architecture across its empire: Western Europe, Clark maintains, inherited an ideal that

had been invented in Greece in the fifth century before Christ and was without doubt the most extraordinary creation in the whole of history, so complete, so convincing, so satisfying to the mind and eye, that it lasted practically unchanged for over six hundred years. The same architectural language, the same imagery, the same theatres, the same temples, were found all around the Mediterranean. (3)

While assuredly these were not only in cities, these structures—like Rome itself—nevertheless presage the powerfully leveling effect cities enact. What we are witness to by the late twentieth century is a confluence of several homogenizing effects: the imperial drive to uniformity that Clark notes combines with corporate capitalism’s need for uniformity, as well as with the enormous global phenomenon of urbanization, to produce unprecedented erasures of locality.

The phenomenon of urbanization is global. If world literature is “always as much about the host culture’s values and needs as it is about a work’s source culture” (Damrosch 283), then the pressingly global issues of urban fictions offer a thought-provoking confluence of values between the so-called source and host. Understanding how representations of urbanization function in the production of world literature is important because it helps us to avoid clumsy blunderings into untenable questions about “a universal criterion by which to evaluate literature of the greatest world significance” (Wang 2010, 4).¹ While Wang Ning seems to be looking for a universal as the reason for a given work to come to have broad, perhaps global, significance, David Damrosch does not seem to share this concern. Nor do I. Very early in his monumental *What is World Literature?*, Damrosch is very clear specifically *not* to raise ridiculous ideas about universal criteria:

A work enters into world literature by a double process: first by being read *as* literature; second, by circulating out into a broader world beyond its linguistic and cultural point of origin. A given work can enter into world literature and then fall out of it again if it shifts beyond a threshold point along either axis, the literary or the worldly. (6)

Because urbanization is a global phenomenon with both benefits and problems that have a degree of uniformity, literary depictions of urbanization clearly circulate beyond their linguistic and cultural points of origin. When the hair collector Rajaram in Mistry's novel remarks on urbanization, he is uttering a truism that not only all of the other characters in the novel know but that readers across the world also know: "thousands and thousands are coming to the city because of bad times in their native place" (Mistry 171). It is a fact as true in China as in India, as true in Canada as in Korea, and as true in Hungary as in the United States. Rural areas are emptying into urban areas. People go to the city in *A Fine Balance* for similar reasons that they do in the real world: the city is a place of dreams. Ishvar explains to Omprakash that "there is lots of opportunity in the city, you can make your dreams come true" (89). It is also, however, a place of pressing material realities, and Om's response is that he is "sick of the city. Nothing but misery" there (91).

No less for Paolo Bacigalupi do the realities of urbanization press insistently on the narrative he offers, and *The Windup Girl* provocatively envisions just how bad our current strife and division can become from our over-crowding. This is significant when we remember that alienation is vital to the global capitalism that drives much of the plot of this novel. Like Mistry or Sinha, Bacigalupi directly challenges capitalist neocolonialism, revealing in the process a scale of loss and disconnection—of which we have gotten a sample through Covid-19—that is nothing short of staggering in the novel. Bacigalupi narrates this staggering loss skillfully (and with considerable understatement), revealing that it is as much the human responses to crises that are troubling as the crises themselves. What this science fiction imagining of our current trajectory suggests is that notwithstanding how technologies seem to bring into reality Marshall McLuhan's notion of a "global village,"² it is very clear that uniformity is in many ways an illusion and that entropy ensures global diversity.

The need of corporate capitalism for uniformity is nowhere more clear than in Sinha's *Animal's People*. Basing its narrative on real events, the novel

reveals a world of corporate, global capitalism where uniformity of production (and of the bodies that run or feed the machines) is absolutely essential, and there is clearly no place or sympathy for the differently-abled in corporate logic. Set a mere day away from the 1984 Bhopal Union Carbide disaster, *Animal's People* is a fictionalized account of that real event and its effects on people. On the night of December 2-3, 1984, more than 45 tons of methyl isocyanate gas leaked from the Union Carbide pesticide plant in Bhopal, India. The Bhopal Disaster is, to this day, the world's worst industrial disaster in history. It has killed approximately 20,000 people to date and injured more than half a million. *Animal's People* is narrated by a disaffected nineteen-year-old boy who has been severely disfigured by the gas leak. Compelled to walk on all fours because his spine has been twisted and deformed, Animal—as the boy is called—is the victim of global capitalism and the poisons it produces, as were the victims of the Union Carbide disaster in Bhopal. Unable to receive compensation or remuneration because the Kampani is offshore and evades responsibility, the people suffer. The ubiquity of the reach of corporate capitalism—and, in particular, its poisons—is part of the horror that the novel describes. The topicality of corporate capitalism is global, and Sinha's treatment of it guarantees the novel's place among world literature.

The processes and effects of corporate capitalism obviously have important implications for the development of world literatures. One of the effects of corporate capitalism is to break down the affective bonds between people and the places in which they live. It is a point not lost on Marx and Engels, who claim that

the need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole surface of the globe. It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere. The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country. (83)

It is precisely this desire to terraform that fills the eyes of the developer in *A Fine Balance*. For him, the ancestral home of Maneck Kohlah is a materially poor, culturally static bit of real estate that needs to be developed. For Maneck, it is a mountain paradise, and “the beauty of the place” (205) arouses his topophilic sense of belonging and all of the

memories that are afforded by place. Maneck's concerns, individual and local though they are, reverberate globally as the McDonaldisation (or Starbucksization or whatever corporate flavor of the day we wish to invoke) continues apace. Erosion of diversity is a palpable threat, and with this comes also the threat of an erosion of memory and, indeed, of identity. Short of "the 'local color' tipped in to distinguish the Jakarta Hilton from that of its Cancún counterpart" (to borrow a startlingly apropos phrase from Damrosch, 17), there is little to distinguish one contemporary city from another. Surprisingly, however, Sinha's *Animal's People*, Mistry's *A Fine Balance*, and Bacigalupi's *The Windup Girl* very consciously resist urban terraforming. Sinha's Khaufpur, Mistry's "unidentified city," and Bacigalupi's 23rd century Thailand (Bangkok is under water) share little with contemporary Western cities or with each other (certainly not enough in themselves to pull the narratives into the realm of "world literature"), and yet they bear striking similarities in the existential threats that they pose to humanity.

If the threat of terraforming is the threat of the erosion of identity and memory in *A Fine Balance*, then no less is the threat of genetic terraforming a similar threat in *The Windup Girl*. Genetic diversity is the central concern of Bacigalupi's novel. Because the biological memories of millennia are encoded in genetic materials, the biological work of countless generations are being lost today as species become extinct and diversity narrows. *The Windup Girl* follows the trajectory of our current path and takes us two hundred years into the future to a miserable world where the loss is tangible. It is not a local loss; it is a global loss. Cli-fi is, by its very nature, global literature.

Of course, while one does not want to play fast and free with the term "world literature," it is clear that unless it is to have profoundly protracted utility, we really do need to open up the term to the realities of contemporary literature. Cli-fi, climate-induced pandemic literature (what we might call cli-pan lit), speculative fiction, and Anthropocene fiction in general are, by their nature, constitutionally different in the audiences they imagine from other, less politically and environmentally engaged literatures. Anthropocene literature such as *The Windup Girl* clearly addresses climate concerns of a global audience. These concerns are refracted through the lenses of temporal and geographical locality. The odd hope in the face of genetic terraforming that *The Windup Girl* offers is

one that we nurse today with our various global seed banks, a hope made a part of the popular imagination by the 1990 film *Jurassic Park*—specifically, that it is within the realm of human ingenuity to bring species back from the dead. One of the powerfully interventionist aspects of this novel is that it subtly understates the dangers of genetic technologies even as it posits the importance and inevitability of gene manipulation. Moreover, like climate change itself, fiddling with genes by human beings is far more than a local matter. It is a global concern. Any literature dealing with it is bound to fall within the parameters of world literature.

Thus, as the local is global in *The Windup Girl*, similarly in Sinha's *Animal's People* we can see that even though the contamination is clearly localized, the problems and implications are far from local. The central character is a living victim of nonbiotic forces that know no borders—global capitalism and lethal gases. While *The Windup Girl* and *A Fine Balance* are, in some important ways, novels about the loss of worldly footings through loss of memory (of various sorts), *Animal's People* presents a different kind of loss of worldly footings: it is not the loss of memory but of membership that the novel presents. The central protagonist—"Animal"—is a boy who loses everything, including his humanity. Clearly, one of the matters under investigation in this novel is the question about what it means to be among the membership of the human community as a human, and the characters themselves posit the body as central to any kind of understanding of what might qualify as answers to this question. We are confronted with Animal through his own voice in the opening lines of the novel: "I used to be human once. So I'm told. I don't remember it myself, but people who knew me when I was small say I walked on two feet, just like a human being" (1). "My name is Animal," he explains, clearly and repeatedly stating "I'm not a fucking human being, I've no wish to be one" (23). As Animal's deformity calls into question whether he falls within the parameters of "the human," no less do the genetically modified people (the titular windups) of *The Windup Girl* face the abyss of all that is *not* human. Indeed, the status of the windup is unclear, and the narrative toys with the implications of what it means for their exclusion from the category of personhood and humanity. The novel shows that capitalist-driven gene technologies (centered on the ever-problematical matter of food production) offer promises of control (of food sources, of the environment, and of people), but as with so much

else in *The Windup Girl*, the roots of the problems remain unaddressed: as there is no real challenging of racism or sexism,³ neither does Bacigalupi question how food habits (such as meat-eating) play a central role in climate crises.⁴ There is a lot of ugliness and pain and suffering and struggling in this novel, but there is no humor and no room for humor: *The Windup Girl* is deadly serious. Not so with *Animal's People*.

There is something funny about *Animal*. While it is hardly sidesplitting comedy, the profanity and earthy sarcasm of *Animal* add an inescapable sardonic humor to the narrative, and there are some genuinely funny scenes and threads throughout this narrative.⁵ The humor is important because it allows the reader to move somewhat outside of the analytical, diagnostic, logical, and reasoning mode and thereby to sidestep the intellectual suffocation that comes from knowing of disasters whose scales are enormous and overwhelming. *Animal* is funny indeed, but the laughter he generates—far from making the reader oblivious to the issues that he raises—focuses the reader more intently and with less despair than would a less humorous narrator. Such would only result in a doom-and-gloom narrative devoid of hope and humanity. The novel effectively raises concerns that can be digested rather than dismissed, and these have clear global implications. For Rob Nixon, it is

through *Animal's* immersed voice, Sinha is able to return to questions that have powered the picaresque from its beginnings. What does it mean to slow violence, neoliberalism, and the environmental picaresque be reduced to living in subhuman, bestial conditions? What chasms divide and what ties bind the wealthy and the destitute, the human and the animal? What does it mean, in the fused imperial language of temporal and spatial dismissal, to be written off as “backward”? (66-67)

The question that the reader faces has to do with identity politics: to what degree do the behaviors of a character such as *Animal* come to delineate the boundaries of his human status?

While *Animal* is the central focus of the novel, the alienation from the self through bodily suffering is hardly confined to him in this novel. Indeed, all of the people who are subject to the borderless toxins of “the Kampani” are in danger of losing themselves and “continue to feel intense fear, violent dread, because they don’t know what horrors might yet emerge in their bodies” (283). It is psychological suffering and pain brought on by material suffering: “The people ache, their bodies are

bottles into which fresh pain is poured every day. Their flesh is melting, coming off their bodies in flakes of fire, their bones are burning” (100). To make matters worse, the agents responsible for these horrors are thousands of kilometers away. The corporate violations of environmental laws and justice in the real world, as in the novel, are difficult to prosecute because the perpetrators are in an entirely different geographical jurisdiction. Justice remains elusive. Sinha is careful to keep hope at the forefront, however, not only through a lively and humorous narrator but with the explicit message that nature can rebound: the apocalyptic world of contamination and death is far from permanent. As Animal explains,

throughout this place a silent war is being waged. Mother Nature’s trying to take back the land. Wild sandalwood trees have arrived, who knows how, must be their seeds were shat by overflying birds. That herb scent, it’s ajwain, you catch it drifting in gusts, at such moments the forest is beautiful, you forget it’s poisoned and haunted. Under the poison-house trees are growing up through the pipework. Creepers, brown and thick as my wrist, have climbed all the way to the top, tightly they’ve wrapped wooden knuckles round pipes and ladders, like they want to rip down everything the Kampani made. (31)

Even so, the very resilience of nature is itself alienating in a sense, fueling, as it does, the sullen fantasies that populate the ever-growing “world without us” genre. The land in the Khaufpur/Bhopal disaster, like the playgrounds in Chernobyl, the animal life thriving in Fukushima Daiichi and in Korea’s DMZ, and the resurgence of birds and boars in cities such as Seoul during the COVID lockdowns, are chilling reminders that even though humanity could disappear as a result of its own actions, the world will go on. It is a sad idea, but one clearly not devoid of hope. The world *will* go on.

Hope is often a characteristic of Anthropocene fiction, and it is this hope that gives the genre its broad appeal. Given the data, such hope is difficult to sustain. Anthropocene fiction focuses on just how bad environmental crises have become and are becoming, and so even without the promise of better days ahead, the intense spotlight on shared global threats perhaps promises a far more global interest than topics that characterize literature from other periods. Certainly the topics of a Jane Austen or a Charles Dickens lack the kind of global appeal of even the most shoddily written cli-fi (of which there is a lot), and yet such work has

become world literature. This is because there are many routes to becoming world literature. The sheer narrative power of an Austen or a Dickens is clearly one such route. Then what of the status of so much shoddy American writing as world literature, one might ask, and why—with the exception of Margaret Atwood and a few others—does Canadian literature not garner international interest at the institutional level?⁶ Why, in other words, is American and British Literature so much a part of the global obsession? Is American literature really *that* good, *that* much better than Canadian literature? Are its topics so appealing and so much less parochial? Can William Faulkner really hold a candle to Margaret Laurence? Clearly, the answer here speaks to the “great nation” notion with which I began this article. Part of the worlding of world literature is certainly an effect of cultural cringing and bowing to the Trump-like audacities of super-powers.

What we might understand as a kind of cultural bullying from the United States effects not only the worlding of American literature; it also determines what non-American (not to be confused with un-American) literature becomes part of the American bookshelf—and, hence, “world literature.” Damrosch puts the case succinctly: “Even today, foreign works will rarely be translated at all in the United States, much less widely distributed, unless they reflect American concerns and fit comfortably with American images of the foreign culture in question” (18). For Damrosch, “world literature” can “encompass all literary works that circulate beyond their culture of origin, either in translation or in their original language,” and “a work only has an *effective* life as world literature whenever, and wherever, it is actively present within a literary system beyond that of its original culture” (4). One of the key elements that pushes literature into such active presences, as I have been arguing, is obviously its topical appeal, and the environmental issues of Anthropocene fiction—as evident in the urban narratives of Sinha, Bacigalupi, and Mistry that I am discussing here—are powerfully insistent topics in the global imagination. The translation here is not linguistic but cultural. If Wang Ning is off the mark and naïve in his comments about “a universal criterion by which to evaluate literature” that I discussed above, he is more on the ball in noting that it is “universal” *themes*⁷ that allow “works [to] transcend the limits of given national literatures becoming world literature” (2013, p. 391). The difference here is between

form and content. Genre cannot be global. Cultures tell stories differently, make music differently, dance differently, write articles differently, and so on. The importance of content, too, is obviously situational, as Laura Bohannan's "Shakespeare in the Bush" reminds us⁸, but Anthropocene fiction on the whole has a broad global appeal. It is this broad global appeal that characterizes the topics Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi address, arguably placing their work firmly in the category of world literature.

Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi offer Anthropocene tales of very different cities but with topics that touch very common interests all around the globe. In the face of the homogenizing force of urbanization and corporate capitalism, however, Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi stress the importance and durability of the local, of tradition, and of cultural heterogeneity. Clearly a threat to identity and memory, the terraforming of cities is a menace with which contemporary global audiences are familiar, and the *genetic* terraforming of *The Windup Girl* is no less a peril that sits at the global doorstep today. Each in their unique ways, Sinha, Mistry, and Bacigalupi offer hope without trivializing the immensity of their subjects and without simplifying or dumbing down the solutions. Our world is in trouble and is waiting for answers, and it is clear that Anthropocene fiction is one source of solutions and solace.

Notes

¹The philosophical problems associated with "universals" and "universalist" beliefs have a very long history in Western thinking, ranging from the time of Plato to the present day. Wang uses the concept of "universals" unproblematically here and without explaining how to determine such a criterion.

²Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan defined the "global village" as an effect of electronic media and their capacity to bring people together: "The new electronic interdependence recreates the world in the image of a global village" (31). McLuhan was writing many years before the internet. During the 2020 Spring semester, as the Covid-19 pandemic gathered force, all of the students in my graduate class attended from different time zones; shoppers became reluctant to go to real stores and increasingly ordered everything online, things that often arrived on the same day; and military bodies continued to target sites remotely from thousands of miles away. These are aspects of the global village.

³The whole notion that the novel participates in racist and sexist Orientalism has become more meaningful and timely since early 2021, with mainstream media

attention to anti-Asian racism and violence becoming more pronounced than ever before in the Spring of 2021. Although this coverage has been—to cite Connie Chung—“miserably late” (Benveniste), the racism and violence are by no means new. While it is certainly true that Bacigalupi represents a deeply and entirely racist world and clearly shows the tragic and devastating consequences of that racism, there is in the narrative voice of the novel itself what I identify as a “racist Orientalism.” This and anti-Asian sentiments are often absent in discussions about race in the West, and, as I write, are only now receiving widespread media attention (see, for instance, the CNN article about violence toward Asian women in America, Kaur). This racism is very much at the core of the novel but is not under critique in any way; rather, it is a narrative necessity in the novel. Making such a claim about a well-established and much-loved novel is obviously subject to the same kind of resistance critics faced when claiming that Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* is at core a racist text. Perhaps now, however (given the clear awareness developing at the moment in the US to racism against Asians), the observations in this article will seem less radical and unacceptable than they might have seemed, say, a year earlier than publication.

⁴This entire sentence appears in my 2021 “Racist Orientalism, Technology, Gender, and Food in *The Windup Girl*: Notes on Detachment and Division.” See References.

⁵The latter part of this paragraph appears in my “Humanizing Corporeal Spectacle: Humor and Resistance in Indra Sinha's *Animal's People*.” See References.

⁶Rohinton Mistry, of course, is another exception: he is Canadian.

⁷The term “universal” obviously remains problematical, but as a description of thematic elements rather than of “a criterion by which to evaluate literature,” it is somewhat more palatable.

⁸Among the many things that Bohannon reveals when she takes *Hamlet* to the Tiv tribe of Nigeria is that while the British see the marriage of Claudius with his dead brother's wife as incest, the Tiv see it as entirely natural and are thus baffled by the British reactions. To the Tiv, Bohannon's responses seem uncultured and uneducated—for instance, for the Tiv, ghosts do not exist but zombies do, and any educated person should know this in Tiv society. The values that define cultures differ, and what is profound and sublime to one culture is idiotic to another. Damrosch is clearly aware of the importance of how literary “work becomes reframed in its translations and in its new cultural contexts” (24).

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Bioprofile

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